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## Camdenherald » Local News

### Tibbetts Industries marks 60 years

By **SUSAN MILISA MUSTAPICH**

CAMDEN (June 28) - The success of Tibbetts Industries, which celebrated its 60th year of operations with a pig-roast for employees this week, speaks softly for itself.

Its products, microphones, receivers and magnetic coils amplify sound, yet the company that occupies three red brick buildings on Colcord Avenue maintains a quiet profile.

That may be partly how it has sustained manufacturing electronic components at its home base, coexisting in a community now known more for scenery than industry. The other parts of the success story are entrepreneurship and a workforce of dedicated, long-term employees.

The company designs and manufactures miniature components for receivers and microphones, and magnetic coils that allow hearing impaired persons to use the telephone. The three products are sold in a volume of about 1.5 million a year. Yet because any one of these products is smaller than a BB pellet, the company's shipping room is no more than a small narrow office.

Tibbetts Industries products are used in hearing aids, pacemakers, headsets for airline pilots, cell phones, automatic insulin dispensing devices, and telephones for the hearing impaired.

The company also has a security products division that produces audio components and field kits used by law enforcement and state and federal government. About 35 percent of the company's products are sold to government.

#### HISTORY

Dr. Raymond Tibbetts founded Tibbetts Industries in Camden in 1945. Tibbetts was a practicing osteopathic doctor in the area, and a natural inventor, as was his son George, according to Larry Tibbetts, one of the company's directors and owners, and George's son.

In the 1930s George was the youngest ham radio operator in the country, and he and his father Raymond were experimenting with Rochelle Salt Crystals, which in the future would be at the center of their hearing health business. They were experimenting with the crystals to achieve better sound from their radio equipment microphones and speakers.

On July 25, 1946, a front page story in The Camden Herald announced the "first shipment from Tibbetts Industries."

It read: "After months of painstaking preparation and the building of many special machines for production, Camden's new electronics industry is shipping today its first lot of microphones to be incorporated in more than fifteen different makes of hearing aids manufactured throughout the country. Also included in these shipments are orders from Leningrad, Paris, and Australia.

"All these microphones have been shipped on orders in response to a full-page advertisement in one of the leading electronics magazines of the country, and Dr. Tibbetts states that some forty or fifty inquiries have already been received as a result of this advertisement."

Tibbetts Industries and Laboratories became one of the first crystal labs in the country, and was a world leader in hearing aid transducers, until the 1950s.

At that time the commercial use of the miniature vacuum tubes in hearing aids made crystal microphones obsolete nearly overnight, according to Larry Tibbetts, and the company had to absorb that shock, and reconfigure its entire product line.

It did so, producing the magnetic components that allowed hearing aid manufacturers to reduce the size from something that looked like a cigarette pack carried in the pocket to more cosmetically suitable products, and brought the company back to a leading position by the 1960s.

George's remarkable intellectual capacity, including the invention of a revolutionary design process, has driven the company's long-term success though the decades, said Larry Tibbetts. George is currently the company's chairman, and Donald Sweet is president.

#### EMPLOYEES

Back in 1947, when Marjorie Sawyer was hired by Tibbetts Industries, she was just out of high school. One of her classmates from Camden High School was the first to be hired, and she was the second.

"We didn't have a job or prospects," she said, "this meant a lot to us."

At the time, the company was located on the corner of Elm and Washington streets, above what is now Maine Coast Photo.

Sawyer's job was cutting and polishing Rochelle crystals to pieces just smaller than her thumb nail. At the time, these crystals were a component in hearing aides. Sawyer worked for the company until 1953. Her future husband Joe, whom she met in high school, would also work for Tibbetts Industries, and eventually become plant manager.

Today, the longevity of the workforce is one of the company's quietly remarkable features. Turnover is low, and a number of employees have worked at the company for decades.

On a tour of the facilities after the company lunch, employees could be seen, in room after room, peering through microscopes as they worked. Paul Shulda, who guided the tour, remarked on the high level of skills of the employees, and the company's low turnover.

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