

The Midnight Airliner, Faience Tile and Gold Pottery Forty Years of Manufacturing in South Milwaukee Wisconsin.

A brief history of the “Lawson Building” by Steve Schreiter

When the Pan-American Rubber Company built a sturdy brick manufacturing building on the south side of South Milwaukee in 1916, no one contemplated that the location would eventually be the site of one of the world's first airliners, or the site of a ceramic tile manufacturer whose artistic tiles would be sold throughout the United States for homes and public buildings, or the site of a pottery manufacturer who had solved the problem of glazing pottery with gold.

Very little has been found of Pan-American's or later Fisk Rubber Company's operations in South Milwaukee, although advertising for Fisk boasts of 124 locations supporting their automobile tire products.

In about 1920, Alfred Lawson conceived of an airplane large enough to provide long distance service throughout the United States. This plane would accommodate 35 passengers and 6000 pounds of mail. His facilities in Milwaukee would not accommodate this large ship so he purchased the Fisk factory and 3 acres of adjacent land. By late fall 1920 the plane was ready.

Lawson was a proven aircraft manufacturer, he had started his efforts in Green Bay Wisconsin in March of 1917 and his first aircraft, the MT-1, flew on September 10, 1917, followed by the MT-2 on May 1, of 1918. He moved to Milwaukee in February 1919 and began work on his first airliner (passenger aircraft) at a loft at Cream City Sash and Door Company. Mayor Daniel Hoan and the city of Milwaukee provided assistance by allowing Lawson to use facilities at State Fair Park to assemble his plane. It was then moved to a site in Butler Wisconsin for the test flight. His 2 engine aircraft, the LT-2, first flew in August 1919. Buoyed by the reception shown this plane on a barnstorming tour of the eastern United States, Lawson planned a larger 3 engine craft. For this purpose he acquired the South Milwaukee site. These planes were designed by a skillful aircraft designer named Vincent Burnelli and flown by either Lawson himself or a professional pilot with Lawson as the copilot. Machining, woodworking and subassembly was done in the Fisk building and the fuselage completed there. A wooden hanger was built on the site for final assembly. The plane was huge for its day with a wingspan of about 120 ft and a fuselage 65 ft long. For comparison the DC 3 aircraft of WW II fame was 64-½ ft long and had a wingspan of 95 ft.

Unfortunately the plane crashed on take off from a runway at the South Milwaukee location on May 8, 1921 and Lawson was unable to raise funds to effect repairs. Bankruptcy ensued and by 1922 the company ceased to exist.

Continental Faience and Tile Company (Faience refers to a style of tile first produced in Faenza, Italy) was incorporated in 1924 with a Belgian named Carl Bergmans as its manager and later president. Bergmans was a ceramist who had immigrated to the

United States in 1910 and first worked at Mosaic Tile Company and later American Encaustic Tile Manufacturing Company both of Zanesville, Ohio. Continental specialized in custom artistic tile but also manufactured many varieties of colored tiles in various shapes, sizes and designs. Examples of their work can be seen today in the offices and show room of the firm in the building at 909 Menominee Avenue in South Milwaukee Wisconsin. This building, the second on the site, is also on the National Register, and was built in 1928 by the tile company.

Today the tiles embellishing the Continental Faience and Tile Company showroom are considered "art tiles," although at the time they were made they were not expected to be collected or displayed as works of art. They were advertised and promoted as "handmade" and "artistic," but they were primarily intended to be used on floors, walls, fireplaces, and as decoration on building exteriors. Continental's tiles were very much a product of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which emphasized handmade objects reflecting the skill of the craftsman, rather than the machine made products that represented the preceding Industrial Era. Machine made tiles were pressed from a damp clay mixture, where Continental's handmade tiles were created from wet clay, using manual labor to pack the clay into molds and to decorate the finished tiles. Continental Faience's advertising brochure proclaimed "Being Hand-made it has a distinction of texture and artistic merit unequalled in machine-made tiles, yet its cost compares with any similar material."

Midwest Pottery Company can trace its roots to the Morton Pottery Works, founded in 1878 by six brothers from Germany named "Rapp" Later generations of the family changed the name to The Morton Earthenware Company. These firms were all located in Morton Illinois near a source of clay that was used in the pottery production. After World War I, the pottery was reopened by Matthew Rapp and his 4 sons under the name Cliftwood Art Potteries, Inc. After Matthew Rapp died in 1938 the pottery was sold to local investors and renamed Midwest Pottery. It operated in Morton until 1944 when the building was leveled by fire. R.G. Dunn and Sherman Deutsch, the owners of Midwest at this time, then purchased the Continental Faience and Tile Company property in South Milwaukee including the tunnel kilns therein, and resumed their pottery business. They produced art pottery under the name "Kron" and "Cliftwood" together with lamp bases and other pottery items and were producing 2000 to 3500 pieces per day. John Rapp eventually went to South Milwaukee where he produced the spray glazes that he had perfected in Morton. A newspaper article in the August 21, 1947 issue of the South Milwaukee Journal by its editor Gordon Lewis reported that the gold glaze used by the firm cost \$20 for a 3-½ oz. bottle.

Subsequent to about 1953, when the pottery business discontinued operation, the property has been used for warehousing and storage, most recently by Mr. Richard Schumacher, who is responsible for placing the buildings on the National Register of Historic Places in 2001. The City of South Milwaukee acquired the property through eminent domain proceedings in 2004.

Sadly, the South Milwaukee Historical Society lost it's battle to save the Lawson Building and it was torn down by the city in the Spring of 2009. Tiles from the offices and show room were saved and plans are underway to showcase them elsewhere in the city.