



The AMA History Project Presents: History of the MEGOW CORPORATION



Written by CR (2005); Reformatted by JS (04/2012)

Charlie Reich wrote and submitted the following history to the AMA History Project in 2005. This was also submitted to SAM Speaks for publication.

Megow's By "Ol Charlie"

Norm Rosenstock, the Historian for AMA, called me last fall requesting, "Charlie, we need another biography for AMA's museum archives as we have nothing on file for Fred Megow nor the Megow Corporation." The gauntlet was thrown down and the quest was on. I remembered an old friend and kit collector, Walt Griggs, had once told me he did a biography on Fred Megow in an old issue of the now defunct *Model Builder* magazine. I thought it best to take a trip down to Orlando to see Walt personally and discuss my needs with him and to see if I could obtain his permission to reprint his Megow article and give him full recognition for his work to AMA. That would make fulfilling AMA's biographical need on Megow a piece of cake. I should have known better!

During my discussion, Walter advised that he has been a kit collector since the early 1970s and now has over 1000 very rare solid and rubber kits in his collection. During that period, he did extensive research on old model manufacturers and hobby shops. He also advised that Fred Megow moved to Orlando to retire in 1949 after closing his Megow factory, and he and Walter had soon become close friends. Walter then proceeded to haul out two huge scrapbooks containing Fred Megow's personal handwritten autobiography of over 180 pages about his Megow Corporation. I was speechless!

Fred had presented these to Walter after as a special gift knowing that his friend Walt was interested in modeling history. The manuscripts were completed and presented to Walter just three years prior to Fred's death. Walter loaned me the complete original journals, and as the saying goes, the rest is now a large biographical journal of documented Megow history stored in the [National Model Aviation Museum's Lee Renaud Memorial Library.]

For our *SAM Speaks* readers, and to provide a brief article from a very lengthy biography, the following is a timeframe outline of Fred Megow and his Megow Corporation.

Fred Megow was born in 1900 and went to college in Wisconsin, graduating with a teaching degree. In 1927, his first job was as an Industrial Arts teacher in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This was in the same year that Lindberg crossed the Atlantic, which stirred a frenzy of interest in aviation among that era's youth. Fred received many requests from the youth in his newly formed shop class to teach model aviation.

In 1929, he started a new course in aviation which included drawing plans and building and flying models. Fred was soon to realize that he would need special supplies to provide to the boys in his class for their model building, and these were not to be easily found nor locally available. Fred located balsa, tissue, rubber and wire sources, which allowed him and his family members to make up small kits at home for his students. He also made a plan for a simple ROG (rise-off-ground) rubber model, and later a smaller indoor flying version called a *Parlor Fly*.

The whole Megow family sat around the dining room table making up the small kits for the school's class, and had several left over from the project. Times were tough then, as this was the start of the Great Depression, so Fred decided to take the leftover kits down to his local Vic's Sundry Store and see if Vic would agree to sell them for him.

Fred made up a small window sign and went to see Vic. They quickly came to an agreement with Fred advising that the kits cost him 6¢ to make, they would sell them for 10¢ and split the profit. Vic happily agreed and Fred left a cigar box to keep the money in from the kit sales. Vic called in a panic the next day and said, "Quick! Bring more kits. The kids are lined up at my door and clear out in the street clamoring for Megow kits." And that was the official start of Megow's.

Megow's started off being known simply as "The Model Airplane Shop," going through several name changes until finally becoming known simply as Megow's, "the world's largest model airplane company." Fred initially placed a small ad in *Boys Life* magazine advertising either two solid model kits or the flying *Parlor Fly* for 25¢, and the quarters immediately started arriving daily by the bagful.

A decision was soon made to get out of retail/mail order sales and start supplying more volume to stores such as Vic's. A new display cabinet called "The Green Cabinet" was designed and supplied by Megow to all the new accounts that Fred signed up in his off-school hours. The Green Cabinet had an initial startup cost to new dealers of \$7.95, which included balsa, cement, dope, tissue, rubber, and a few Megow kits. Soon, their business boomed with a multitude of Megow dealers located throughout the state of Pennsylvania.

Fred continued to expand the business, hiring full time employees and a salesman. He retired from teaching in 1933 and the shop was moved to his home's basement with all the neighbors' garages rented as additional storage warehouses. They soon had to move to an all-new three-story manufacturing facility in Philadelphia, which allowed them to expand their product lines to include boats and an all-new line of competitively priced model railroad supplies and kits.

All manufacturing, printing and designing was done in-house and Megow obtained the first patent for the print-wood process. By then, Fred had contracted with a South American supplier for balsa and had warehouses filled with prime balsa logs in several Philadelphia port warehouses. Fred also enlisted his father's help, who manufactured over a million balsa props during the Megow Corporation's tenure.

Fred Megow wrote the following regarding his Megow operation in 1936:

“To handle the large volume of business it required mass production, the third floor was entirely production of the finished goods and a large stock room for kit-parts, or as we called it, ‘Goods in Process.’

“The Print Room was also on the third floor. An automatic printing press was installed, which printed up to 11 x 17 in.-size plans. All larger plan sizes came from an outside printing source.

“The printed wood was needed in large quantities. This took three manually operated presses, with a fourth one used to die-cut some of the wood. The presses were also used for a variety of other printing requirements.

“The tube production included “Kwik-Dri Cement.” Also, unlabeled tubes were produced to be included in the kits. The cement in kits was later discontinued due to costs and evaporation. We had two machines to produce the Kwik-Dri tubed cement. These were Stokes Machines made in Philadelphia, Pa. The regular 5¢ and 10¢ sizes were produced in quantities of 10,000 to 20,000 tubes daily from each machine. The produced quantities depended on the tube size. Later, cement was put in bottles for the larger kits, which were produced on a series of bottle filling machines.

“Third floor assembly lines were set up to handle: 10¢ kits-40,000; 25¢ kits-25,000; 50¢ kits-10,000. These amounts were per day, including 1,000 per day on \$1.00 kits and lesser amounts on higher priced kits. This required us to purchase containers in quantities of 250,000 folding boxes, collapsible tubes and bottles.

“The basement was the saw room with an automatic machine for cutting strips, a sanding machine (finishing two surfaces at one time), routers, bending and forming machines, band saws and a variety of other special machines.”

Megow was indeed the largest modeling manufacturer in the world and located at the corners of Howard and Oxford Streets in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. All of the kits produced by Megow’s were complete, as they contained everything required to build a model except for a razor blade to cut out the parts. Famous kits were Korda’s *Wakefield*, sold for \$ 1.00, the *Flying Quaker* and *Quaker Flash*, Maxwell Bassett’s *Cardinal*, the *Soaring Eagle* designed by Megow’s employee Walt Eggert, and another new and innovative 1940 product called Planefilm, better known today as Monokote.

A week after the Pearl Harbor attacks on December 7, 1941, the U.S. Government paid Fred a visit and demanded he sell them his balsa logs for use in the war effort, to be used to build life rafts. Over one million board-feet of balsa was immediately sold and that was the start of the decline of the Megow Corporation. The plant was converted to making war requirements and only a limited amount of model supplies were made during the war years from whatever materials could be made available.

At the close of WW II there was no balsa available. The government had new regulations, controls and restrictions, the banks were tight with their business loans, and Fred was threatened with a union effort, all of which prompted Fred Megow to close his plant forever in 1949.

Fred Megow was a pioneer and one of the great contributors to the model airplane industry. He started on a shoestring in the midst of a great depression and built a giant industry which helped to feed the frenzied modeling world of that era, one which we still enjoy today. Thank you, Fred Megow.

-Charlie Reich

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