HISTORY

MILTON BURSMA

AND

BURSMA RADIO SUPPLY CO.

Courtesy of Jim Bursma

My father Milton Bursma had a large wholesale Radio TV parts business headquarted in Grand Rapids, Mi. Started in 1947. See the history enclosed.

He sold various brands of rebuilt tubes, but rebuilders were not known for their longevity. Every time one went out of business my dad felt obligated to stand behind the warranty himself.
So in 1961 he bought equipment and but me in total charge (I was 20 at the time) I ran the small plant until 1972. All of the 35,000 tubes we built were sold through Bursma Radio Supply under the BURCO brand.

We moved the plant 2 times and had 1 fire. Not started in the tube plant though. The wholesale company is still in existence today although the product lines are now in security.
When I look back I remember that it was a rather scary job. Never knew when one would implode. None of us were ever seriously injured though.

When Milton Bursma was 14 years old he became interested in electronics. A farmer neighbor was studying a correspondence course. Milt asked if he could borrow the courses as the neighbor finished each lesson. Milt's father would tell him "this will never get you anywhere, get busy hoeing the corn." He developed a business of installing and repairing car radios. When he was 16 a neighbor said "I bet you have enough parts to build me a radio" Milton agreed and said I bet you have enough car parts around your farm to build me a car. So the trade was made. The radio worked great for years but he never made it out of the yard with that car.

Milt Bursma was ready to enter WW11. The recruiter decided that because of his knowledge in electronics he would be more valuable stateside. Milt moved from Grand Rapids to Jackson to work at Spartan as a troubleshooter. Spartan was manufacturing the guidance systems for our bombers.

When the war ended radio repair parts were very scarce. Milt bought up sizable quantities of military surplus electronic tubes and parts. He traveled the state selling surplus parts to radio repair shops.
With his knowledge of electronics he was able to show repairmen how to substitute these surplus parts to repair radios. (example, if you change these wires this tube will work even better than the original)
He hand built selenium rectifiers out of washers and sold them by mail throughout the US. A lab bought a few for testing and reported they were far superior to any brand that was on the market.

With the friendship he built with the repairmen it was natural for him to start a wholesale parts business serving the repair trade. He named the business Bursma Radio Supply.

His business really took off. It wasn't long when he took on a couple of life long partners, moved the Grand Rapids store to a larger location and had branches in Muskegon and Holland.

With the Korean War came other shortages to deal with. One item was TV lead in. They were able to find a supplier ,but had to make a large purchase. This helped put them in the driver's seat as a wholesale supplier.

Again they had to move to an even larger building in Grand Rapids. It was difficult to find a good source of rebuilt picture tubes. Rebuilders never seemed to stay in business very long and Bursma was stuck standing behind the warranties on their own. In the early 1960s they purchased equipment and produced about 35,000 rebuilt tubes under the Burco brand.

As TVs got more popular many homes had more than 1 TV. An antenna rotor was needed to get a good signal. If the kids wanted to watch a station in one direction and the parents in another there was a problem. Also the need to change the antenna direction as the channels were scanned was a drawback. Bursma with the expertise of the Antennacraft Company developed the 4 stacked antenna which with one down lead would receive the main local stations without the nuisance and expense of a rotor. Now it was possible to watch different stations on multiple TVs at the same time. It was a real success and the Burco antenna was a leader in the market.

As the business grew other branches were opened in Kalamazoo, Traverse City, Manistee and Lansing. Included was a specially

built bus that was a store on wheels. This bus made scheduled stops at repair shops in the outlying areas. In addition to radio and TV parts Bursma was a key distributor of VM Voice of Music, products built in Benton Harbor, Mi.

Friday afternoon on March 15 1963 Bursma Radio had a devastating fire at the Grand Rapids main headquarters. It was a total loss. Before the fire was even under control Milton and his faithful employees set up an emergency office in a restaurant across the street. By the end of the afternoon a nearby building was rented, new shelving was being installed, employees in branch stores were pulling any extra stock to load on trucks to ship to Grand Rapids during the same night. Employees from all locations, suppliers, friends, customers and relatives were all ready on the next morning (Saturday) to stock the shelves. No one worked on Sunday. Bursma Radio was open for business Monday morning. Thanks to everyone working together the sales for the month were in line with other years. This amazing recovery story was published in newspapers and trade magazines.

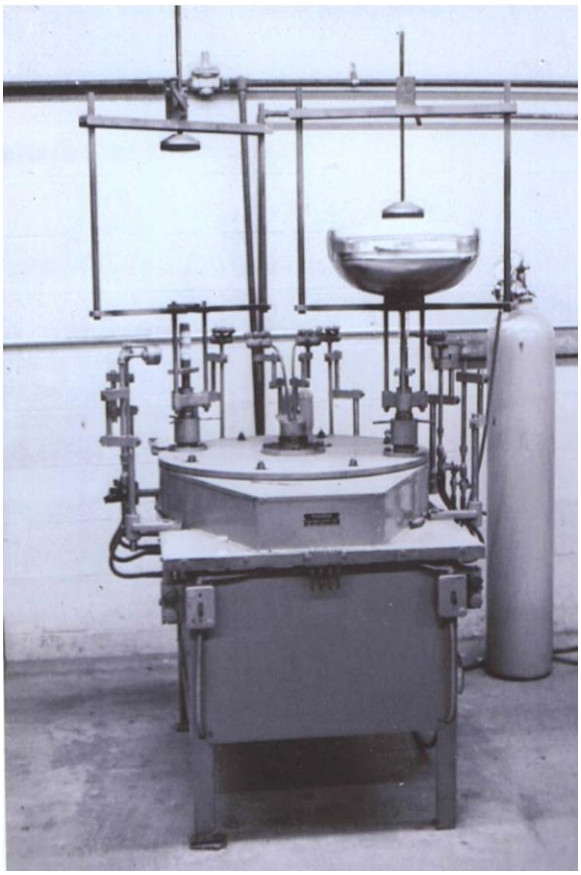
With the cooperation of many suppliers and an interest free loan from Tung-Sol, Bursma soon built a new modern facility on Scribner Ave in Grand Rapids. Bursma became the distributor for many consumer electronics lines such as being the Sony distributor for the western half of Michigan. In the peak years Bursma employed over 60, and became the premier electronic supplier in western and northern Michigan. 62

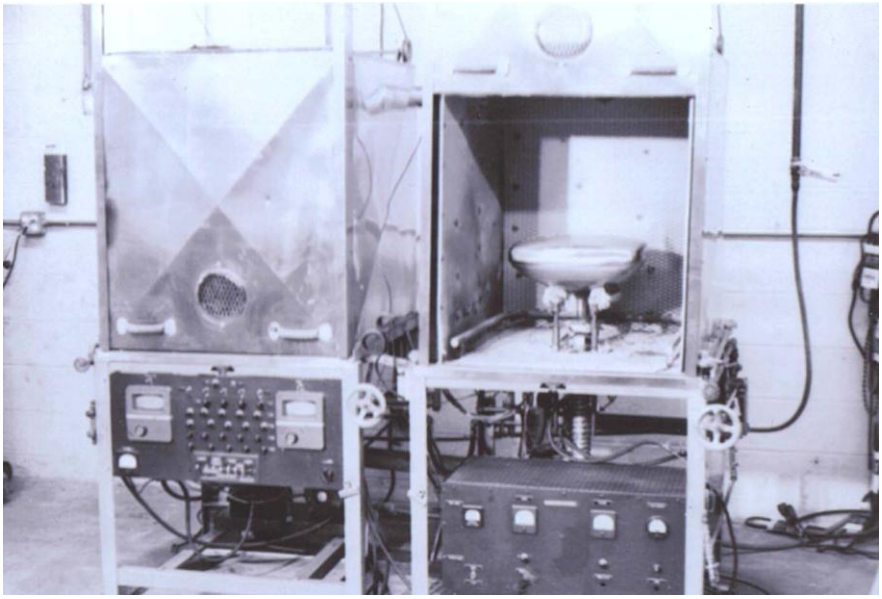
Milton's primary purpose in life was to be of service to his Lord and savior Jesus Christ. He eventually turned the daily operations

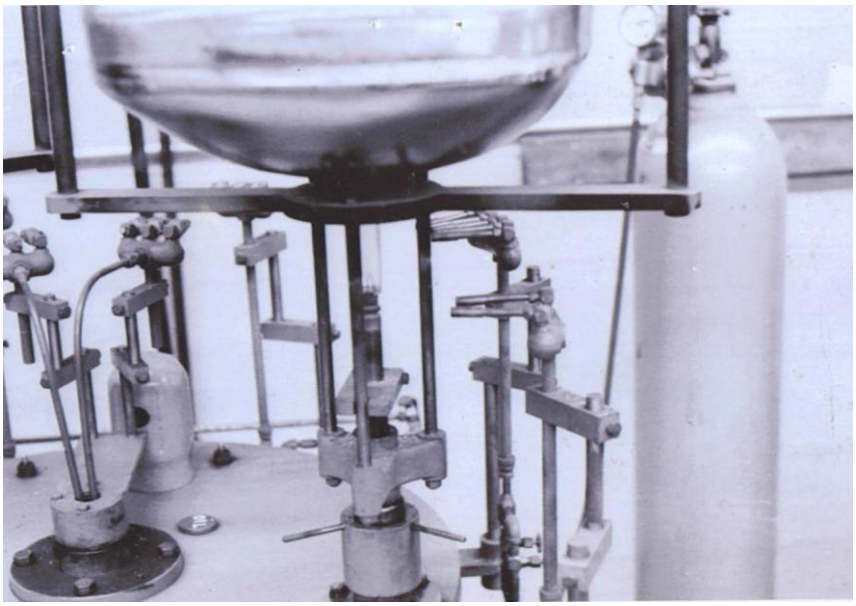
over to a partner so he could devote more time to expanding Christian radio throughout the world. Milt and his partners sold the business to faithful employees in 1980. Today 82 years later, the company is still in business in Wyoming, Mi with a branch in Columbus, Ohio under the name, Bursma Distributing.

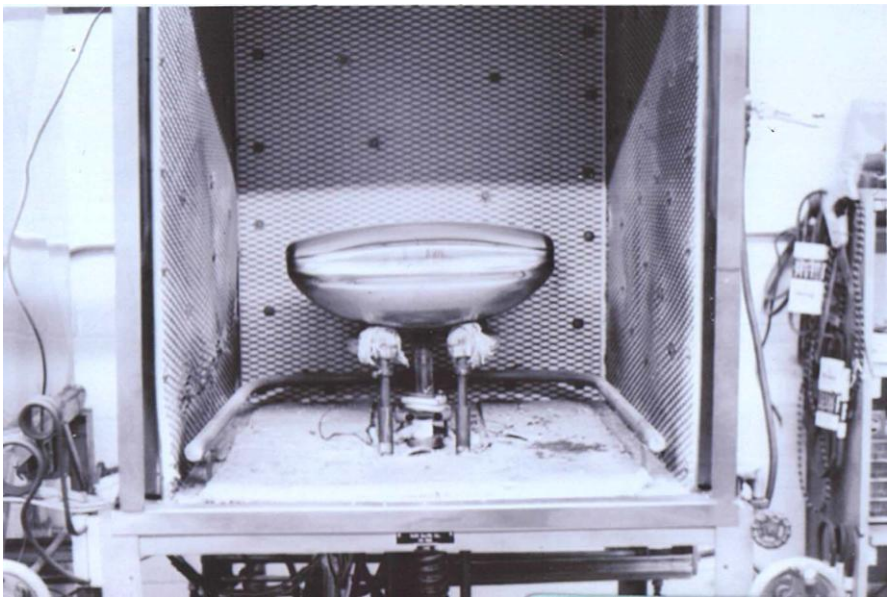
Bursma Radio was one of the first Radio Supply wholesalers in the nation to be designed for self service. Although shoplifting was a concern the increased sales and labor savings far outweighed any loss from theft.

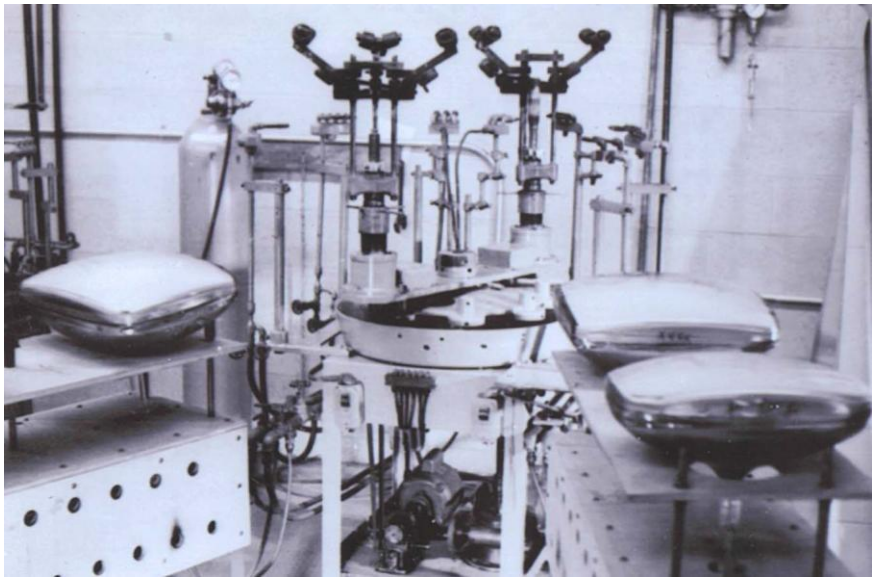
Our subsidiary, Burco tube rebuilding plant,
Jim Bursma, manager-operator

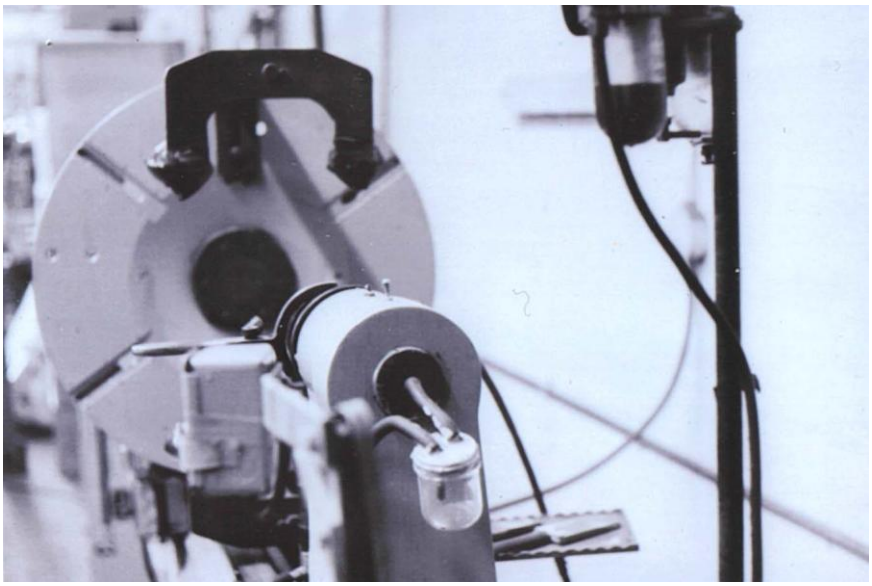


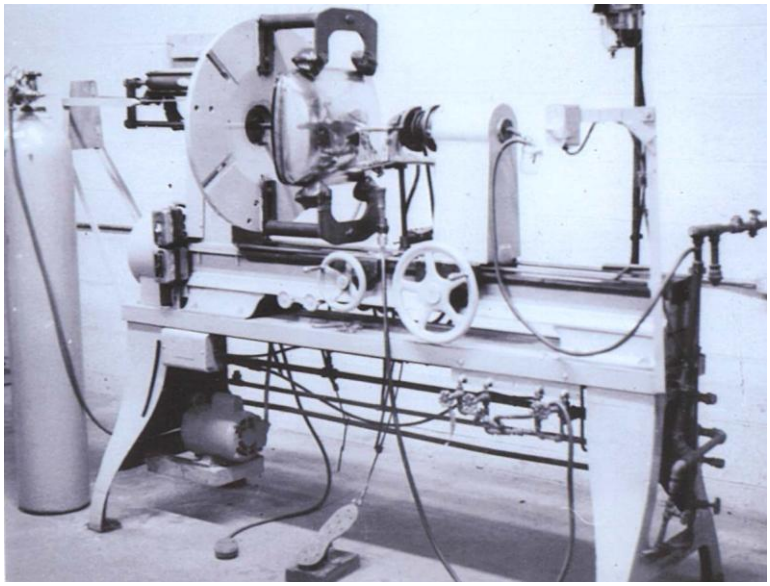


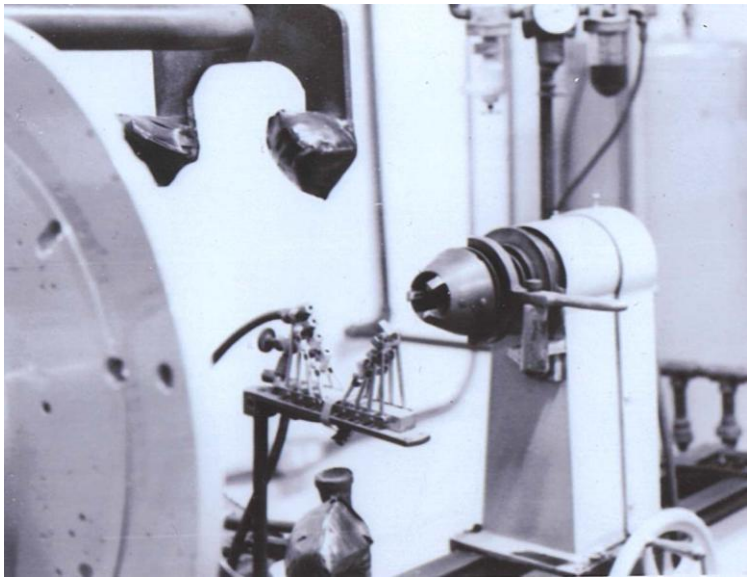


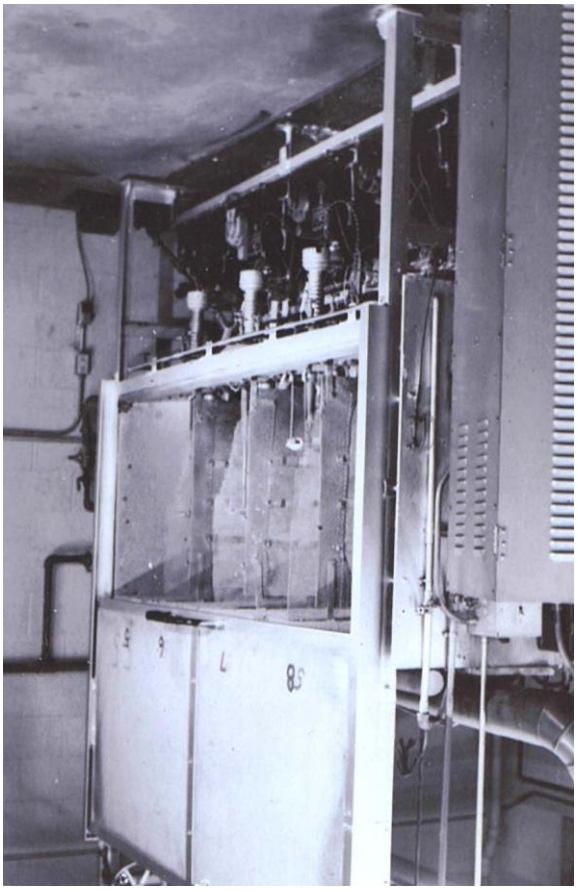


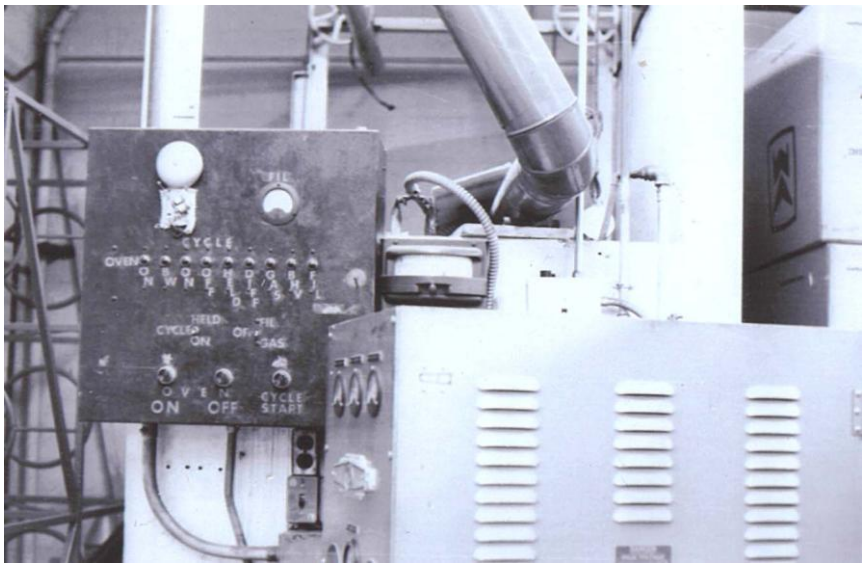








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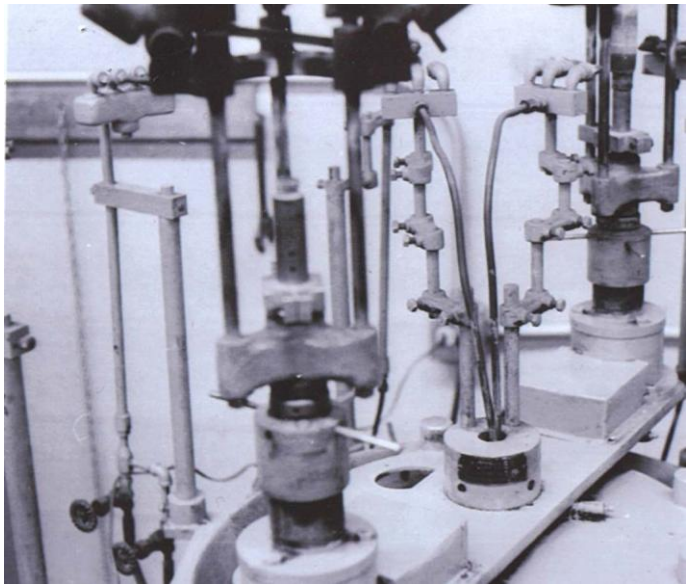

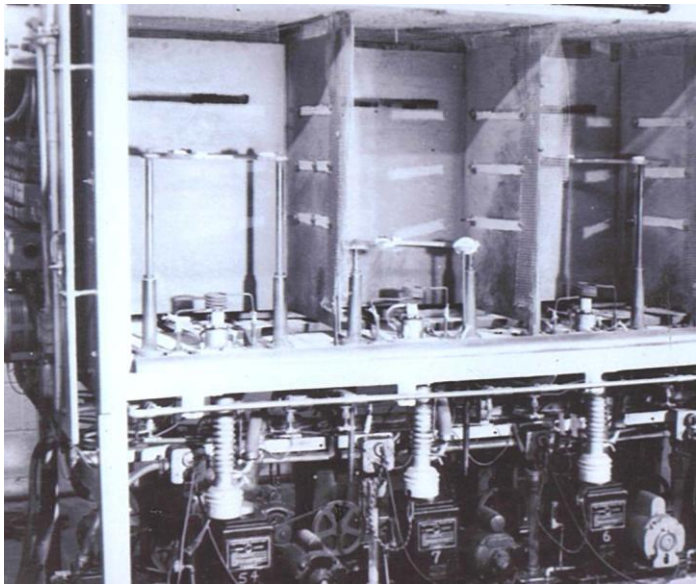

THE SCARIEST JOB I EVER HAD
(REBUILDING TV PICTURE TUBES)

When I was 20 (1961) dad and I flew to Pennsylvania and New York to buy television picture tube rebuilding equipment. Tube suppliers were never in business for very long and dad felt responsible to stand behind the warranties himself. Some of the equipment we bought was used some new.

I had no idea of how or where to begin and there was no one in Michigan to ask. Most was learned the hard way from reading books. (not many of them either) and trial and error.

Dad rented the 2nd floor in a furniture store. No insulation in the roof. (The furniture guy probably would not have rented it to us if he would have known how noisy the vacuum pumps would be) A few times it got so hot that the tar was dripping from the roof.

Dad put me in total control, manufacturing, ordering, hiring and bookkeeping.

I hired my cousin Ron, my friend Mike and a few others. We had to learn about fusing glass, vacuum pumps, TV tube specs, air, oxygen, compressed air and gas mixtures as well as electronics.

The plant moved 2 more times in the 11 years of it's operation. Once next to Bursma Radio on Grandville Ave where it got burned out and then to the new building on Scribner. It was a lot of heavy stuff to move and set up again.

The scary part was the possibility of dropping a tube or with all the stress in the glass of having one implode. We would have at least one a week implode usually while in one of the ovens.

It was a hot job because we were melting glass and heating the tubes to 400 degrees Centigrade. The tubes would be hanging from metal rack carts at about head height. Every so often we would hear a loud crack and wouldn't know which one it was. If one blew it could start a chain reaction. If it was

later in the day we would get out as soon as was allowable, lock the doors and find out what happened the next morning.

This is a run down of the process.

1) Wash the tubes and use a stripper to remove the dag (a graphite coating that if it was not totally removed would make it very slippery after they came out of the oven.) sometimes these tubes were filthy because they would really attract dust.
2) Check the face screen with a black light to see if fit to rebuild.
3) Use a glass cutter and a hot wire to crack the neck to slowly let air in.
4) Remove the old electron gun
5) take a new piece of glass and fuse it onto the old neck
6) take a new electron gun and measure it's location precisely
7) melt the new neck glass onto the glass button on the new electron gun (this was very crucial as to the heat from the gas, compressed air, and oxygen mixture) If everything was not just right it could crack even a day latter.
8) Put the tube in the oven and hook it up to vacuum pump. This was a 2 ½ hour procedure with heat going up to 400 degrees centigrade.
9) Glue and solder a new socket and trim the wires.
10) Flash the tube in a wire coil. Hated this because you had to hold the tube against your belly. A 27" tube is so heavy you can hardly hold on to it.
11) Reapply the dag conductive coating paint
12) test and box

I was at a competitor who had a hard time keeping help. He hired a man who worked for ½ day. A tube imploded and the man went into the bathroom. When he didn't come back out they discovered he was so scared he jumped out of the window and never returned.

I think if dad had realized how dangerous the job was he probably would have given up on the idea. We rebuilt over 35,000 picture tubes that were all sold through Bursma Radio under the BURCO label. The good Lord certainly protect us as no one was ever seriously injured in the 11 years. We wore heavy asbestos gloves, aprons and masks to protect us from hot or flying