

Ottawa Bowling and Plastic Products Inc. History

- by Larry Unterbrink

Bowling came to Ohio in the late 1800's, brought in by the Germans and Dutch.

In the Mid 1930's there was a two-lane alley a few doors East of the Court House in Ottawa. It was not until 1939, when Victor Unterbrink built a modern four lane establishment, Ottawa Recreation, on Railroad Avenue (Taft Avenue) in a former livery stable, that modern bowling came to Putnam County. The lanes had spectator seating, manual pin-setting machines, a restaurant, bar, three pool tables and a billiard table and a game room. While managing the lanes with his wife Eleanor, "Vic" as he was known perfected a number of patents and innovations for the maintenance of bowling lanes.

The first lacquer to replace the troublesome shellac for coating lanes came in the early 1940's. It was manufactured in a small barn located behind our home on East 3rd St. in Ottawa. He patented a lacquer applicator that would finish (paint) a lane in 3 minutes verses the 2 hours of brush painting by hand. He trademarked the name Lino-Plastic ® for the finish as it was also used to preserve linoleum and hardwood floors. He formulated his own lane dressing or alley oil and soon a dusting device to clean the lanes called the Lino-Duster ®. This machine dusted the lanes with a disposable cotton cloth the width of the lane much like a roller towel and of course he sold the replacement rolls of dusting cloth. He added approach finishes and cleaners, and many other bowling pin cleaning and coating chemicals.

Victor authored several articles on lane maintenance for Bowling Magazine and the Bowler's Journal in the 1940's

On April Fool's day in 1946 Ottawa lost it's fine bowling center to the largest fire in Ottawa's history. Wartime building restrictions were still in place preventing rebuilding, so Victor Unterbrink decided not to rebuild.

He started marketing his lane finishes and equipment. Soon thousands of lanes were covered with Lino-Plastic ® Lacquer across the mid-west and almost every lane in the country was now being refinished with Unterbrink's patented applicator. In peak years Plastic Products, as his firm was called re-rolled and distributed over a million lineal yards of replacement dusting cloth as his Line-Duster ® became the standard for the industry.

He told me he patterned the business after Gillette who sponsored the "Friday Nite Fights" on TV ... "You can afford to give away the razors if they come back to you for the blades."

His next project was to manufacture bowling pins. He persuaded Neil Gerding who had a saw mill near Glandorf to build a bowling pin plant. They even had a modern dry kiln to dry the large billets needed for bowling pines made of maple. Heat for the kiln came from an old converted steam powered thrashing machine. In addition to pins they also made some ash baseball bats on their lathes. With Maple lumber running in short supply Vic developed and patented one of the first laminated maple

pins with central holes to keep the weight down. To prevent wear around the center of the pin he developed a fiberglass coating around the center in cooperation with Owens Corning.

In the early 1950's he built an Ultra-Modern office and factory building at 209 S. Oak Street to house his chemical and manufacturing business. Today, the art-deco building, it's curved glass block corners now covered, is used for a lawn mower, chain saw and other gas-powered saws and cutting tools repair shop. One large room, once a month is used for picking, playing and singing songs by whatever group gets up to perform.

The 1950's brought the boom in bowling and Victor Unterbrink decided to install bowling lanes in competition with Brunswick and AMF. These new lanes would still utilize Brunswick and AMF automatic pinsetters, but the entire balance of the equipment down to the balls, pins, and bowling shoes, Plastic Products would supply. The first installation was for a Mrs. Pusey in Lima, Ohio. Vic hired a friend from Detroit, who had just finished putting lanes in Henry Ford's basement, to supervise the installation and completed his crew with local woodworkers. Among the best were Jim Drerup, Harold Kreinbrink, and Larry Stechsulte. That German, Putnam County, work ethic and craftsmanship allowed him to produce a better product and yet underprice the Brunswick and AMF lane Installations.

In Lima he built the Moreo's Lanes, and Westgate 24 lanes. In Ottawa, Highland Lanes which was surrounded by lanes he constructed in Leipsic, Pandora, Continental, Deshler, Holgate, McComb. He also constructed lanes in Lakeview, Ada, Wapakoneta, Marysville, Vandalia, Fort Recovery, Antwerp, Anna, and Cincinnati. The quality was so high that some of the original lanes, now 60 plus years old, are still in use and some have the same family ownership when last personally visited.

Soon the reputation for quality spread and he constructed lanes in Muncie and South Bend, Indiana and as far away at Provo, Utah and Pocatello, Idaho.

Most of the small wood parts and the bowling balls, pins were made ready in the Ottawa, Plant. Over the years almost 5000 bowling balls were drilled for new lanes alone. All the manufacturing of the bowling dusters and applicators and the bowling lane supplies were accomplished by a small band of loyal workers. Fred Allen, of Columbus Grove, ran the shop operation and able part time help from local farmers like Barney Kleman, Henry Kleman, and Cletus Rieman. Vic' son, Larry Unterbrink, took care of the logistics and ran the office, occasionally working in the shop with his friend Darby Kahle.

With so many lanes being built during the "boom" the hard rock maple and long leaf Georgia Pine came into short supply. Vic scouted for prime logs from Upper Michigan to Arkansas. He convinced Art Hoge of Hoge Lumber Company in New Knoxville, Ohio to manufacture the lane lumber and the gutters and kickbacks. They had previously made wood parts for his other bowling inventions. As of 2002, the writing of this history, they are still making bowling lane parts.

The ball returns, seating, and other parts were manufactured for Vic by the John E. Sjostrom company of Philadelphia. They were a Swedish company of craftsman whose main business till that time was maple laboratory equipment for laboratories. They were a pleasure to deal with.

Around 1960, Victor Unterbrink conceived the idea of combining the bowling lane cleaning, polishing, and lane dressing operations into one and designed an electric machine to accomplish this operation. The complicated machine was built with off the shelf parts from sewing machines, bicycles, Sear's tools, and motors and gears from WW Grainger. It worked like a charm and a separate assembly line was set up in the Nelson Trailer Plant which Mr. Unterbrink had purchased. It was located on the West side of N. Locust St., north of the Catholic Church and just before the railroad.

Unable to manufacture fast enough to meet the demand, the entire operation was sold to an Aurora, Illinois firm, who later came back and purchased the balance of the Plastic Products, Inc. Business.

The chemical line later became the basis for the ServiceMaster chemical line.

Wanting to retire, Mr. Unterbrink also sold the bowling lane construction business to a Milwaukee firm but retained the factory and office building.

Plastic Products had a traveling team which won many championships. Vic, with the lowest average on the team, was the cheerleader and when he got "hot" they would always win. They traveled to several tournaments each month over the entire mid-west and at the end of the season had enough prize money to pay all their expenses including luxury rooms for the wives when in Chicago etc.

In retirement he turned to Golf and became an avid golfer. He designed and sold golf putters under the name Eagle Eye and built a large putting green next to his home at the end of Northview Court in Ottawa. Vic was one of the first directors and investors in Kildaire Country Club

In his late 50's Vic learned to play the piano and began a new avocation in Art. Both he and his wife Eleanor became accomplished oil painters winning many awards and as President he revived the Findlay Art League and placed its headquarters in a newly remodeled building where they had their gallery and shows. He had originally purchased the property to build a bowling lane of his own. Brunswick, incensed that he had taken almost every area bowling contract away from them, refused to sell him pinspotters. So, he had to abandon the project.

Next his interest turned to Pottery. He built his own electric potter's wheel on which to "throw" pots and studied under master potters like Clyde Burt and soon was winning awards for his designs and unique glazes he ground himself.

Bowling lost one of its true pioneers in 1963 when Victor Unterbrink, age 63 passed away. He left a legacy of inventions and techniques still in use in bowling today and over 500 bowling lanes, many in use today still giving pleasure to young and old alike. I lost a great friend and father.....

Vic could go into any of the scores and scores of bowling establishments he built after several years and still be greeted with a handshake and a pat on the back. Many of the proprietors came to his funeral. That's a great business legacy

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