



Sprague Electric: An Electronics Giant's Rise, Fall, and Life after Death

John L. Sprague

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The rise of the Sprague Electric Company from a kitchen-table high-tech startup with a niche electronic product is representative of much of the U.S. electronics industry. Sprague Electric began in 1926 in the Quincy, Massachusetts kitchen of a young naval officer, Ensign Robert C. Sprague, and became a thriving manufacturer employing thousands of workers. It built a broad product line of electronic components, achieving international sales and a reputation for the highest quality. It then declined, went through a series of acquisitions, and eventually dissolved. Sprague Electric provides a valuable business and technological history, which serves as a lens for the stories of thousands of companies all over the world. It is the story of corporate success, and a cautionary tale of what to avoid. The Sprague Electric story portrays the value of investment in research and development, and also the effects of raw material supply chains on product lines. It is a story of a company's relations with the town where its factories were located, the small New England mill town of North Adams, Massachusetts, and how labor relations — initially cordial— later soured. It is a story of how a vulnerable company weathered the stresses of the Great Depression and triumphed, only to be brought down by the recessions of the 1970s and 1980s. It is a history of acquisitions, mergers, and spin-offs— some of them botched— and of the strategic and tactical mistakes that eventually caused the company to vanish. Its principal manufacturing plant is now an acclaimed art museum. Yet, Sprague Electric's successor companies continue its legacy in the electronic components industry. Corporations formed from its different business units and operations are now spread around the world.

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