

Denver fights war at home on rubber front

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This case in The Victory Years exhibit displays a wide array of products from the Gates Rubber Company.

A WORLD WAR II tank required one ton of rubber to build. A B-17 Flying Fortress required a half-ton. Uncle Sam's war machine became painfully aware of rubber's importance and scarcity after Japan seized Malaya and the Dutch East Indies in 1942. Ninety percent of America's supply of natural rubber was cut off.

This perilous shortage of natural rubber set the stage for an amazing American success story. Enter Charles Cassius Gates and his giant manufacturing plant at 999 South Broadway in Denver that became an essential production center of synthetic rubber products, making Gates Rubber Company one of Colorado's largest wartime employers.

Buna N and Buna S, synthetic rubbers, are created by combining coal tar, petroleum, butane, refinery gas, potatoes, grains, sugar, and molasses. Buna S, a "darkish-brown, spongy material," as a *Rocky Moun-*

tain News reporter called it, was the more commonly used of the two.

Gates and his 4,000 employees used Buna S to make all kinds of rubber products essential to the war effort. In round-the-clock shifts they produced synthetic rubber tires for Army and Navy use. They made gun turret control hoses, gas masks, oxygen valve gaskets, and carburetor elbow seals. By 1943 they were producing over 200,000 feet of hose daily.

Plant productivity was high enough in 1943 to earn Gates Rubber Company and its employees the prestigious and coveted Army-Navy "E" award for excellence. The plant was permitted to fly the "E" pennant for one year over the factory, and every employee was given a lapel pin to wear as a symbol of their high contribution to American freedom. The award, previously given only to military crews achieving the highest ratings for gunnery and engineering, was expanded in World War II to include civilian men and women whose companies made outstanding records in producing war equipment.

In 1946, after the enemy had been defeated, Charles Gates set his sights on more humanitarian issues. In that year the Gates Foundation was established. Its initial purpose was to provide assistance to projects relating to the health and welfare of all man-



A dapper Charles Gates sits at his desk in this historic photograph.

kind. Later that came to include college scholarships for financially needy students.

Today the Gates Foundation is a proud supporter of the Colorado Historical Society, funding many projects and exhibits. Charles Gates and the Gates Rubber Company's contribution to the war effort are outlined in the Colorado History Museum's popular exhibition, *20th Century Colorado: The Victory Years, The 1940s*, generously sponsored by Public Service Company of Colorado. The exhibition will be on view through August 6, 1995.

THE
VICTORY
YEARS

Colorado Historical Society Collection