

RE: Lockheed Vega NC904Y; landed at Davis-Monthan Airfield, December 19 or 20, 1930. Airplane was sold on October 11, 1930 to McAleer Manufacturing Company, Detroit, MI.

Web Site Reference: <http://www.dmairfield.org/airplanes/NC904Y/index.html>

Text From: <http://rochesteravonhistory.blogspot.com/search?q=mcaleer>

I left the internal links active as of the date of conversion to PDF, January 9, 2016.

MCALEER INDUSTRIES

Today's post is the first of a three-part story about McAleer Manufacturing, one of Rochester's leading industries during the mid-20th century.

McAleer Manufacturing Company was founded in approximately 1923 in Detroit, Michigan, by a former garage foreman from Pennsylvania named Charles H. McAleer (1894-1968). McAleer developed a formula for automotive polish in a washtub in his basement and launched a successful business during the prosperous 1920s. The company grew to national prominence, and in 1930 McAleer took to the skies on a cross-country promotional tour with an airplane dubbed "Miss McAleer," from which a loud-speaker broadcasted commercials for the company's products to prospective customers on the ground. McAleer brand polishes and waxes were so highly regarded that they became the standard against which bids for such products furnished to the United States military were judged.

In 1940, McAleer sold his controlling interest in the company to brothers Carlton and N. Bradley Higbie. The Higbie brothers were from Chicago, and both had extensive experience in commercial banking and finance; in addition, Bradley Higbie had served at the helm of a chemical manufacturing company. When they took control of McAleer, Bradley Higbie stepped into the role of president and his brother, Carlton, served as chairman of the board.

In June 1941, the Higbies made a decision that would have a major impact on Rochester's history. The brothers purchased the old [Western Knitting Mills factory](#) at Fourth and Water streets, vacant since 1937, and moved manufacturing operations here from Detroit. A banner headline in the *Rochester Clarion* issue of June 12, 1941 heralded the prospect of new jobs in a community weary of Depression-era unemployment levels.

Just six months after McAleer announced its move to Rochester, the Pearl Harbor attack plunged the United States into World War II. In an effort to restore the company to a sound financial footing after the setbacks it had suffered during the Depression years, McAleer management sought to procure defense contracts and turned from the production of polishes and finishes to war matériel. The list of items that McAleer was contracted to provide for the war effort was lengthy: a water resistant coating for airplane parts; gun oil; rust preventative; control surfaces for airplanes; and most notably, the [AN- M26 photoflash flare](#) and the MK-46 photoflash bomb. More photoflash bombs - 50,000 in all - were manufactured and shipped from Rochester, Michigan than from any other defense plant in the nation. At the height of its wartime production, McAleer employed approximately 600 people in its Rochester facilities.

Part 2

In September 1942, McAleer Manufacturing announced that it would build a second facility in Rochester. The factory in the former Western Knitting Mills building was already running shifts around the clock and McAleer had just won a new defense contract - to produce aluminum powder used in the manufacture of various types of explosive ordnance.

The new factory was built on South Street, along the banks of the Clinton River. It was financed and built by

the [Defense Plant Corporation](#), or DPC, a government agency created expedite the equipping of private sector industry for wartime production. Factories built by the DPC were given Plancor numbers for identification purposes. The McAleer powder plant on South Street was designated Plancor 2151, and it was built with the urgency that accompanied the times: the project was announced in September and the plant began operating in December 1942.

The work done at the South Street plant was dangerous, and several concrete bunkers were built away from the main plant to further isolate the risky operations. In December 1942, just after production began, an explosion in one of the compound's small cement and frame building killed two women employees and seriously injured a third. The women were blown out of the building when powder in a mixing machine they were using exploded, and they were burned when their clothing caught fire. Virginia Ann MacLeod, 22, of Rochester, and Ella Jane Brinker Thorne, 31, of Pontiac, died from their injuries. Audrey M. Shoemaker Fisher, 30, also of Pontiac, was the only one of the three to survive the accident.

Another fatal explosion happened a year later. George Howard Smith was killed when the powder he was mixing exploded and destroyed the isolated building in which he was working. According to one newspaper account, Smith had been a member of the plant protection force before transferring to the job of explosives mixer. The day of the explosion was his first and only day on the new job. In addition to these tragedies, several other serious but non-fatal accidents happened at the powder plant during the war years.

After the war ended, the McAleer powder plant was idled and in April 1946 the government offered it for sale as excess inventory. The main powder plant building still stands on South Street, looking much as it did during the war, but almost all of the outbuildings that were part of the compound have long since disappeared. Several light industrial operations have occupied the former powder plant over the years, including Crucible Brass, Beaver Stair Company, and Boyle Engineering.

Next week: Part 3: McAleer in the Postwar Era. ([Click here](#) to go back to Part 1.)

[Click here](#) to view a video of the story of McAleer employee Virginia MacLeod, who was portrayed by actress Halley Anspach in the 2014 Mount Avon Cemetery Walk, "Heroes in the Stones."

Part 3

The post-World War II years were turbulent ones for Rochester's McAleer Manufacturing. Before the war was over in the Pacific, company officials had already plans for production of a new portable suction cleaner for automobiles. The company had also just acquired the [Bronson Reel Company](#) of Bronson, Michigan; Bronson, now a McAleer subsidiary, claimed to be the largest producer of fishing reels in the world at that time.

On January 15, 1946, just five months after the war ended, owners Carlton and N. Bradley Higbie took their company public, offering 50,000 shares of preferred McAleer stock at \$10 a share and 50,000 shares of common stock at \$5 a share. The stock offering was intended to raise approximately \$662,500 in new capital.

The following November, Carlton M. Higbie bought out his brother's share of the company and took his place as both president and chairman of McAleer. Along with the announcement that N. Bradley Higbie was leaving the firm came the news that McAleer was ready to start production steel pressure tubing for the auto industry. On May 5, 1950, company stockholders met and voted to change the name of the firm to Higbie Manufacturing Company. Higbie was organized into four divisions: Avon Tube Company, McAleer Manufacturing, Bronson Reel, and the general crafts division. Two years later, the McAleer division was sold off, and the Rochester plant was solely devoted to the Avon Tube division.

In 1971, Higbie Manufacturing was acquired by International Telephone & Telegraph (ITT) and became known as ITT-Higbie. ITT-Higbie continued to produce tubing in the Rochester plant until 1994; the building was then sold for redevelopment and eventually became the home of the Rochester Mills Beer Company.

