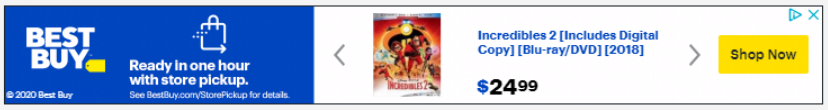

ACCESSORIES

Catalog giant J.C. Whitney celebrates its centennial

Kurt Ernst on Feb 16th, 2015 at 8:58 am

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Roy Warshawsky (R), with the catalogs that helped build his auto parts empire. All images courtesy J.C. Whitney.

In 1915, Lithuanian immigrant Israel Warshawsky opened a scrapyard on the corner of South State Street and South Archer Avenue. Sensing the significance of the automobile, particularly the Ford Model T, Warshawsky began to focus his business on used auto parts, and soon opened a retail store onsite, catering to the home mechanic. No longer located in Chicago, the business is still going strong a century later, though most know the company by its post-1934, outside-of-the-Chicago market name: J.C. Whitney.

Need a bus body? The 1950 Warshawsky catalog could help.

Need a bus body? The 1936 Warshawsky catalog could help.

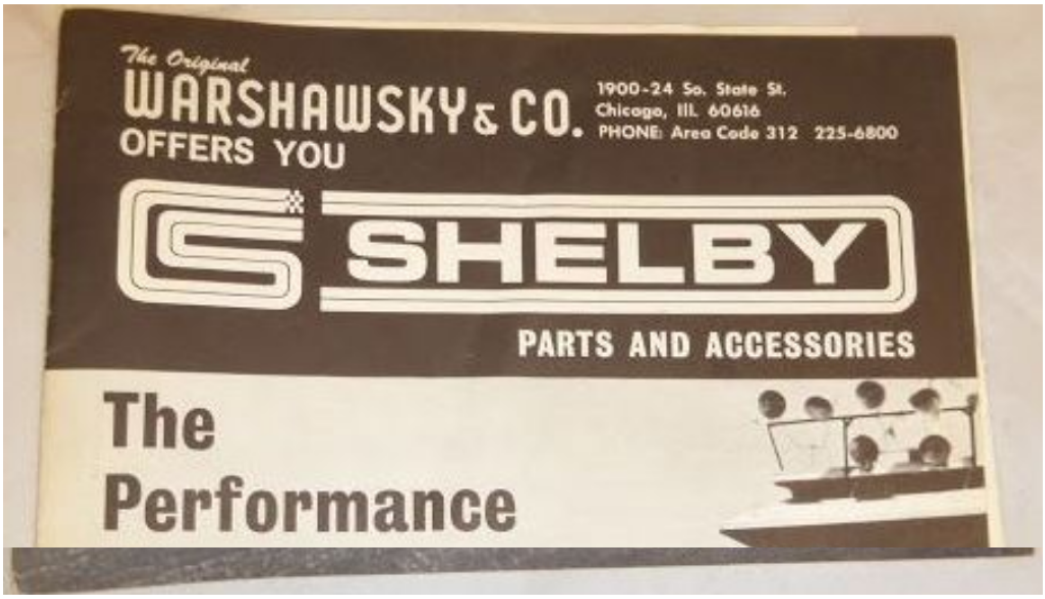
Warshawsky's business grew quickly during the years leading up to World War I, and his business savvy allowed him to acquire inventory from defunct automakers and industry suppliers for pennies on the dollar. A natural showman, Warshawsky became known for his theatrical promotional stunts and his dedication to helping sell Liberty Bonds. The Great Depression proved good for business, too, as people needed affordable auto parts, and Warshawsky was more than happy to supply them.

The cover of the 1945 Warshawsky catalog.

The first Warshawsky catalog was published in 1933, and a year later, following his graduation from the University of Chicago, Israel's son Roy joined the family business. It was Roy who urged his father to expand the business nationally, and it was also Roy who proposed the company adopt a more "American" name for its new mail order business. J.C. Whitney was the moniker chosen, and in the August 2004 issue of *Hemmings Muscle Machines*, Hib Halverson explained the name was derived from Roy's occasional nickname ("Whitney"), blended with the J.C. of retail giant J.C. Penney. In the Chicago market, however, the business remained Warshawsky & Company.

A 1956 J.C. Whitney catalog.

Israel Warshawsky died in 1943, and Roy took the reins when another World War was causing a dramatic increase in demand for automotive repair parts. By 1947, the store occupied an entire block on State Street, making it the largest automotive department store in the world. An ever-increasing number of accessory items joined auto parts in the catalog, leading to the long-time J.C. Whitney slogan, “Everything Automotive.” Hood ornaments? J.C. Whitney had them. Ah-ooga horns? The company sold them, too, along with tissue dispensers, custom taillamps, an endless variety of wheel covers and just about anything else one would need to properly dress their chariot.



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1967 Shelby parts catalog.

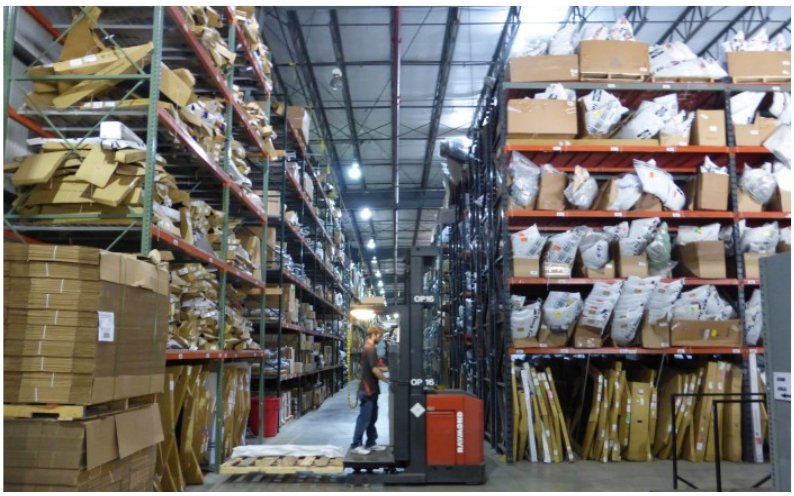
Inventory grew so large that specialized catalogs were needed, and at one time or another J.C. Whitney published a catalog dedicated to Shelby parts, Volkswagens, Jeeps, trucks and even motorcycles. Other family members joined the operation, but for decades its leader was Roy, at least until his health took a turn for the worse in the early 1990s. Roy died in 1997, which, coincidentally, was also the year that the first J.C. Whitney website debuted. It was also the year that the company built a 340,000 square foot operations center in La Salle, Illinois, designed to keep up with the company’s current and future needs. Today, La Salle is both a retail site and a distribution center for its online, catalog and telephone sales.

If you owned a VW in the early 1980s, there's a good chance this cover looks familiar.

In 2002, J.C. Whitney was acquired by The Riverside Company, a private equity firm. Riverside attempted further diversification, creating Whitney Automotive Group (which also includes companies like CarParts.com) in 2207. In 2010, the Whitney Automotive Group was purchased by U.S. Auto Parts, which remains the parent of J.C. Whitney as the company celebrates its centennial.

Motorcycle gear? The company had a catalog for that, too.

The company will be marking the anniversary with a series of project builds (including a 2015 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon to kick things off), and it will be attending a variety of car-themed events ranging from the Easter Jeep Safari in Moab, Utah, to the Woodward Dream Cruise in Detroit, Michigan. The company has even set up a dedicated 100th anniversary website to keep customers informed on the latest news and events.



Inside the company's current La Salle, Illinois, warehouse.

Today, the bulk of J.C. Whitney's business comes in over the internet, but printed catalogs are still offered. We're tempted to order one up, just for old time's sake.

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