

DESCO Corporation

Milwaukee Wisconsin

DESCO Corporation manufactures diving helmets, weight belts, shoes, tools, accessories, fittings, and miscellaneous diving equipment under the brand names DESCO, Diving Equipment & Supply Co., and A. J. Morse & Son.

DESCO was first organized in 1937 as a Wisconsin corporation under the name of Diving Equipment and Salvage Co. Its organization was the result of several events, which occurred during the preceding years.

During the early 1930's, a Milwaukee diver, Max Gene Nohl, had received national publicity as the result of his salvage operations on a sunken steamship, the "John Dwight." This brought him to the attention of a Hollywood producer, Col. John D. Craig, who was interested in the possible salvage of the torpedoed Cunard liner, the "Lusitania," which lay in 312 feet of water off the Irish Coast. At that time, no equipment or reliable techniques were available for diving operations at such a depth, and it was obvious that such a project would require both physiological experimentation and an advance in diving equipment design. Although no actual attempt was ever made to salvage the Lusitania, its challenge caused Nohl to join forces with two other Milwaukeeans. The first was Jack Browne who was also a diver. The second was Edgar End, M.D. of the Marquette University School of Medicine who was a pioneer in the new science of hyperbaric physiology and medicine. Browne and Nohl worked together on the design of a new type of lightweight, self-contained diving suit. At the same time they worked with Dr. End to explore the promising possibility of preventing nitrogen narcosis by having the diver breathe a mixture of helium and oxygen rather than air. On December 1, 1937 in Lake Michigan, Max Nohl succeeded in diving to a depth of 420 feet, thereby breaking a depth record which had been held by a U.S. Navy diver Frank Crilley, since 1915. Nohl accomplished this feat using DESCO's new diving equipment and breathing a heliox mixture prescribed by Dr. End. With World War II on the horizon Great Britain withdrew permission to dive on the Lusitania.

Jack Browne continued the company by making and selling a version of the rebreather units that were developed by the team. Nohl and Lockwood used similar units in Florida.

When World War II began Jack Browne went to the War Department in Washington to offer DESCO's services. During the war they received contracts not only conventional hard-hat gear, but also the design, development and manufacture of a military oxygen rebreather, known as the "B Lung." By V-J Day, DESCO was producing more diving equipment than any other company in the world. DESCO had its own pressurized wet tank in the factory for research and development. On April 27, 1945, Jack Browne used this tank to "dive" to a new record depth of 550 feet of seawater. In 1945 the company changed its name to "Diving Equipment and Supply Co., Inc. As the war ended surplus diving equipment was making its way into the commercial market. This had a significant impact on DESCO's sales.

In 1946, Norman Kuehn and Jack Browne sold the company to another Milwaukee businessman, Alfred Dorst while retaining a stake in the firm. Under Dorst, the company continued to design and manufacture U.S. Navy and commercial diving equipment but also broadened its product line to include a variety of sporting goods, including water skis, aquaplanes, swim-fins, spear guns, and simplified oxygen rebreathers, such as the "A Lung," intended for use by sports divers. Don Dorst, Alfred's son, and Fred Roberts designed the DESCO Air Master open circuit SCUBA regulator. It was a very innovative design but manufacturing problems, and strong competition from Voit, Healthways, and Aqua Lung limited production to only two years.

In May 1966, DESCO was purchased by Thomas and Marilyn Fifield. In 1968 it moved to its present address at 240 North Milwaukee Street in Milwaukee.

Mr. Fifield was responsible in the 1960's for the design and development of the DESCOS Air Hat. The Air Hat or "Pot" remains a standard piece of modern equipment for diving with air in relatively shallow water. In addition to its full line of conventional diving equipment, the company has continued to improve and manufacture its famous DESCOS Full-Face Mask, which originated in the early design efforts of Jack Browne. This mask, developed for the U S Navy was made in the thousands, and though no longer used by the Navy is still in commercial service.

The company ownership changed again in 1997 with the purchase of DESCOS from Mr. Fifield by Richard Koellner. Mr. Koellner was an employee of DESCOS since January of 1980, and at the time of his purchase was General Manager.

In January of 2016 DESCOS purchased the assets of Morse Diving Incorporated of Rockland MA. DESCOS will be offering a product line of helmets and accessories under the brand name A. J. Morse & Son. The name the company adopted in 1864.

In 2017 Christian Koellner formed Lake Michigan Classic Diving Organization to promote safe recreational diving of standard dress equipment, and as an educational vehicle to share local diving history.

A. J. Morse and Son

In 1837, Fletcher & Morse opened in Boston Massachusetts. The company began as a manufacturer of brass goods. In 1864 the company name was changed to Andrew J. Morse & Son. Morse company records of hand pumps used for surface air supply go back to 1861, so hats may have been produced in the 1840s and '50s.

Andrew J. Morse's heirs sold the company in 1939 to the Farrell family (owners of McKee Pile Diving Company), who continued to operate it in Boston as the Morse Diving Equipment Company.

In 1970 they moved the operation to Rockland, MA, 20 miles south of Boston. Ken Downey joined the company in 1978 as a machinist, there after learning every aspect of shop production. After twenty years with Morse he purchased the company in 1998, with his wife, Donna. The Downey's built some of the Morse models and The U S Navy Mark XII helmet. The Mark XII was designed by the Navy in the 1970's to replace the Mark V helmet. Solicitations for manufacture were let and Morse accepted the job. After a few years the Navy decided to discontinue using the Mark XII and move to a military version of a standard commercial diving helmet. Morse continued to make and support the Mark XII for commercial use.

In 2014 Morse was sold to Mr. Watson Robby Holland. After two years Mr. Holland determined the Morse Company could not be returned to profitability. After a 177 year run they closed their doors. DESCOS had worked with Mr. Holland in an advisory capacity in his attempt to change Morse's fortunes. When the company failed it was agreed that the only chance to maintain A J Morse's legacy was for DESCOS to become its caretaker. In 2015 DESCOS Corporation purchased the assets of Morse Diving Inc. from the court appointed bankruptcy receiver. The name A J Morse and Son was adopted for the brand. This name was used by the company from 1865 to 1939. It represents Morse's golden era.

DESCO Corporation owns these trademarks:

DESCO (72274021)

A. J. Morse & Son (86571203)

There are no licensees for these trademarks. Any products bearing these names not manufactured by DESCO Corporation is in violation of our intellectual property rights.

All products manufactured by DESCO Corporation are made in Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA.

DESCO Corporation does not manufacture any reproduction or replica diving helmets. There are many imported reproduction diving helmets which have nametags bearing actual manufacturers names. Most prominent is A. J. Morse & Son. DESCO Corporation receives several calls and e-mails per year from helmet owners looking for parts or repairs. We have the unhappy duty to inform them their helmets are not authentic. More concerning is the possibility some untrained or uneducated person will attempt to use a reproduction helmet for diving believing it was authentic because of the nametag. This would result in injury or death.

Diving for work or sport is a hazardous undertaking. DESCO urges anyone who wishes to dive to get proper training and to use authentic and properly maintained equipment.

Questions about DESCO Products can be made to us at:

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