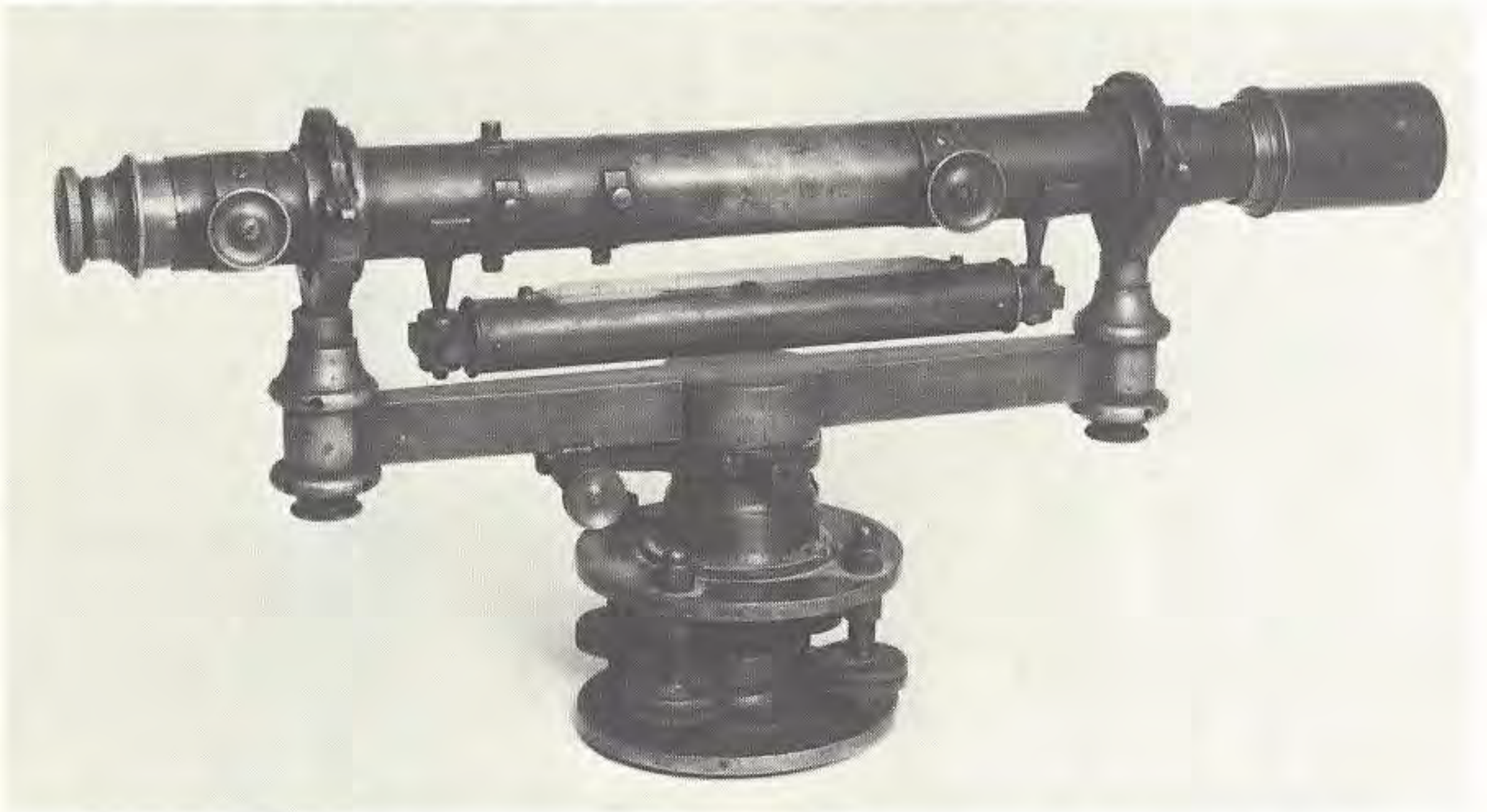


THE A. S. ALOE INSTRUMENT BUSINESS

Deborah Jean Warner

The A. S. Aloe Company originated in 1854 when Sadoc Aloe, a Jewish immigrant from Scotland, established himself as an optician in New York City. By 1865 Sadoc Aloe had moved on to St. Louis to join his son, Albert Sidney Aloe (1842-1893), who had settled there around 1860 and was making "High Grade Surveying and Engineering Instruments."¹ S. Aloe & Son worked together for a year or two as "practical opticians," offering spectacles, microscopes, stereoscopes, and opera, field and spy glasses,² but by 1867 Albert was in business on his own. The scope of Aloe's enterprise in these early years can be gleaned from his display of surveyor's instruments, drawing instruments, and optical instruments at the Cincinnati Industrial Exposition of 1872. A similar assortment of instruments appears on a broadside issued by Louis M. Prince, who had worked with Aloe before setting up a branch of the firm in Cincinnati in 1873.³

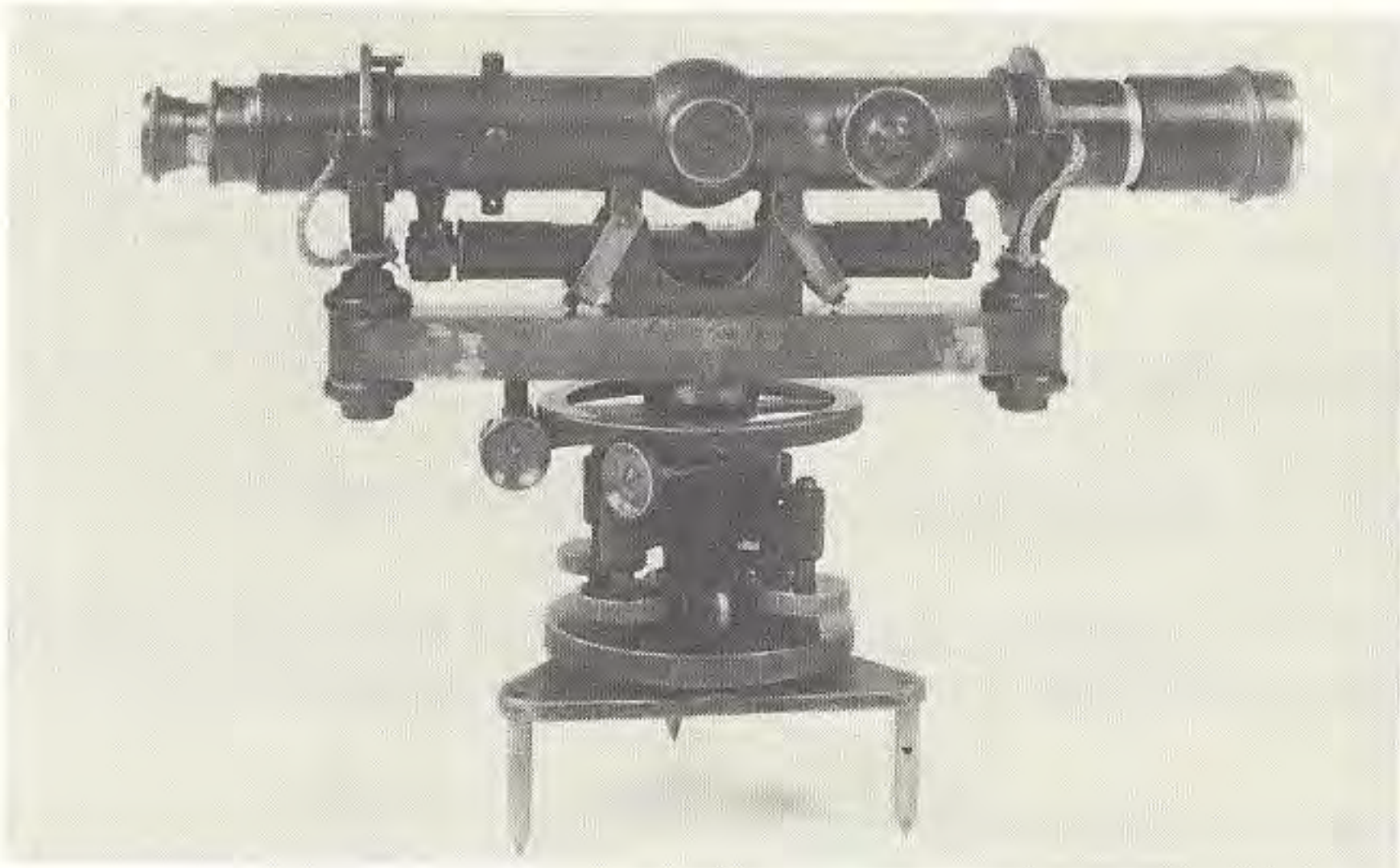


Y-level signed "A. S. Aloe Maker / St. Louis / No. 69" and "Blunt & Co., N.Y."
The telescope is 16½ inches long; the level is 7½ inches long. NMAH photo.

The Y-level shown above dates from this early period; the Blunt & Co. signature presumably indicating the New York firm (fl. 1868-1872) that retailed it. Another early Aloe instrument in the National Museum of American History is a carriage odometer marked "A. S. Aloe / Maker / St. Louis" that was recently donated by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

In 1876, having realized that there was money to be made by marketing mathematical instruments as well as by manufacturing them, Aloe went into partnership with William H. Hernstein and began offering instruments made by others. Advertisements from the 1890s which appeared in engineering journals noted that A. S. Aloe & Co. served as "headquarters in the west for surveying instruments of all descriptions."⁴ Aloe catalogs from that period described surveying instruments made by W. & L. E. Gurley in Troy, New York and by Buff & Berger in Boston, boat compasses by Merrill of New York City, and drawing instruments by Kern in Switzerland and Alteneder in Philadelphia, as well as several instruments made in Aloe's manufactory. These included a new and improved engineers' transit, a vernier transit compass, an improved engineers' Y level and several smaller levels for architects and builders, a "universal eclimeter" (described as an inexpensive combination of transit, level, and compass), an improved miner's compass with four sight vanes, and a large assortment of "Peerless" drawing instruments. Aloe also produced a view camera designed for architects and engineers.⁵

The partnership of Aloe & Hernstein also expanded into new areas such as surgical instruments, and such electrical apparatus as bells, batteries, electro-medical apparatus, and annunciators for cottages and grand hotels.⁶ In 1883, Aloe, Hernstein & Co. (as the firm was then known) boasted that they were "the largest house in the States." Twenty years later, A. S. Aloe Co. claimed to be "the largest house in the world."⁷



Architect's level marked "A. S. Aloe Co. / St. Louis / 9067" and "PAT. 7-24-1917."

The telescope is 12½ inches long. NMAH photo.

The architect's level shown above provides a first clue correlating serial number and date. It also suggests a connection between Aloe

and Adolph Wissler, the St. Louis mathematical instrument maker who patented a combination level and transit instrument on that date. And it indicates that, while surgical and biological apparatus had quickly become Aloe's core business, the mathematical instrument business was not so quickly forgotten. This level was given to the National Museum of American History by Mr. & Mrs. James Mallard, Jr.

Following the death of A. S. Aloe in 1893, his son, Louis Patrick Aloe (1867-1929) took command of A. S. Aloe Co. He incorporated the firm, moved it into an 8-story building, and developed it into one of the largest laboratory supply houses in the country. He was also active in his community--he wrote the provision for an eight-hour day into the St. Louis city charter, sponsored legislation creating the public welfare and public service departments, and organized a large bond issue to finance civic improvements--and he is memorialized in the Aloe Plaza across from Union Station.⁸

By the late 1920s the firm was capitalized at \$1,000,000, and had some 350 employees and branches in Kansas City, Chicago and Los Angeles. In recent years, Aloe's laboratory supply division was bought out by Curtin-Matheson, and their medical division became a part of Sherwood Medical Industries.

1. Charles Smart, The Makers of Surveying Instruments in America Since 1700 (Troy, N.Y., 1962), p. 2. The 1860 date comes from A. S. Aloe Co., Instruments and Supplies for Civil Engineers, Architects, Surveyors (St. Louis, [before 1919]).

2. Advertisement in St. Louis city directory (1865).

3. This broadside is reproduced in Rittenhouse 1 (1987): 118-119. As Aloe's mother was born Isabella Prince, it is reasonable to assume that L. M. Prince was his cousin.

4. Advertisement in Engineering News 26 (1891).

5. A. S. Aloe & Co., Mathematical Catalogue (St. Louis, 1892).

6. A. S. Aloe & Co., Illustrated Catalogue and Price List of Electrical Supplies (St. Louis, 1885); this has an illustration of Aloe's 4-story instrument depot.

7. Advertisements in Engineering News 10 (1883) and 50 (1903).

8. "Louis Patrick Aloe" in National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York, 1939), vol. 27, p. 249; and Burton A. Boxerman, "St. Louis Jewish Leaders," Gateway Heritage 6 (Spring, 1986): 20-21. A photograph of the new building is shown in Sheryl Lang, "Fulfilling the American Dream: Jewish Life in St. Louis," Gateway Heritage 7 (Summer 1986): 13. Some of Aloe's surgical instrument catalogs are listed in Audrey B. Davis and Mark S. Dreyfus, The Finest Instruments Ever Made (1986), pp. 37-38.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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