When you think of this region's metal manufacturing industries, toys do not leap to mind. But for more than seven decades, a factory on Pittsburgh's North Side mass-produced metal toys for the nation's children. Wolverine Supply and Manufacturing Co. opened in 1903 in then Allegheny City. Company founder Benjamin Franklin Bain, a former resident of the "Wolverine" state of Michigan, found a niche in the toy market. Wolverine supplied the growing body of mass consumers with an affordable, durable product. The company also became a supplier of equipment and goods to toy manufacturers, joining the growing number of regional concerns involved in the tool and die and sheet stamping industries.

This multi-faceted approach to business secured the Wolverine Co. their first signature product line. Early on, the company was hired by the Sand Toy Company of Pittsburgh to make tools for the manufacture of mechanical sand toys. Unable to pay its bills, Sand Toy faced bankruptcy, and Wolverine inherited its patent for the "Sandy Andy" toys. This long-lived line of toys became immensely popular with an American middle class venturing to the beach for vacation or into the backyard sandbox. The line included pails, shovels, and more elaborate mechanical toys such as cranes, windmills, and Ferris wheels that used gravity to lift, sift, and move the sand.

A complementary line of automatic marble toys operated on the same principle as the sand toys. With names like "Sunny Andy" and "Bizzy Andy" (as seen in a 1928 Butler Bros. wholesale catalog), these cranes, pile drivers, and cable cars also hoisted and hefted their loads of marbles. Some items from this line illustrate the popular events of the day, such as the building of the Panama Canal that inspired the design of new toys. The Wolverine Panama Pile Driver capitalized on the fascination of the American public with the engineering marvels that conquered the landscape and changed world trade.

The company also introduced a line of pull toys for the younger set. Along with trolleys, trains, boats, and submarines, the line included a travel trailer that typified the days when Americans began taking automobile camping trips. The sleek aerodynamic
design of the “Streamliner” train kept pace with the period’s Art Deco trends.

More mundane toys indicate the role that playthings had as instructional tools to teach socially acceptable behavior or reinforce gender roles. More than a dozen washing machines trace the evolution of appliance technology — from a simple washboard to a machine with rollers to the modern washer familiar today. The refrigerators, sinks, and stoves produced from the 1930s through the ’60s illustrate changes in consumer tastes and lifestyles. Color preference evolution in home decoration is readily apparent too, from sanitary white to pinks and teals to almond and gold. Apartment living must have necessitated the “efficiency units” line: these appliances, as well as the irons, bake and tea sets, and eventually dollhouses helped prepare little girls for skills they might someday need as homemakers.

Active toys, such as the long-lived line of marble and pinball toys, often feature pictures of boys on the boxes. The “Attack” marble game, “Hockey Go Round,” and “Lunar Landing Electric Pinball Marble Game” were clearly designed for the male market. In the 1970s, the company also began producing logo lines of toys for boys such as a Shell Service Station and a Texaco gas pump. Some active play toys were marketed to a family audience: “Gym Horseshoes” featured family images on the box, reminding consumers that the family could be united through recreation.

The consumer base for Wolverine remained fairly constant throughout its Pittsburgh history. Retailers such as Sears regularly carried them in their mail order catalogs. The toys were colorful and durable, but affordable too, wholesaling in the 1920s and ’30s for 50 to 70 cents each. Ads in industry trade journals, such as Playthings and Toys and Novelties document the selling characteristics of the toys, using terms such as “colorful,” “educational,” “sturdy,” “well-constructed,” and “timely.”

In 1968, Wolverine became a division of Spang & Company. By the early ’70s, production ceased at the North Side factory and operations moved to Booneville, Ark., where the company still produces toys, but under the name “Today’s Kids.” Though the factory is gone, the toys remind us of the days when the Steel City was a national player in the metal toy market.