

Burbank... on Parade!

Librascope - From Tiny Workshop to Giant New \$500,000 Plant

(No. 83 in a series of factual stories of Burbank and Burbankers.)

By Ade Banks

A Burbank inventor has seen a new industry develop from a handful of pencilled sketches, some tables of power curves, and a tiny workshop in 1937 into the giant new \$500,000 "single-deck" modernly equipped plant of Librascope, Inc.

This Burbank inventor was Lewis W. Imm, currently vice-president in charge of engineering of Librascope. The geometric tables and nomographs still figure in the creation of the fabulous instruments embodying the unique Librascope principle of mechanical-linkage computing—calculating machines—"thinking machines" which can solve complex industrial control problems in one to three minutes as compared to up to 600 minutes required for manual solutions by even the most highly-trained technicians.

Upon completion early in 1950, the new Librascope plant to be located in Glendale will serve as the greatly-expanded headquarters of the company which is now operating in two smaller plants in Burbank and Glendale. The current employee roster of 300 engineers, laboratory technicians, designers and highly skilled machinists, many of them from M I T, Cal Tech, and other great engineering schools, is now being augmented so that when Librascope operations are under way in the new building the company will have 500 or more employees.

As manufacturers of "thinking machines" and allied devices, Librascope and its engineer executives are part of the developing revolution hinted at in a fascinating new book called "Cybernetics," by Dr. Norbert Weiner.

Librascope has already come up with many "firsts," solution-wise, in the growing field of industrial controls. During the war the Navy took virtually all of Librascope's output of electronic, optical and mechanical computers.

But the company is now entering the commercial and industrial field with its "Automatic Tristimulus Integrator"—a device which receives data by electro-mechanical means from a spectrophotometer. Highly complex though it is, its operation ultimately affects the living standards of Mr. and Mrs. Jones—in automatic dye-process control for instance; to match yarn for the home-knit sweater—in textile color matching and in manufacture of living-room carpets, in newspaper and magazine color printing, and even down to such homely subjects as the dinner-table catsup. For this it guarantees that one bottle of catsup will look just as appealingly red as another.

Librascope was formed in 1937 on the basis of a single device—an airplane load balance computer. In that year, Lewis Imm convinced Lockheed engineers that the few pencilled sketches he had placed before them would make a good balance computer.

Three years later Imm still had a staff of only six or seven people. But about that time Howard Hughes, planning a trip around the world in a Lockheed 14, successfully tried out one of Imm's instruments in his ship (it may be attributed to have actually saved him from potential disaster in Paris) and was so impressed with its performance that he ordered additional computers for his future world-girdling flights.

The problem-solving responsibilities of the original computer were relatively simple. It was manually supplied with data about cargo, fuel and passenger weights of an airplane; from that data it computed not only the total weight but the exact load center of the plane.

Thursday's article in this series will continue the inventor's story.