Hello. My name is Charles Rodgers and I work with the State Archives collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

You may think of prison inmates producing license plates, but in the Stillwater State Prison, inmates manufactured and produced much more.

Prison industries are defined as the production of goods and services from the labor of prison inmates. Since the 1890s the Stillwater State Prison has manufactured a variety of products.

Minnesota Prison Industries products were well-known in Minnesota and the region, and there were extensive exhibits at the Minnesota State Fair for many years. The industrial program was self-supporting and profit-making, and designed to provide suitable industrial and vocational training and meaningful work experience.

The Stillwater State Prison started manufacturing twine, used for binding hay, as early as 1891. Fifty years later, in 1941, farmers in this region had bought and used almost a billion pounds of twine.

Stillwater Twine was the brand name for the twine produced by Stillwater State Prison inmates. In 1912 Stillwater Twine had been manufactured for 20 years.

Here are photographs of the rope and twine factory, dated in the 1930s to 1950s.

And some photos of prisoners at work, along with interior shots of the rope and twine factory.

Here are some close-ups of the Minnesota State Fair exhibit photos, dated in the 1950s to 1970s.

Stillwater State Prison inmates manufactured a wide range of farm equipment, including hay binders, corn harvesters, hay rakes, mowers, wagons, cultivators, manure spreaders, and more.
The farm equipment brand name was the Minnesota Line. With a reputation for excellent workmanship and quality, Minnesota Line farm equipment was sold to farmers and implement dealers for several decades, starting in 1908 and well into the 1980s.

In 1908 the prison built five mowers. In 1919 the output was 4500 binders, 6000 mowers, and 3500 rakes. Over the years demand and production steadily increased. In the early years, much of the equipment was drawn by horses. Later, the equipment was pulled by tractors.

Here are some close-ups of farm equipment catalogs and advertising brochures that are in color.

And photographs of farm equipment from 1920 or earlier, and from the 1950s to the 1960s.

Here’s a close-up of a page which lists “ten good reasons for the success of Stillwater Prison Industries,” which is found in the 1941 farm equipment catalog.

And some close-ups of Minnesota State Fair exhibit photos dating from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Here are photographs of prisoners at work in various workshops and in the foundry.

And this photograph shows prisoners walking to their weekly bath.

And then my favorite photograph, prisoners getting their hair cut in a workshop.

Now prison inmates manufacture office furniture and equipment, and much more under the brand name MINNCORR, and here’s a close-up of some 1980s brochures.

These photographs and selected documents show another side of life in a prison. For research purposes, Stillwater Prison Industries are well documented in the Minnesota State Archives. The records include annual reports, patent records, farm equipment catalogs, summary statistics, minutes of management committees, reports about twine and machinery sales, contracts, financial records, and production and shipment records.

There are a few prison industries objects in our three-dimensional objects collection, including Minnesota Twine notepads dated from the 1920s to the 1940s, pencils, and a package of twine.
Thanks again for viewing this podcast about the Stillwater Prison Industries.