North America’s Cinderella Pipe Story: A Look at PVC Pipes’ Climb to the Top

Remember the story of Cinderella? Cinderella was too poor and unworthy to ever become a princess. Similarly, when first introduced into the North American pipe market in the 1950s, PVC pipe was admonished by competitors and skeptics as having little chance to succeed. As a substitute for the well-established pipe mainstays of that era—iron, steel reinforced concrete, asbestos cement, and vitrified clay; PVC pipe was initially viewed as having insufficient strength and stiffness to be a viable contender. All of these early views had to be changed. This paper summarily chronicles how the questions and doubts surrounding PVC pipe’s performance capabilities were overcome, including the resolution of subsequently raised concerns. Through the consistent treatment of every issue with rational, technical, research based approaches; combined with an extensive in-service record of admirable performance; the use of PVC pipe has grown steadily through more than five decades. As a direct consequence, PVC pipes now account for the majority of all new water and sanitary sewer installations, exceeding the market shares of all the aforementioned established pipe materials combined. PVC pipe’s fairy godmother is proud, indeed!

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