

History of Straw Broom and Broom Making in the USA

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The prototype of brooms is hand-made bundled grasses or tree branches. Sometimes, a crude broom was fashionably tied to a stick or handle but these old brooms did not sweep well and fell apart after a short time. The quality of broom changed in 1797 when Levi Dickenson, a farmer from Hadley, Massachusetts, used a bundle of tasseled sorghum grass to make an extremely good broom for his wife. From then on, Dickenson began making and selling straw brooms throughout his community, but the business was small for several decades. In 1810, Dickenson invented the foot-treadle broom machine which could make better brooms at a faster speed. This effective machine was copied and soon an annual production of about 6000 round brooms became reality. By the 1860s broom production had become a major part of rural agriculture in Hampshire and Franklin counties and they were distributed widely. Besides satisfying the domestic market, straw brooms were also exported to Canada, South America and Europe. Towns in central and western Massachusetts collectively became the broom capital of the world by the mid-19th century.

In the mid-1820s, United Society of Believers, usually called the Shakers, started the broom manufacturing business by growing broom straws and changing the design of round broom: they eliminated the woven stems, the holes and the pegs, and used wire to secure their broom to the handle. The bundles were put into a vise, flattened and stitched in place to form a requisite flat-shaped broom just as what we use today. They believed that the new brooms would move dust and dirt more effectively. Meanwhile, pertinent machines were invented to fast separate the seed of the broom straw from the tassel bristles. These new machines and techniques greatly improved the efficiency of broom making.

In modern times, the machinery is steered by electricity. However, even in large broom factories, the production of straw broom is still labor-intensive. A workman makes a broom at a single machine. This method remained unchanged for about 40 years.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 witnessed a tariff lift against straw brooms imported from Mexico. Cheaper Mexican-made brooms frustrated American straw broom factories. There are around 15 straw broom manufacturers left in the United States and today most brooms are imported from Mexico, China and India.