

# A celebration of a life well lived



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Looking back on the history of East Penn it's clear that his personality — that strange mix of determination, ability and generosity that characterizes the best of corporate America — has been stamped on the success of the firm.



DeLight Breidegam Jr, the co-founder of East Penn Manufacturing, died on September 9, aged 88. He was as widely respected for his creation of a battery manufacturing giant in the US as his ethical business creed to employees, suppliers and customers.

**W**hat a legacy, what a man and what a life. That was the consensus of an astonishing outpouring of tributes to DeLight Breidegam Jr, the founder of East Penn Manufacturing, who died this September.

Accolades have ranged from speeches from the floor of the US House of Congress to floods of sympathy on the internet to his family.

"I don't know of anyone in the battery industry who was respected as much as DeLight," says John O Wirtz, head of Wirtz Manufacturing.

"He developed a team that included his employees and suppliers who strived for excellence in every area which proved to be an unbeatable combination. He was an inspiration to everyone who knew him and he always had time for everyone as a friend."

"He was one of a kind," says Mike Tole, chairman of MAC Engineering who knew DeLight for some 40 years. "I've never met someone who could simultaneously do what was needed for the business as well as for his employees. He has been and will continue to be an inspiration to the business community."

But DeLight was much more than a generous and ethical businessman.

Dan Langdon, president of East Penn, who joined in the mid-1980s says part of the genius of the firm was the work culture DeLight created. Employees see themselves as part of a family united in a business rather than having a traditional boss-work relationship, he says.

"He's always had the long-term interests of employees in mind," says Langdon. "And has been ready to support them through the bad times as well as the good. His management approach was not a confrontational one — in the 37 years I've known him, we've not once had a disagreement."

He was also a highly generous donor to the community. "DeLight provided infrastructure and scholarships at Moravian College that transformed the face of the campus and the futures and lives of hundreds of our current students and graduates alike," says Bryon Grigsby college president.

"It is difficult to find a programme or place at Moravian that has not been touched and renewed by DeLight's involvement and generosity." DeLight was on the Board of Trustees for 37 years.

The donations were also scattered around the local health care facilities where substantial contributions came from DeLight and his wife of 67 years Helen.

As a man he was gregarious, generous and amusing. But also quick-witted. "One of my favourite stories highlighting this aspect of his personality happened on VE-Day," says Langdon. "There was so many young USAF men leaving the airbase and trying to hitch-hike into town and to celebrate meant they couldn't all get a lift. DeLight told his buddies to cross the road and hitch in the opposite direction!

"Why?" they asked.

"You'll see! They hitched a mile up the road, crossed over and almost imme-

diately got a ride, past the airbase and back into town."

### The birth of East Penn

DeLight's story and where it coincides with that of East Penn is normally attributed to the firm's foundation in 1946.

But it began before that.

In a characteristically modest remark DeLight once explained how East Penn started because "my father sent me out back to fix the battery in the tractor."

DeLight E Breidegam Jr was born on October 3, 1926 in Fleetwood a small semi-rural Pennsylvania town dominated by farming and the industrial sized car body workshop that was bought by General Motors in 1925.

With the oddity of coincidence the next major industry in the region would be his. And just minutes down the road from where he had been born.

As a child, the youngest of three and the only boy, his father — perhaps the man he most admired — taught him the value of honesty and hard work. The sheer grit and determination of the father, who had been brought low by the Depression and lost his home after the Crash was a deep and abiding influence on the young DeLight.

DeLight was to work with his father until DeLight Sr died in 1992.

When only just a teenager DeLight Jr was industrious and in the holidays would earn 50 cents a day helping work at a neighbour's farm. Later he earned more as a picker in the fields.

And even by the age of 16 when he was able to buy his first car — a 1935 Chevy for \$150 — he was helping his father build hand-made batteries. He also gained practical knowledge of this by working at a nearby firm called Price Battery, where his father was plant manager.

The critical period for the emergence of the future of East Penn as a business happened between December 1943 — when DeLight left senior high school and enlisted in the Army Air Corps Aviation Cadet Program, aged 17 — and his release in October 1946.

While waiting for his discharge from the USAF he had been sketching out plans for some of his father's fanciful



**Before DeLight joined the Army Aviation Corp in 1943 he had worked shifts as an official volunteer spotter looking for suspicious aircraft flying in Pennsylvanian airspace**

proposals for life after the forces. He decided he would capitalize on his father's knowledge of working in lead acid battery manufacturing and his own ability not just to help in making them but also distributing and selling them.

He also kept in contact, as much as he could, to his high school sweetheart, Helen Merkel.

DeLight was discharged from the US Air Force on October 3, 1946. That morning he drove the three hour trip from Fort Meade, Maryland to the family home. It proved to be a busy day — both his 20th birthday and the day he and his father co-founded East Penn.

The business proposition — based like many that rode the tricky boom years after the second world war — was essentially a simple one predicated on making do with very little.

In this instance, the war had made materials for new batteries scarce, but there was a great demand for rebuilt batteries to allow the returning soldiers to restart mothballed cars and trucks. The two DeLights collected old batteries and rebuilt them.

The early days of East Penn were very much the stuff of the American dream itself where sheer effort, and enterprise overcomes hardship.

The two rented an old creamery for \$10 a month and set up their small business repairing and then making lead acid batteries. They used a payphone at the hotel across the road for the office phone.

In the beginning DeLight Jr hand-built the batteries himself with guidance from his father who continued to work full-time at the Bowers Battery plant.

DeLight Jr would then tour the region selling the handmade batteries to local garages. It was the beginning of the distribution network that helped build the success of East Penn in later years.

The following year the Breidegams took on a partner, Karl Gasche, a MIT engineering graduate who they had known from working at the nearby Bowers Battery. He became vice-president of the company, which was incorporated as East Penn Manufacturing Company.

Raw materials were now becoming available and with Gasche's expertise the company began to make new automobile batteries. Gasche proved to be brilliant engineer — in the end he would hold 21 battery-related patents.

Their product line was named Deka — being the first letters of DeLight and Karl.

Manufacturing batteries in quantity involved the need to smelt lead for the new batteries, and so the fledgling firm built a small smelter on 11 acres outside of nearby Lyons, Pennsylvania which they used at night while devoting their days to rebuilding old batteries and manufacturing new ones.

This was also the first building of what would one day become two million square feet of operations on nearly 500 acres.



**Wedding day: February 28, 1948**

In 1948 the entire family was invested in the new company — DeLight Jr married Helen that February in the local Lutheran church. Helen had just finished a three year nursing course and her interest in caring for the sick was to be a recurrent theme of the family's later charitable giving. Early that year too DeLight Sr quit his job at Bowers to work full time for the company.

Their first child Daniel was born in 1953. Timothy (1957) and Sally (1962) were to follow.

But although the business had settled



DeLight testing batteries, late 1940s. The early days of East Penn were very much the stuff of the American dream itself where sheer effort, good ideas and enterprise overcomes hardship.



down and the firm was now financially stable enough to move their offices to the Lyons facility, it wasn't immediately apparent they were on to a winner.

In 1950 they had just six staff though the Deka brand was already being recognized for its quality and price.

That said, in one sense from then on, the company didn't look back.

By the middle of the 1960s, the firm had established a small but expanding

network of warehouses across the mid-to east coast. In the future, developing an expanded distribution model when you have something like 90 warehouses would be as vital a part of the business as the product itself.

In the 1960s the company rapidly expanded its product range moving into related parts of the battery business such as plastic parts from injection moulding when suppliers were unable to fill or-

ders. In 1967 thanks to a steady supply agreement with Sears Roebuck & Co the firm moved into plastic clamps, wire and cable products.

By the end of the decade East Penn had powered into industrial batteries providing power for forklifts, diesel locomotives, personnel movers and aircraft tow vehicles.

By the mid-1970s the company had doubled in size leaping from around 350 employees in 1971 to 700 five years later. DeLight later said that even in those years growth was sustained by ploughing every penny of profits in the family business back into the company.

To make deliveries of Deka batteries and its new range Lynx accessories, East Penn added to its truck fleet and in 1974 built a garage in which to keep the vehicles serviced. Other plant expansion projects in the 1970s included the opening of an oxide facility and a new battery plant and laboratory, and the addition of a continuous automatic plate-making system.

In the late 1970s East Penn introduced its Kare-Free line of calcium maintenance-free batteries; the line had so much potential that the company began making plans to build a second automotive plant for its production. To handle the wastewater created by battery manufacturing, East Penn also opened a treatment plant in 1977, able to process 100,000 gallons of wastewater each day.

East Penn produced more than a million batteries in a year for the first time in 1976. It far exceeded the expectation of DeLight Sr's ambition to be able to build a 100 batteries a day. Nowadays East Penn makes over 125,000 a day.

Through this period DeLight Jr's role was pivotal in helping the firm grow and his gradual assumption of larger and lifelong duties within an industry he was to love, help and nurture.

Personally it was not always so easy. His youngest son Timothy — already showing great promise for the future — died in a college kayaking trip in January 1978. He was just 21.

The pointlessness of Timothy's early death was to be directed in charitable giving to a host of local medical health initiatives.

## Industry endeavours

In 1969 he became a director at Battery Council International, the leading lead acid battery trade body. He stood down as director three decades later in 2002.



**Above: East Penn HQ 1946. The two Delights rented an old creamery for \$10 a month and set up their small business repairing and making lead acid batteries. They used a payphone at the hotel across the road for the office phone.**



**Above: Aerial view of the East Penn site in 1954 and below nowadays**



He also took over the presidency of BCI in 1978 and 1979. (He is also one of the few individuals to receive its honorary title of life member.)

As part of this sense of duty he has also been on the board of directors for the Lead Industries Association and is a former member of the now-defunct Independent Battery Manufacturers Association.

If the 1970s were exciting times for East Penn, the 1980s were even more so.

Groundbreaking new battery technology led to expansive growth throughout the decade and into the next, quadrupling the company's size. New manufacturing facilities were swiftly added to accommodate the growing business. Smart acquisitions delivered needed warehouse space and allowed the company to span new horizons.

East Penn expanded on a number of fronts in the 1980s. Battery design became the province of CAD (computer aided design), making the drafting tables obsolete. Engineers also turned their attention to new battery technology in the 1980s, such as absorbed-mat and gelled-electrolyte, non-spillable batteries, ideal for applications such as telecommunications.

In 1988, East Penn began distributing in Canada, and within two years had secured a substantial segment of that market.

The company also made history in environmental protection. Here DeLight early on had seen the way the battery industry needed to go. "People thought that waste was normal," he said in a later interview. "Then in the 1960s, the environmental stuff started to come. Some people threw their hands up and said, 'There's no way.' And I always said, 'Well ... heck, we're going to try.'"

Today it recycles some 30,000 batteries a day including reclaiming the acid and the plastic.

And he did. And his efforts through organizations such as BCI, have helped achieve the now accepted understanding that environmental stewardship needs to be built into the economic model. It would be cost-ineffective to build a battery without recycling.



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In 1992, the annual battery total passed the five million mark. East Penn was now a state-of-the-art industry model, fully prepared for the 21st century. Every stage of the manufacturing process was computer-aided and the most tedious jobs were now fully automated.

Each division — SLI (starting, lighting, and ignition), motive power, reserve power (specialty), and cable & wire — was playing a major role in the company's growth. The SLI line alone consisted of more than 150 battery types for everything from golf cars to farm tractors.

The motive power division was manufacturing, distributing, and servicing nationwide an amazing range of battery sizes and types, some weighing more than 20,000 pounds (10 tons).

In the early 1990s East Penn acquired 13 warehouses when it bought up mid-west firm Electro Battery Company and Power Battery Sales, in Ontario Canada.

In 1993 it launched a line of reserve power batteries for standby power applications such as telecommunications and UPS and was able to capitalize on the remarkable growth of businesses such as data centres. Later in the 1990s stationary batteries were developed for the cable TV market.

Since then East Penn's growth has been steady with only the bursting of the telecoms bubble in 2001 — the telecoms business which has a heavy reliance on batteries, had been growing at around 7% a year worldwide till then — causing a hiccup. That year the firm — which had a policy of trying to keep workers for life — had to temporarily

lay off 100 workers.

East Penn has regularly been acknowledged as one of the best places to work in Pennsylvania. The company has a long history too of recruiting and retaining staff with many employees now into their third and fourth decades of employment with the firm.

### **Distribution, distribution**

Although East Penn had expanded northwards into Canada and exported its batteries, it made a determined push into improving its European business in 2002. That year it set up a joint venture with Austrian company Banner Batterien, a battery manufacturer of similar philosophy and standing in the European market.

The primary purpose of the joint venture company, located in Linz in Austria, is to broaden East Penn's customer service in Europe and Banner's customer service in North America in the areas of marketing, distribution, product development, engineering and manufacturing technology.

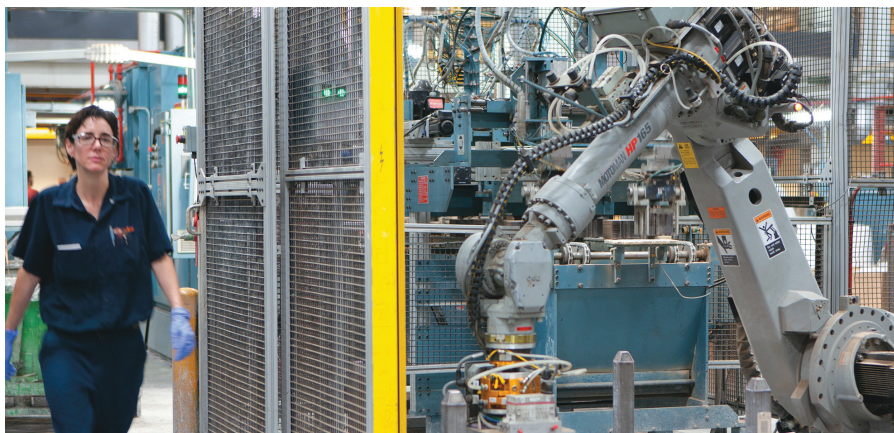
In 2005 East Penn acquired the automotive-battery division of Douglas Battery Manufacturing Co, adding a substantial North Carolina distribution centre to its US operations.

The firm's persistent interest in new technology has propelled it to the front in lead acid battery manufacturing. In 2008, East Penn entered into an exclusive agreement with Furukawa Battery, a Japanese battery manufacturing company, and CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization), the Australian national science agency, to release the revolutionary UltraBattery technology in North America that would be manufactured by East Penn.

The UltraBattery is a completely new class of an advanced lead-acid technology.

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East Penn helped lead the way in environmental protection. “People thought that waste was normal,” DeLight said. “Then in the 1960s, the environmental stuff started to come. Some people threw their hands up and said, ‘There’s no way.’ And I always said, ‘Well ... heck, we’re going to try’”

ogy that combines the added benefit of an asymmetric supercapacitor. This provides an optimal balance of energy storage with quick charge acceptance, power discharge and longer life spans than existing technology in the marketplace.

The UltraBattery has the capability of challenging the advances of lithium ion batteries in that it can operate in a partial state of charge at a far more competitive price.

Thanks in large part to the enthusiasm and cordial relations of DeLight’s daughter Sally Miksiewicz, Ecoul was acquired in 2010. East Penn holds the exclusive license to develop, test, and release the UltraBattery technology for reserve power applications through its subsidiary, Ecoul.

And as an aside, perhaps the saddest part of DeLight’s final year was the death of Sally in June 2014.

## A business model

Breidegam would never credit himself as being the sole instigator of the huge success that the company he cofounded has enjoyed. “We probably wouldn’t be a model for the Harvard Business School,” he once quipped.

But looking back on the history of East Penn it’s clear that his personality — that strange mix of determination, ability and generosity that characterizes the best of corporate America — has been stamped on the success of the firm.

His generosity of spirit and commitment to hard work often meant that he reaped what he had sowed. A mid-winter storm in 1996 ended with a fire at the plant that took days to stop. Rather than kick a competitor when down, East Penn’s rivals appreciated his commitment for the entire industry and helped him fulfill his orders.

DeLight was a practising Christian, and a regular attendee at his local Lutheran church all his life.

The firm’s success was also down to the deep level of knowledge he possessed about both the industry and technical aspects of manufacturing. “You couldn’t go for lunch with him without coming away having learnt something new,” one customer told *Batteries International*.

He also was able to create an environment open to incorporating new ideas.

He had a profound interest in moving ahead with new technology and East

Penn has long had a reputation at being ahead of its competitors in machinery and manufacturing processes. “He used to say that those who said “wait and see” before introducing new technology or methods had decided to go out of business — they just haven’t decided the date yet,” says Dan Langdon.

“And for the last decade or so he’s prepared the company for the transition to the time when he will no longer be around — the company is in great shape but clearly it’s a sadder place without DeLight.”

Perhaps the last word about his life and the corporate philosophy he fostered should come from him.

“I get a big kick out of seeing young people come here and being able to grow,” he once said. “I take a lot of pride that we have thousands of people here.

“I grew up so humbly, I never had anything. Now, I live in a nice home, I drive a good car compared to what I used to. That’s about it. But I like to go in the plant and see what they’re doing and pat a guy on the back and tell him I think he’s doing a hell of a good job for us. And if he makes me some money, I’ll share it with him.”

**DeLight E Breidegam,**  
**battery manufacturer, philanthropist:**  
**October 3, 1926 – September 9, 2015.**

DeLight is predeceased by his father and mother; DeLight Sr died in 1992 and Helen in 1988. His daughter Sally died last year. He lost his son Timothy in 1978. He is survived by his wife, Helen; his son, Daniel and grandchildren Timothy, Daniel, Katelyn, and Matthew, Mortimer, Gemma and great-grandchildren Anna, Reilly, and Logan.

“His legacy not only resides in the remarkable organization he founded and built but also in the countless lives he touched, encouraged, and inspired to become the very best they could be. His vision, dreams, and accomplishments will still live on in the people who follow in his footsteps as they grow the company and support the community and country he loved and served”