

The Magee Family and the Magee Carpet Co.

The Magee Family and the Magee Carpet Co. as told to Patchwork by Drue Magee.

Interviewed by Katie Howe and Caitlin Levan in the spring of 2001

Drue Magee, a Bloomsburg resident, is the granddaughter of Harry Magee. Drue is an instrumental part of the family-owned businesses in town.

Harry Magee brought a highly successful industry to the town of Bloomsburg. The Magee Carpet Company and Magee Main Street Inn both add character to the community. Both businesses employ many Columbia County citizens. Harry Magee not only contributed to the success of these two businesses but also to many other events in town.

PATCHWORK: From what country did the Magees originally come from?

MAGEE: Well my understanding is that they came from Ireland.

PATCHWORK: Do you know what part of Ireland?

MAGEE: I really don't know that. We are going back further than my great-grandparents, so I am just not clear on that. And I wish my father were here because he could tell you these things much more clearly. So I don't know when or why, or anything else.

PATCHWORK: When did they come to the U.S.?

MAGEE: I really don't know that. My grandfather was not the person who started the Magee Carpet Company, it was his father, so it was my great-grandfather, whose name was James Magee, as well as my father's name is James Magee. So, Harry Magee was the second generation involved with the carpet mill.

PATCHWORK: When did they start the Magee Rieter?

MAGEE: Magee Rieter has been in just the last few years, that was a joint venture that we have, it's a partnership that we have with the Swiss firm, Rieter Automotive, so that's been very recently. The carpet operation in Bloomsburg started in 1889. In essence it was started in 1889 and went bankrupt several times before they could start the Magee Carpet Company in 1901. Then it was changed to Magee Carpet Company to being a subsidiary to Magee Industrial Enterprises in 1967. And then, in 1997 I believe it was, we merged or we did a joint venture with Rieter Automotive Systems, and now it's the name of the company, Magee Rieter Automotive Systems.

PATCHWORK: Was this the first company your family invested in or was it one of the first big ones that has been successful?

MAGEE: From the company history, James Magee and his family were involved with a carpet manufacturing firm in Philadelphia and there were a group of citizens in Bloomsburg that were encouraging industry into the Bloomsburg area and they were contacted. So he brought the carpet manufacturing to Bloomsburg and that's how we got here.

PATCHWORK: What achievements other than the Magee Rieter did he achieve?

MAGEE: He did an awful lot of things. He was involved in a very lot of things, and I think he was the one that was instrumental in the radio station, WHLM, that has been sold in the last few years also. He was instrumental in starting the airport in Bloomsburg. He was very instrumental in getting the airport going. He had a museum next to his house on West Main Street, where Dr. Brown's Optometry is located. And he built a transportation museum in the '60s. Those businesses we mentioned were ruined in the flood of 1972. He had his fingers in a lot of things. He was a very dynamic sort of person.

PATCHWORK: What kind of reputation did he have in Bloomsburg?

MAGEE: Depends on whom you talk to. I think he was someone that got things done, he was very generous to the town and to his employees and family.

PATCHWORK: Can you tell us about the origins of Hotel Magee?

MAGEE: Hotel Magee was brought here by Magee Carpet Company and James Magee. It depends on what you read; some literature says 1911 and some 1917, so I am not exactly sure. It was bought by the company and it has been an operation ever since.

PATCHWORK: What great contributions do you think your grandfather brought to the community of Bloomsburg?

MAGEE: The greatest thing I can say about him, or my father as well, is that they were able to continue to carry on a business that was brought here over 100 years ago and keep it pretty much as a family operation, which is a very unique and difficult thing to do. It rarely happens that you have a business of this size and can continue through several generations and it's been a big employer to the town and big contributor. So I think that's probably his greatest contribution. He was interested in a lot of other smaller things, but that's really his greatest contribution to be able to keep that company running and keep it going in Bloomsburg.

PATCHWORK: What kind of legacy do you think he has left here?

MAGEE: A continuation of a wonderful company. I think it's been passed on through the family and all of us have been gifted as this being something to take care of. We just have it for a while, then we just keep it going and pass it to the next group of people.

PATCHWORK: Did Mr. Magee have any family members with whom he worked?

MAGEE: He worked with a lot of his family members, actually. His brother-in-law was very involved as purchasing director and his son was involved with the company, his son-in-law also, and several other relatives. His father died when he was very young, so he worked with his father and his son and brother-in-law and that's about it.

PATCHWORK: Is there any other information you can give us regarding your grandfather's life at all?

MAGEE: He was a very colorful character. He was just very ambitious. He lived life to the fullest. He was injured when he was a young man. He liked flying a lot. He was kind

of a daredevil, I think. He was injured as a young man in an accident with firecrackers. He was running away from one, slipped, fell and broke his back. He had complications from that which resulted in him being handicapped in some greater or less degree; his hip was fused in a standing position. As I remember him, he was never able to sit down. He had stools made to suit him with one side of it cut out, so he could sit and have one leg hang down. He had all kinds of gadgets around his house that accommodated him and his fashion. So he had things to get around and stand on and scoot around. He was able to accommodate his needs in that fashion. But he was handicapped for the bulk of his life and all his life that I ever knew him. But that never stopped him from doing anything or accomplishing what it was he wanted to accomplish or having the fun he wanted to have. He was an interesting character, he really was.