

LARKIN HISTORY (#33) - Larkin Center's Oldest Tenant, Tapecon, Turns 100

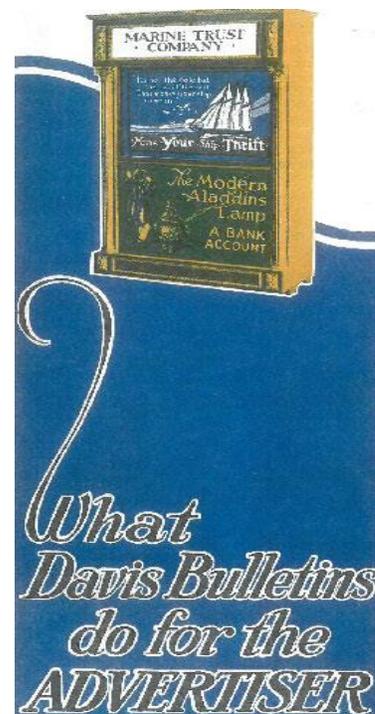
This month we are going to look at the more recent history of the Larkin Soap Co.'s (LSC) main manufacturing building, and more specifically, at its longest tenant, Tapecon. At one hundred years of age, Tapecon has outlived the LSC, which died a slow death, finally closing entirely at age 87 in Jan. 1962 after years of great innovation and success, followed by a terrible economy and changing market trends. By contrast, Tapecon has experienced great health and growth fairly consistently through its existence.



We are aware of Tapecon mostly because of its straight forward blue signs, a large one on the outside of the building overlooking Larkin Street, but clearly visible as one travels east on Seneca past the Larkin Center. Small, modest, similar signs are posted here and there by the several inside entrances, next to the security pads that permit entrance into its work space. Located in 80,520 square feet of space on the second floor, one hears no noise from outside its doors, nor from abutting tenancies. One would never guess that behind those closed, rather austere-looking doors are about 120 employees busily working on several dozen machines.

Tapecon was founded by Albert Davis in 1919, but was then known as The Davis Bulletin Co. On a recent tour of the company conducted by Albert's great grandson, Alan Davis, Alan proved to be the history guru of Tapecon, clearly enjoying and proudly relating its biography of owners and business. Alan, himself, is past President and is now mostly retired, maintaining an office there and around most Thursdays to keep an eye on his great grandfather's legacy.

Pride of history was obvious from the photos and displays throughout the office areas. I was amazed to see several original products, beautiful wood and embossed metal "bulletins". Decorated in Art Deco style, they were a mechanical sign changing system, that flipped cards on a conveyor type track, containing memos, information and graphics about current and upcoming programs for use in lobbies of, for example, movie theaters and other entertainment venues. They were particularly popular at vaudeville shows where the bulletin was placed on the stage to announce the next act. The machines could be purchased or rented. Albert, in the early years, acted as a travelling salesman, selling these devices. Famed vaudeville comedians, Abbott and Costello, prior to their performing careers, were actually salesmen for the company in the early 1930's. Printed advertising brochures for the devices enthusiastically claimed, "The constantly moving, live signs attract attention – where dead, still signs do not". Another ad boldly proclaimed, "They attract ATTENTION; cause INTEREST; create DESIRE; and produce BUYERS."



Alan demonstrated several of the bulletin machines for me, including one which flips a series of cards relating the history of the company.

Initially the signs in the devices were hand painted, but by the 1930's, the company had mastered silk screen printing. The 1940's began their advent into the making of decals, which were printed on water-release surfaced paper, usually in large sheets, to be transferred by its customers onto products to serve as labels. One of the largest decals made was for military airplanes manufactured at the local Curtis and Bell aviation firms. Later, labels for other products were designed to identify them, often including back labels which provided information about ingredients, instruction about how to use and UPC codes. Labels can be as small as 1/16th of an inch wide or as large as 40 inches square.

As technology progressed, so did the company. Electronic tactile systems were a 1980's innovation involving pressure placed on a thin-plastic surface covering key locations on an electronic circuit board or printed conductive circuitry to elicit functions like "on", "off" or other desired changes in function. Tapecon now designs, assembles, and manufactures complete flexible switches and hybrid electronic components.



A great deal of the company's contracts are for medical devices, including printed sensors as well as labels. Some labels monitor various environments with color changing inks that indicates when a condition changes.



A research and development team continuously works on new products with complex procedures tracking every step and testing to assure compliance to product specifications. For example, the company has autoclave units to test for sterility activation or adhesion pull testers to assure that adhesives perform properly or satisfy specialized application requirements. This is reminiscent in this writer's mind, of the presence of 7 laboratories throughout this building maintained by the LSC to develop new products and to assure the purity of all the product it manufactured.

Third generation owner, Harlow Davis, Jr. (Harlow Jr), during an interview for the Buffalo News in 1981, offered insight into this attention to detail and quality, using as an example, the screen printing of labels: "All of the company's work is performed on cylinder and flatbed screen printing presses, followed by a heating process to dry the thick applications of ink that are necessary for many signs or labels that will be exposed to weather and direct sunlight for a long period of time." Though technology may be more upscale now, the objective is obviously the same today. This is born out by the company's description of its work on its current web site, "Tapecon.com."



That the company is successful qualitatively has been recognized by a general industry organization that gave them the 2019 award in manufacturing for general excellence. It markets worldwide and directly to Canadian firms, but also ships internationally to assembling facilities for many large multinational corporations.

Initially, the company was located on Lock Street, but were "evicted" from that site in 1949 to make way for the erection of the I-190 downtown expressway. By then the Larkin manufacturing building (now Larkin Center) was empty. The last of the Larkin Co. and other tenants had been moved out when the building was conscripted by the U.S. Army during World War II. Its use was primarily on the rooftop where anti-aircraft artillery was set up in case the Germans conquered Canada and then attacked the U.S. from there. While they occupied the building, they also removed the 7-story soap vats that were on the west side of the building for the copper lining and subsequently built the ramp in their place that allows fork truck access up the building.

The etiology of the company is interesting. Tapecon is celebrating its fifth generation of Davis family ownership. (Again, I get a flashback to the Larkins.) The founder, Albert, is described by great-grandson, Alan, as being a terrific salesman. His successor – Albert's son and Alan's grandfather, Harlow Davis, Sr., - was a great businessman, according to Alan. Next came Harlow, Jr. Though he lived till age 90, dying in July 2018, he retired as President in 1996. Alan, who worked part-time since age 11 in the company, but started full-time in 1974 following college, held management positions since the early 1980's, becoming President in 1996. Around 1994, a Family Council was formed mainly of Harlow Jr, Alan, and his brother Keith but included other members and advisors to structure some guidelines of ownership. One requirement for joining the company, which may lead to management or ownership, was 4 years of college and 4 years of work elsewhere. Alan's son, Steve, got his working papers at age 14, and worked summers at Tapecon (as did his brothers and sister). He then studied Engineering & Management at Clarkson University, followed by employment at Cooper Industries before joining Tapecon in 2005. When Alan retired as President four years ago, Steve succeeded him and continues to run the company to this day.



Other family members including "Uncle Mitch" and "Uncle Keith," have worked for Tapecon. Keith, Alan's brother, stuck his head in while I was interviewing Alan, to say "hello." He is employed in production planning, i.e., buying, estimating and participating on the Research and Development team.

Steve's younger brothers both are employed at Tapecon, Greg is Supply Chain Manager, overseeing the purchase of supplies, materials, and inventory, and Jeff is the Sales Manager which oversees all sales functions.

Contributing to the complexity of the company's history, though, is its relationship with Rochester. By 1956, Davis Bulletin Co. was primarily in the screen printing business. Alan's father, Harlow, Jr., had become acquainted with Rochester businessman, Stan Fulwiler, who at that time started a flexographic printing company

which uses a rubber plate on a cylinder to print labels on rolls. It did a lot of work for Kodak, Xerox and Bausch & Lomb. The two companies began to coordinate their sales with Harlow, Jr. selling labels for Tapecon and Stan selling screen-printed products.

The name, "Tapecon Inc." came into use when the company became a public corporation in 1968 after developing a conductive tape product line for the growing electronics industry. Two years later, Davis Bulletin Co. merged into Tapecon as a wholly owned subsidiary. Harlow, Jr. was on the board and became a large shareholder. In 1983, Harlow, Jr. and the Rochester facility's manager, Tom Hale, bought out Stan, who had moved to Georgia. In 1992, Tapecon went private, reorganizing as a Sub S Corp. In doing so, Harlow, Jr. and Hale bought out all the other shareholders. When Hale died in 1994, his shares were retired through a buy/sell agreement and the Davis family subsequently became sole owners of Tapecon. In 1995, Tapecon bought Duragraphics, an East Rochester company that made thin-film, flexible, printed conductive, membrane, touch switches. That operation was moved to the Buffalo location.

When Steve came to work for Tapecon in 2005, his position was that of Process Engineer for both the Buffalo and Rochester locations. He worked on improving the efficiency of the operations, noting that the culture was different between the two operations. At the same time, though, Stan had been, according to Alan, a "visionary", especially regarding employee benefits and incentive programs going back to the 1960's. These were the advantages of merging with a larger operation at the time and benefited the Buffalo location.

In 2012, the decision was made to close Rochester operation. Concerns had been expressed by some of Tapecon's medical customers regarding the need for increased compliance with standards for medical products in the Rochester location and its lack of room to expand. So, the Rochester branch was closed and moved to Buffalo. Incentives were offered to the employees to move to the Buffalo operation. Some employees made the move; others preferred to find other employment in Rochester.

Steve describes Tapecon's benefit program as "market rate" while acknowledging that it does not compare with that of LSC. (But on the other hand, Tapecon is turning 100 while LSC sold its last order in 1963, not only as a result of a bad economy, but also largely as a result of its determination to maintain an impossible benefit program.)

What was apparent as I walked with Alan throughout the Tapecon company is the relaxed, contented atmosphere. As we walked around, employees appeared comfortable in Alan's presence, conversing easily with Alan and myself. They displayed no anxiety at the unexpected presence of their ex-boss, now the patriarch.

This atmosphere was also noticed by the President of a publisher of "Medical Industry." He wrote, "Thank you and everyone at Tapecon for the hospitality and interest in working with us. We were both impressed with the quality of work that is produced at Tapecon. One thing I always look for when touring a plant is the level of engagement of the men and women on the floor with visitors. I noticed very clearly that there is ownership and pride among your team, and I believe that success only comes when these elements exist, coupled with enthusiasm and I was glad to see that yesterday."

Employees have posted reviews of Tapecon as a work environment. Comments were made like "Love Tapecon; it was a family environment...It was a second home to me." And "I have been a member of the Tapecon family for ten years. This company has value! Work-life balance is great. Being a family-run business, Tapecon knows what is most important!" A transferee from Rochester said, "I've met some of the greatest people while working there and I went from a teenager to a mother in my 8 years at Tapecon." She added that she quit to go back to school (Again, a flashback to Larkin; perhaps there is something in the water?)

Tapecon was initially located on the fourth floor at Larkin Center. (At that time the company was still known as The Davis Bulletin Co.) In 1970, Tapecon moved to the second floor due to the desire of another fourth-floor tenant, Colad, to expand its business on that floor. Being on the 2nd floor offered many opportunities to expand its floor space and with the Rochester re-location in 2012, the company needed even more space. Steve and Alan had to make a decision about whether to move to expand the space on the second floor, or possibly relocate to a "big box" type of location in the suburbs.

Steve acknowledged that after serious consideration, he recognized the value of being in this building. Not only was it an historic building, but there was a hint of cache about the Larkin and Davis family's connections to East Aurora. The building, in itself, is a community where employees can interact with each other at Larkinville events and local restaurants. They are also able to enjoy walking around the neighborhood. Children and doggy day cares are available; bus routes are readily available; Downtown Buffalo is just a short distance away.

So, they and the Managing Partner of Larkin Center Management, LLC, James Cornell began planning a major expansion, including determining where all the diverse machines required for the manufacture of its many products could be configured to enhance efficiency. Ultimately, Tapecon became the tenant of an 80,520 square foot floor plan.



Despite all the machines, equipment and products, it seems like serious injuries or other accidents involving employees are a rarity. Customers are apparently satisfied as well. Alan, when asked, said they have never been sued as a result of a product-related injury. The company passes handily all the inspections required by health and medical authorities. This too is like LSC, which was committed to fine products (making over 900 at one point) using only the finest, purist ingredients and clean techniques in a clean environment.

It seems that the only major incidents had nothing to do with Tapecon.

The first occurred opposite its windows overlooking Seneca Street. In 1950 management and employees watched in dismay – and some amusement – as a wrecking company knocked down the Frank Lloyd Wright – designed Larkin

Administration Building. This steel, concrete and brick structure had been built like – and actually resembled – a fortress. Alan says that his father, Harlow, Jr., reported that the first attempts with assaulting the structure with a huge wrecking ball resulted in the ball bouncing off it like a tennis ball. It did eventually come down, a scandalous event for FLW fans and historic architecture buffs. Unfortunately, none of the Tapecon employees took pictures. (Of course, this was long before cell phones).

The other incident occurred on Dec. 27, 1983 at 8:23 p.m. when a four-story radiator warehouse located a few blocks away at N. Division and Grosvenor Streets exploded. An employee inside was attempting to move a huge propane tank (not legally on the premises) on a fork lift. It fell off, damaging the release valve which allowed propane to quickly fill the building. The worker called the fire dept. and just as firefighters arrived, the propane filled building exploded. Five fire fighters and two nearby residents were killed. And serious damage was done to dozens of buildings within half a mile, including the LCOC.

When the initial horror of the blast was dealt with, the periphery buildings were examined. Fortunately, because of the lateness of the hour and the proximity to the Christmas holiday, no tenants were in the LCOC. At the time a good thing indeed, because the shock waves from the blast broke every one of the windows on the Seneca Street side of the LCOC, sending thousands of shards of glass, like shrapnel through the adjoining room and embedding in walls and furniture. Walls opposite the windows were pushed apart. John D. Larkin would have been quite proud of the strength of the steel and concrete columns, floors and ceilings which withstood the blast. And no one in the LCOC got hurt.

Alan recalls that night. When he, his father, and a couple other employees learned of the explosion, they hurried to the building with rolls of plastic with which to cover the openings of the windows. When they arrived, they heard a rumor that there was another propane tank in the doomed warehouse that was about to explode, so they spent considerable time crouching on the floor. Luckily, it turned out the rumor was false.

Alan Dewart, a partner in Seneca Industrial Associates, the company which owned the Larkin manufacturing building at that time, recalls that their insurance claim was for \$700,000. Again, no one except possibly the insurance company took any pictures. Dewart vividly recalls the shards of glass, though, and actually kept one of the large shards in his desk all these years till recently when he finally discarded it. It just so happened that the week I talked to Dewart he was having lunch with the insurance agent who processed the claim. But the agent did not know of any photos and if there were any, they would have been thrown out by now, he told Dewart.

So, we now salute Tapecon and the wonderful five generations of the Davis family which created and nurtured their company for 100 years. May they go another 100 years here in this equally amazing building designed by John Larkin to be a fire proof fortress and infected it with the seeds of creativity, a commitment to fine and pure products, an affinity for high ethical standards in business and commercial operations and respect and affection for its employees. We are honored that two such awesome families converged here to enhance the lives of all who enter the portals.

- From the Desk of Sharon Osgood