



# Gaslight News

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Historical Society of Riverton

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Dem bones at the riverbank are gonna have to wait for the next issue. Article author Paul Schopp got sidelined with an illness that put him behind on deadlines for his jobs that actually pay money. (He's feeling better now, thank you.)

Contributor, Patricia Smith Solin, steps in with this piece on Richard Hollingshead Sr., founder of the chemical company bearing his name, his son, Richard Hollingshead, Jr., who succeeded him, and who also re-imagined movie-going during the Great Depression.



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## RM Hollingshead Corp. supplied homes and autos in peace and war

But it was the founder's son's desire to get his mother a good seat at the movies that really put him in the history books

The man celebrated as the inventor of the drive-in theater was a

Riverton native who had a varied and extraordinary career, beyond his invention, as an executive of a vast chemical company that his father founded.

In 1888, at age twenty, Richard M. Hollingshead Sr. cooked up a homemade recipe for harness dressing on the stove of his parents' Merchantville, NJ kitchen. He ingeniously parlayed that modest beginning into a corporation that would become the largest producer of automotive chemicals and lubricants in the world.

Despite getting hoodwinked on his first sale (apersuasive demo and sales pitch to a farmer in Germantown, Pennsylvania left him without product or payment), the undaunted young man sought other buyers and succeeded.

The fledgling entrepreneur added leather dressing and polish, stove polish, carriage soap, hoof dressing, castor axle oil, and carriage top dressing to his early line of livery products, thus beginning the first chapter of his American success story.

Doubtless, at some point the kitchen stove could not keep up with demand and Richard moved the manufacture of products to a carriage house on the family plot in Merchantville.



Hollingshead Hoof Dressing



Where *Whiz* Products were first made in 1892

RM Hollingshead ad in *Motor West* magazine, Dec. 1, 1920, p5.

In 1894, he took the big leap and married Emma Lovett who gave birth to their daughter Jeanette in 1895.

He probably later moved the chemical operation to rented space in Camden's factory district, before finally taking another leap in 1898, when he bought land at 9th and Market Sts. in Camden to serve as his company headquarters.

By 1900, the upwardly mobile chemical manufacturer had already moved his brood to 201 Linden Avenue in Riverton. That same year, Mr. and Mrs. Hollingshead welcomed the birth of Richard Milton Hollingshead Jr.; younger brother Wickliffe Stewart arrived in 1904.

No sooner had young Hollingshead Sr. built his business model upon maintaining horses and carriages, but, at the beginning of the twentieth century, along came the first noisy, smelly, high-maintenance automobiles. Hollingshead shrewdly observed that the manufacture of the new horseless carriage held great potential for needing new products and he quickly rolled out Whiz brand auto top dressing, auto cushion dressing, and roadside hand cleaner, among others.

Meanwhile, Richard Jr. (and presumably his siblings) attended Westfield Friends' School and the William Penn Charter School.



Hollingshead Auto Top Dye

See **HOLLINGSHEAD** on 2

“It will be extremely difficult to find a former soldier, sailor or marine, who, during the World War, did not use at least one of the many “Whiz” war products, as these were used in keeping our fighting equipment up to the highest efficiency.”

William Bradford Williams

Munitions Manufacture  
in the Philadelphia  
Ordinance District  
PHILADELPHIA, PA  
1921



Hollingshead Neats Foot



1914 stove polish ad

Open this as a PDF file on [rivertonhistory.com](http://rivertonhistory.com) and all of the blue highlighted underlined terms become links to more content.

## HOLLINGSHEAD from 1

In July 1914, as World War I erupted in Europe, Dad, by year's end, had enlarged the Camden plant by erecting two new buildings and prepared to expand into western states. U.S. Government orders for various products added to the company's bottom line. Richard Jr. started to attend Manlius Military Academy as the inevitability of the U.S. entry into the war increased.

When President Wilson called for war on Germany in April 1917, the company placed every resource at the service of the government. Facilities proved inadequate to the task of meeting the great demand so Hollingshead acquired adjacent land in 1918, razed old buildings, and built a five-story addition.

Hollingshead neatsfoot oil waterproofed shoes, and shoe dubbing helped battle “trench foot.” Whiz axle grease kept the wheels of war rolling while Whiz saddle soap preserved leather.

When young Richard Hollingshead graduated from military school in September 1918., his draft card listed him as foreman at his father's firm, R.M. Hollingshead Company. Shortly thereafter, in November, Germany signed an armistice agreement with the Allies.

By 1920 the thriving peacetime Hollingshead enterprise boasted of producing 98 automotive products, in addition to household products such as polishes, soaps and cleaning agents, floor wax, and insecticides.



Motor West magazine,  
Dec. 1, 1920, p5.

In 1927, R.M. Hollingshead Jr. supervised the construction of a subsidiary of the company in Bowmanville, Canada. He eventually became chairman of the board and brother W. Stewart assumed the office of president in 1945 upon the death of their father.

Despite all his business accomplishments, Richard Milton Hollingshead Jr. is more celebrated as the inventor of the first drive-in theater.



The Hollingshead Corp. used this DOUGLAS EXECUTIVE custom conversion surplus Douglas Skytrain to fly representatives to and from company facilities in over a dozen locations in the US and Canada. *Flying Magazine*, Jan. 1947, p21.

According to lore, as the Great Depression gripped America in 1932, Hollingshead experimented with the concept of outdoor cinema in his own back yard at 212 Thomas Avenue. He set up a movie screen using a sheet, a speaker behind the sheet, and placed a 1928 Kodak projector on the roof of a car at just the right angle so that viewers could enjoy the movie without an obstructed view. It is said that he was trying to accommodate his large mother who could not fit comfortably in regular, indoor movie seats.

In August 1932, Hollingshead applied for a U.S. patent, and, by June 6, 1933, he opened his first Drive-In Theater where patrons could “Sit in your car, see and hear movies” for 25 cents per car, 25

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>OPENS TONIGHT</b><br>8:30  | <b>DRIVE-IN</b><br>NEAR CENTRAL AIRPORT<br>2 Miles from CAMDEN Bridge<br><b>SIT IN YOUR CAR</b><br>and ENJOY TALKIES |
| <b>WORLD'S FIRST</b><br><b>AUTOMOBILE</b><br><b>MOVIE THEATRE</b>                       |  |
| INDIVIDUAL DRIVEWAYS THREE TIMES the LENGTH of YOUR CAR<br><b>A Private Theatre Box</b> |  |
| <b>25c</b><br>Per Car<br>and for<br>Each Person   | <b>25c</b><br>NIGHTLY<br>8:30, 10, 11:30   |
| FAMILY ADMISSION, \$1   |  |

Camden Courier-Post- June 6, 1933

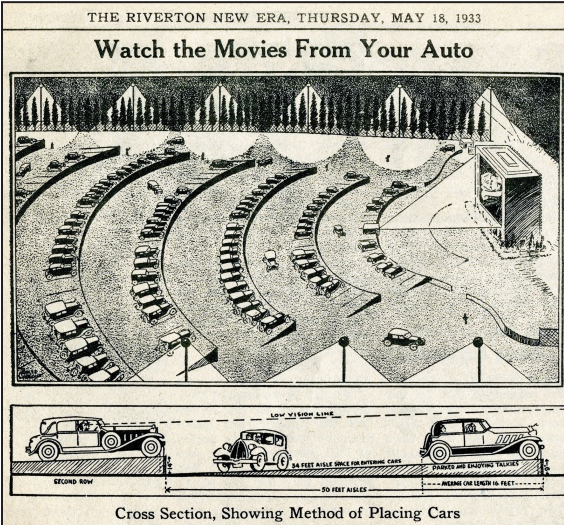
cents per person, with 3 or more persons one dollar. The first theater opened on the Camden-Pennsauken border, along the Admiral Wilson Boulevard, where Zinman Furs is now located. The spacious, 400-acre theater had three six-foot by six-foot speakers provided by local Camden company, RCA Victor, with a 40-foot by 50-foot screen. Playing that night was a renamed British film, *Two White Arms*, titled for American audiences as *Wives Beware* starring Adolphe Menjou, Margaret Bannerman, and Claud Allister.

While Richard Jr.'s open-air theater only operated for fourteen months before he closed it due to a lack of profit, Drive-ins flourished after World War II with improved sound and visual technology. By 1958, the heyday of this entertainment, there were over 4,000 drive-ins operating in the United States and Canada ([Hollingshead's Story by Rick Cohen](#)). Family-friendly entertainment—no need to get babysitters! If the kids grew tired, pack the pjs and pillows and stay as long as the adults wanted! Many complexes offered a food concession and a playground for the kids, too. And the supposed privacy of the car made the drive-in a great place to take a date.

Over the ensuing decades, with competition



from television and multiplex movie theaters that offered air-conditioning, drive-ins began to close. According to Hollingshead's nephew, the patent on his invention did not make him rich. Although the number of drive-in theaters has declined greatly, one can still relive, or perhaps discover the drive-in theater movie experience. Visit [drive-ins.com](http://drive-ins.com) for a list of states with theaters.



Riverton's own hometown newspaper, *The New Era*, heralded the 1933 arrival of the innovation in which "...motor cars are virtually transformed into private boxes making it possible for motorists and their guests to see and hear the movies without leaving their cars."

Not resting on his entertaining invention, this entrepreneur's focus was in the chemical industry, but most folks know him for his singular

contribution to the theater world and not his technical and business acumen.

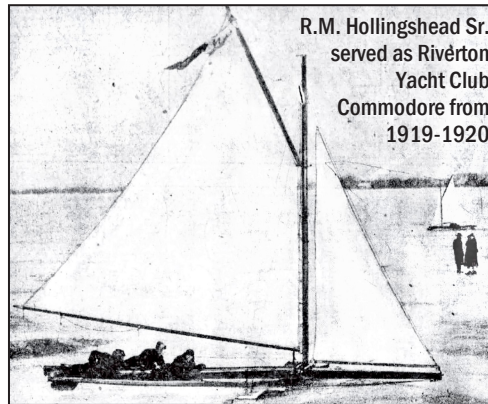


PATRICIA SMITH SOLIN  
& JOHN MCCORMICK  
WITH PAUL W. SCHOPP



Post script: The Hollingshead corporate ship took many turns as it navigated the changeable economic waters of the last half of the 20th century. As late as the early 1970s, Hollingshead was still the third largest employer in Camden. The Hollingshead name later became associated with Dayco (1969), Classic (1974), and most recently [Malco](http://Malco.com) chemical company (1982), of Barberton, OH, which continues to produce Whiz products.

WHO KNEW in 1888 what far-reaching dividends that making homemade saddlery supplies on the kitchen stove would pay?



Whiz III on the Delaware ice at Riverton, Mrs. Jeanette Hollingshead (Stewart's wife), E.K. Merrill, and Ralston Biddle [Evening Public Ledger](http://EveningPublicLedger.com), Feb 2, 1920



In July 1940, fire followed a series of explosions consuming Hollingshead's Camden manufacturing complex leaving ten persons dead and scores homeless. The company continued at a new location. See a Hagley Digital Archive [before photo](http://beforephoto.com), details about the fire and its aftermath at [dvrb.com](http://dvrb.com), and British Pathé contemporary [newsreel footage](http://newsreelfootage.com).

**FUN FACT:**  
**COCOON,**



originally formulated in 1946 by R.M. Hollingshead as a process conceived for mothballing WWII ships and aircraft, survives today in new military, construction, aerospace, and pharmaceutical applications.

## Coming months bring two must-see HSR programs

Have you ever wanted to know more about the history of your house - when it was built, who lived there, and more? Be on hand for Patricia Solin's useful and practical presentation.

### How to Research Your Riverton Home



Learn basic research techniques and use new resources to help reveal your home's interesting history and discover its previous residents.

DATE: Tuesday, Feb. 23, 2016  
TIME: 7:00 pm  
WHERE: Riverton Free Library

In addition to the practical helps Mrs. Solin provides, see the new design house plaques, and get a House Plaque Application Form, if you wish.



If you have ever wondered about the value of an old painting, sampler, hooked rug, vase, set of dishes, sterling flatware/hollowware, oil lamp, mantle clock, cut glass pitcher, tree ornaments, quilt, needlework, valentines, family bible?

Come to the HSR sponsored...

### ANTIQUE COLLECTIBLE APPRAISAL

DATE: Saturday, March 19, 2016  
TIME: 11:00am-3:00pm  
WHERE: Riverton School Gym

Expert Personal Property Appraiser, RONALD E. SHAFFER and NICHOLAS FRATTO of Anthony Jewelers return to offer their expert

### Verbal Opinions of Value

\$5 for each item; No written appraisals issued

**NO WEAPONS or COSTUME JEWELRY**

For more information call Phyllis Rodgers 856-786-8422



Ron Shaffer



Nick Fratto



# We love presents! Thank you for your generosity.



Our website visitors already know that most of our online archive is a virtual one only. That is, nice people send us scans or photos of their items of historical interest, but we actually own few of the items. So it is with particular gratitude that we thank someone when they give us presents grand as these. - JMc

In December **Maureen Murray** brought us **Jennifer Chapman's** dairy bottles, toy soldiers, and re-



search printed on beautifully designed backgrounds that were part of her marvelous photo exhibit of hundreds of locally dug artifacts that she examined in her study. THANK YOU! (See [my photos](#) of the exhibit online.)

Board member **Elsie Waters** contributed a family of paper dolls—mom, dad, and three daughters—



made by Raphael Tuck in 1894. They once belonged to her mother, Lenore Wright Showell (b.1885;d.1966). They are over 100 years old and colors are still vivid. You will see more of these. THANK YOU, Elsie.

I recently met **Mr. Dana Jones** at a diner in Borden-

town to get a handoff of this extraordinary 1890 map of Riverton, a gift from Dana's father, **Charles**

**S. Jones**. The accompanying letter of provenance signed by the donor states that the map "...has addressed the walls of our family homes for generations in New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island..." Dana told me over coffee of his family's roots, parts of which go back to the Dutch settlement of New York and to a Philadelphia gunsmith who made firearms for the American Revolution. THANK YOU, Charles and Dana.



Help make our HSR website at <http://rivertonhistory.com/> grow with YOUR comments, recollections, and contributions. Check in for information on upcoming events, past issues of *Gaslight News*, vintage images, a veterans' page, our blog, and more.

Readers: Inside this issue read about the R.M. Hollingshead Corp. from the father who founded and built the company and the son who, though he carried on in the family business, is famed more for the invention of a source of classic family fun. See two program announcements read our thank-you notes.

## Gaslight News

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### THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF RIVERTON

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The Society warmly welcomes these five new members.

**Michael Floyd Jeanne Giles  
Lynn Johnson Richard Winans  
Allison Young**

We have no secret handshake, just a common interest in history.



The Society gratefully acknowledges the following contributors:

**Kathleen & John Bauman,  
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