

The Father of Sound Systems

This affectionate biography of Milton Boom, written by a man who worked with him for 15 years, recounts the tremendous impact Mr. Boom had on the development of today's sound systems.

HIS SWEDISH PARENTS were still in their teens when they passed the Torch of Liberty in New York Harbor. After leaving Ellis Island, Fred and Lena Boom travelled to Geneseo, Illinois.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Milton, their first son, was born.

As soon as he was old enough, Milton had his first taste of hard work on the surrounding farms. When he had finished high school, Milton went to Milwaukee to study electrical theory at the Milwaukee School of Engineering.

After graduating, he obtained a job at the Hatfield Electric Company in Chicago with the help of his cousin, George Carlson, then the City's Gas and Light commissioner.

He soon became interested in the new medium, radio, and worked in Chicago's Wrigley building for radio station WHT. From there, Milton went on to Erickson Electric where he specialized in sound reinforcement systems.

In 1926 Milton met and later married Miss Lorraine Whitney, then employed by the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. That same year he was involved in providing sound for a crowd of over one hundred thousand at the Catholic Eucharistic Congress using a Western Electric "Loudspeaking Telephone System." Audio power was expensive in those days, but so efficient were the forty long Western horns that only thirty watts of power were required for intelligible sound over the restricted frequency range.

BOOM ELECTRIC CO.

Later in 1926, Milton, with a volunteered loan of twenty-five hundred dollars from his wife's mother, bought out the Erickson Electric Company and the Boom Electric and Amplifier Company was born.

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Milton Boom—the father of Sound Systems.

In 1927, he toured the country by rail with four "Morning Glory" horns and a three watt Western amplifier to cover the Whistle Stop crowds on Vice-Presidential candidate Senator Curtiss's political tour.

In 1928, Milton helped install the first Chicago motion picture sound system for Al Jolson's "talkie" (*The Jazz Singer*) at the McVickers Theatre.

Milton's company was one of the first unionized



One of Boom's early sound trucks with long, efficient Western Electric trumpets.

communications organizations. Having begun his career as a journeyman electrician, Milton maintained his union card throughout his life. He was well-liked by Chicago's management as well as labor leaders; an association which paid off well as his company was always considered for the biggest sound contracts.

In the early thirties, Milton's younger brother, Norton, fresh out of high school, moved to Chicago and joined the company.

A 'BOOM'-ING BUSINESS

When the Chicago 1933 World's Fair began, the Boom Electric and Amplifier Company, despite the problems of the Depression, was well-established in the Chicago area. For the Fair, Milton installed one of the first stereo outside sound systems at the Swift Bridge Exhibit to reinforce music produced by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

During the thirties, communications systems finally began to be recognized as necessities rather than novelties. During this period Milton's company made

numerous large installations including: The National Cornhuskers Convention where a crowd of 120,000 gathered on an Indiana prairie; a customized sound system for Soldier Field; sound systems for the Chicago Stadium, the International Amphitheatre, the Aragon Ballroom, the Colosseum shows, hotel ballrooms and nightclubs, churches of all denominations, International Harvester and a myriad of other prestigious jobs.

Intercommunication grew in demand in business offices and factories across the country and Boom designed and installed Webster Electric intercom systems all over the Chicago area.

As the Country was recovering from the Depression, Pearl Harbor blasted it out of its complacency and Milton's Company speedily expanded to keep pace, supplying the communication requirements of wartime Chicago area plants.

MUZAK AND WW II

Background music for employees working unprecedented long shifts became a new factor and Boom



The 1937 Cornhusker's Convention, where Boom covered a crowd of 120,000 on an Indiana prairie.

installed many systems, eventually becoming the "Muzak" franchiser for the Chicago area. This acquisition ultimately provided a monthly income equivalent to the annual net of most communications companies.

Norton Boom spearheaded the background music development. Unlike many franchisers, Boom's operation was systematically planned from the inception. Sales engineers would determine the loudspeaker coverage based on ceiling height and dispersion. Power per loudspeaker would be calculated depending upon the noise levels as measured with a sound level meter. Then, Western Electric (and later Langevin) amplifiers with special modifications would be installed. (A Boom engineer later designed a special music amplifier that was widely used.) Plug-in equalization modules designed and built to accommodate variations in telephone line response as measured by Boom field engineers were installed for consistent frequency response. Resistive rotary switch volume controls designed and built for 500 ohm and 70 volt loudspeaker loads were matched to the impedance of area loudspeakers. The fact of tube deterioration due to heat and age prompted the now Boom Sound Engineering Corporation to provide regular inspections of company installations. A 24 hour emergency service was inaugurated for continuous system performance insurance.

THE COMPANY CONTINUES TO GROW

As the company grew, the need for better organization became apparent. An organizational outline showing the president (Milton), vice presidents, department heads, supervisors, office and field workers was distributed to all departments in a manual of company policy.

Thinking ahead, Milton was instrumental in organizing national and local sound and communication groups to discuss and plan solutions to their common problems.

In 1955 he began a profit-sharing incentive-oriented program for staff, supervisors and engineers.

In 1956, after years of constant day and night efforts, Milton had his first heart attack, a serious one which put him out of action of months. In the meanwhile, Norton took over running the Company and due to his efforts and the organizational and financial stability of the business, operations went on mostly as usual.

Milton tried to change his lifestyle upon his return. He found that the company still ran well without all of his former extra efforts. He began an instructional program among staff and supervisory personnel by bringing in a retired instructor from Illinois Bell. In evening sessions, procedures and practices of years past and present were discussed, agreed upon and recorded in manuals.

In 1959, Norton, who had long desired his own business,



Early 50s Boom service wagons and delivery truck.

moved to Davenport, Iowa. He began his own communications company, which he called F. N. Boom, Inc.

For the next few years, Milton, taking better care of his health, stayed at the helm of his still thriving company. In 1964, yielding to that organization's policy of major city corporate operation, he sold the "Muzak" portion of Boom Sound Engineering to the Muzak Corporation.

CHANGING TIMES

For two more years the sound and communications division of the company was run under Milton's direction. In 1966, when the strain became too great, Milton sold his company to the Downer's Grove-based Servicemaster Corporation which, at that time, was engaged in a major expansion and diversification program. Before leaving, he asked all personnel to remain and continue to operate the company as usual. The great majority agreed to stay.

For a while it appeared that the Boom Sound Engineering division of Servicemaster would continue to thrive as in the past. The new owners, after some months of study, commissioned a plant manager experienced in manufacturing to head up the company. Mutual efforts were made at cooperation, but for reasons still unknown, the profit picture began to slowly deteriorate. Meetings of personnel at all levels were held, but failed to unearth the contributing problems.

HIS LAST YEARS

Now financially secure, Milton spent his retired years attending occasional industry events, communicating with long-time friends and finally catching up on well-deserved rest. A lifetime fisherman and golfer, he as health permitted, participated in these sports.

On his 79th birthday a selected group of former employees, business friends and ex-competitors gathered to honor the man who had contributed so greatly to the industry. In a short speech, Milton showed some of his old spirit, but it was evident that his health was deteriorating.

In February, 1981, Milton suffered a fatal heart attack.

IN CONCLUSION

There were other dedicated pioneers in the sound and communications business when the century was young, but those who knew and worked for Milton Boom considered him, because of his integrity in business and his demand for perfection, the first of the professionals in the business.

In 1964, when his company was at the peak of success, a session of his peers was held at an industry seminar to pay tribute to Milton's forty years in the business. Don Davis, the Altec's district representative, spoke for all present when he proclaimed, "In the beginning, there was Boom!" ■