

## 1945 March 19-25

### Outers' Factory Fire

# Onalaska War Plant Suffers Total Fire Loss

## Flames Destroy Plant In Two Hours

Fire of unknown origin broke out in the plant of Outers Laboratories at 8:45 this morning, completely destroying the building and its contents. Onalaska and La Crosse firemen were hampered by the dense smoke and experienced difficulty in reaching the actual blaze which started in the southeast corner of the plant. The flames spread quickly to other parts of the structure and within two hours the plant was a complete loss.

Nearby buildings were saved although some were badly scorched by the intense heat. Some burning embers were carried as far as Wooden's garage in the corner of Jay and Third streets.

With the building still burning as we went to press it was impossible to obtain any estimate of the damage.

The machine shop located in the north end of the building was badly damaged by water and the falling beams, and appeared to be a total loss.

Questioned as to the probable extent of the damage Mr. Dale said it would be impossible to determine the loss for several days but the damage was exceedingly heavy and will run into many thousands of dollars.

Outers Laboratories, a manufacturer of sportsmen's accessories during peace time has for the past several years been engaged in the production of vital ordnance material so necessary now in the war effort.



—Tribune Photo  
**Dense Clouds of Smoke Rolled** from the burning Outers' Laboratories at Onalaska Thursday morning as the war plant was destroyed by a blaze believed to have started from oil used in cleaning parts. All that remained of the extensive one-story plant at noon was the walls. This view shows the front of the plant, with firemen battling the flames from hose lines at doorways.

*La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 22, page 1

The family of Vernon Dale, one of the owners of Outers' Laboratories, had been in the region at least since the 1890s. His father worked for the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad in La Crosse.<sup>1</sup>

Vernon Dale got his start in business in the early 1920s. He and F. Christopherson established an automobile repair garage in Onalaska in 1921. Dale bought out Christopherson in February 1922 and changed the name of the business to Dale Custom Garage.<sup>2</sup>

Dale moved into manufacturing in the 1930s. He and Oscar Egeland founded Outers' Laboratories in 1934. It started manufacturing products for government contracts in 1935.<sup>3</sup> It was still operating out of Dale's home in Onalaska when it won a contract to manufacture gun cleaning equipment for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.<sup>4</sup> Its other products were mostly marketed to hunters and fishermen: "precision

tools and gauges, gunslick, solvents, rust inhibitors, cleaning patches and lubricants, reelslick, reel oil, dry fly oil, color preserver, line dressing, mosquito dope, rod varnish and ferrule cement."<sup>5</sup>

When the business outgrew Dale's home, he moved it into the old Onalaska bank building. Next it was located in the Ben Sias building across the street from the bank. In 1937, it was moved to Dale's Garage, where Dale had started his business career 26 years earlier. The plant on Brice Prairie was built by 1942.



—Tribune Photo

**A Crew From Onalaska's Volunteer Fire Department is shown working with hose lines at the rear of the Outers' Laboratories in an effort to bring the destructive blaze under control. La Crosse firemen aided the Onalaska department, a pumper and crew being sent from No. 2 station when the first alarm came in at 8:50 a. m.**

*La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 22, page 2

Because of the volume of its war contracts, some work was subcontracted to I. A. Barr in Galesville.<sup>6</sup>

During World War II, the plant operated 24 hours a day.<sup>7</sup> In January 1944, 95 percent of the products produced by Outers' Laboratories were for the war effort. The company employed about 50 people.<sup>8</sup> At the time of the fire, it was manufacturing five different types of cleaning rods for various calibers of

guns, cleaning kits for the Navy, gun lubricants, supplies for aviation beacon lights, and parts for automatic telephone switchboards.<sup>9</sup>

The naval board of production recognized Outers' Laboratories with awards for production output in March 1943, July 1943, March 1944, and November 1944.<sup>10</sup>

Sometime after 8:30 a.m. on March 22, 1945, a workman was washing machine parts. It was thought that the oil used in the cleaning process started the fire about 8:50 a.m. Employees evacuated the sprawling one-story building without any injuries. Despite the efforts of the Onalaska Volunteer Fire Department, along with help from the La Crosse Fire Department, nothing was left of the Outers' factory but the walls by noon that day. Volunteer fireman Everett Lund suffered an eye injury from burning tar. Three other Onalaska firemen received cuts from glass.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Laboratories' Fire A Tragedy***

**T**HE La Crosse industrial area suffered one of its most tragic fires in the destruction of Outers' Laboratories, Onalaska war production plant which has achieved a remarkable record in the war effort.

Holder of the federal government's "E" award and three renewals for efficient work, Outers' Laboratories had reached and maintained a peak of effectiveness which contributed outstandingly to war production.

But tragic though the fire was, it was characteristic to hear the management announce plans for immediate rebuilding and that production, at least on a limited basis, again would be underway within a few days.

History of the growth of Outers' Laboratories is marked by this sort of dynamic persistence. The industry began from scratch but came along to fill an important gap in requirements of the army and navy.

All power to Outers' Laboratories for the come-back.

After the fire, Outers' rebounded quickly to keep up with its military contracts. In just three days, a roof was built over the still-standing masonry walls of the factory and production resumed literally out of the ashes. The company put out an appeal to the community for drill presses to replace equipment that had been destroyed in the fire.<sup>12</sup>

Following World War II, Outers' Laboratories moved all of its production to the Brice Prairie plant.<sup>13</sup>

Fifteen years after the disastrous fire in 1945, Outers' Laboratories was the scene of another large fire in July 1960 that was compared to the earlier fire. Efforts by five fire departments failed to save a warehouse building, including equipment inside, that was totally destroyed. The loss was estimated at \$300,000.<sup>14</sup>

When Vernon Dale died in 1976, he left the company to a trust of 31 charities. Twelve investors bought the company from the trust in 1977.<sup>15</sup>

The company then went through a succession of ownership changes over the next twenty years. Oregon-based Omark Industries purchased it in 1981. Alabama-based Blount Inc., in turn, bought Omark in 1985. Blount sold its sporting equipment lines to Alliant Tech Systems of Edina, Minnesota in 2002.<sup>16</sup>

Outers' became ATK Onalaska Operations in early 2011. At the same time, it added six employees and started manufacturing the Weaver Grand Slam Scope and mounting.<sup>17</sup>

Outers' Laboratories is gone, but its products are still being made. Under the corporate ownership of Vista Outdoor Inc., Outers Guncare is now part of Bushnell Outdoor Products based in Overland Park, Kansas. Outers Guncare sells gun cleaning kits and accessories, cleaners, lubricants, and protectants, as well as black powder.<sup>18</sup>

The former location of Outers' Laboratories at N5549 County Road Z, Onalaska, is now occupied by the recycling company called Dynamic Lifecycle Innovations.<sup>19</sup>

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### Sources & Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Picture Illustrates Early Railroad Days," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1962 January 14, page 11.

<sup>2</sup> "Onalaska Has Custom Garage," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1928 March 18, page 29.

<sup>3</sup> "Fire Destroys Outers' Laboratories," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 22, page 1.

<sup>4</sup> "Ask the Trib: Outers Lab started in 1934," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2007 January 22, [https://lacrossetribune.com/special-section/askthetrib/ask-the-trib-outers-lab-started-in/article\\_e2d14946-3eec-57bb-a549-bf69fd13af91.html](https://lacrossetribune.com/special-section/askthetrib/ask-the-trib-outers-lab-started-in/article_e2d14946-3eec-57bb-a549-bf69fd13af91.html).

<sup>5</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 March 22.

<sup>6</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 January 22.

<sup>7</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 March 22.

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<sup>8</sup> "Manufacturers In Community Already Starting Plans For Postwar Civilian Production Lines," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 January 2, page 14.

<sup>9</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 March 22.

<sup>10</sup> "Onalaska Firm Receives Flag," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1944 November 3, page 1.

<sup>11</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 March 22.

<sup>12</sup> "Onalaska War Plant Seeks Drill Presses," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1945 March 26, page 2.

<sup>13</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 January 22.

<sup>14</sup> "Loss Set At \$300,000 In Fire At Outers Lab," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1960 July 19, page 1.

<sup>15</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 January 22.

<sup>16</sup> *La Crosse Tribune*, 2007 January 22.

<sup>17</sup> "Expanding its scope," *La Crosse Tribune*, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 2011 May 22, page H1.

<sup>18</sup> "Outers: The Gunner's Companion," *Vista Outdoor*, accessed 2020 March 23, <http://outers-guncare.com/default.aspx>.

<sup>19</sup> Carol Trehey, Dynamic Lifecycle Innovations, telephone conversation with the author, 2020-03-24. For an overview of this business, see: <https://thinkdynamic.com/>.