

The Bliley Electric Company

Circa: 1940s and 1950s



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THE BLILEY ELECTRIC COMPANY

F. Dawson Bliley (Dawson Bliley) founded the Bliley Electric Company of Erie, Pennsylvania, in February of 1930. Charles A. Bliley, Dawson Bliley's son, holds an archive of company materials dating back to the early 1930s. Portions of this archival material are available on Charles Bliley's Web site: <http://www.Bliley.net>. Charles Bliley provided additional original materials from his extensive archives. The authors of this profile are indebted to Charles Bliley for sharing his family's company history.

History of the Bliley Electric Company

Charles Bliley published a booklet titled *A Detailed History of the Bliley Electric Company: 1930-1955* (Bliley, 1982). This booklet was used as a basis for the History section of this company profile.

The Early Years

Unlike many companies that were established in the 1930s, the Bliley Electric Company had a moderately simple and unpretentious beginning based on the dreams of Frank Dawson Bliley, a young amateur radio operator. The company was formed to produce crude quartz crystal frequency-control units (crystals) needed by amateur radio operators. This was a small and infant market requiring a specialized product.

Mr. Bliley received his first amateur radio license in September 1920, at the age of 14. A few years later, he acquired an interest in radio circuit design and in the new shortwave propagation. He cooperated with a Naval Research Laboratory station and an experimental amateur radio station under an experimental license to analyze propagation during various times of the day and on frequencies up to 30 MHz.

Dawson Bliley followed his early teenage interest in radio communications by attending Pratt Institute, and later graduating from the University of Pittsburgh in 1929 with a degree in Electrical Engineering. While in college, Mr. Bliley experimented with slicing quartz crystals in the basement of his parents' home, cutting and grinding crystals for his own transmitter and for a few of his close amateur radio operator friends. After some success, amateur radio operators from places beyond the Erie, Pennsylvania, area began asking Mr. Bliley to make crystals for their radio equipment. Soon Mr. Bliley had many orders for his crystals.

The Great Depression

The October 1929 stock market crash and subsequent depression shattered Dawson Bliley's business aspirations soon after he graduated from college. Mr. Bliley continued to experiment in his parents' basement, ultimately mastering the production of a practical crystal frequency-controlling device.

A Company is Born

Dawson Bliley, with financial help and encouragement from his father, decided to start manufacturing crystals commercially. In early 1930, the Bliley Electric Company was born. Mr. Bliley asked two of his close friends, Robert Schlaudecker and Winfield Riblet, to join him in his basement factory making coarsely ground crystals for the amateur radio market. In 1931, a third friend, George Wright, joined the company.

New Horizons

Also in 1931, Dawson Bliley approached a local optometrist for the use of his motor-driven eyeglass lens lappers, equipment that Mr. Bliley required to keep up with his increasing crystal orders. Dr. Collman and Mr. Bliley entered into an arrangement that he could rent the optometrist's equipment. The Bliley crew soon was spending more time in Dr. Collman's laboratory than originally anticipated. Dr. Collman suggested that Dawson Bliley form a partnership with the Dr.'s son, Charles Collman. Mr. Bliley agreed. The new Bliley Piezo-Electric Company moved into Dr. Collman's laboratory full-time.

Despite the depression, 1932 was a good year for Bliley's. The first of many big orders were obtained. The company experienced a significant increase in the number of orders from commercial and broadcast markets, and moved into office rental space in the new Union Station Building (for public/commercial railway service) in 1933.

Also, in 1933, Bliley's crystals were taken on Admiral Byrd's expedition into Antarctica for use in his radio transmitters. The crystals were given to Byrd as a sort of conciliatory gesture for Bliley's refusal to go along with the Byrd expedition as his radio operator. The use of the Bliley crystals was certainly a significant plus in advertising not to mention the company's pride and image.

Dawson Bliley and George Wright went to the 1933 World's Fair and set up a display of Bliley crystals. While there, they met John Wolfskill, who was doing research work for Bell Telephone Laboratories at the time. By 1935, Mr. Wolfskill had joined the company after being laid off from Bell Labs.

Bliley's first big government contract in peacetime was supplying oscillator crystals for a Navy transmitter. Selling anything during the depression was difficult, but Bliley was able to develop a growing market for its crystals through a network of dealers who received the crystals on consignment. In 1936, they had captured almost a third of the sales in the amateur radio market.

World War II

As World War II approached, Bliley was well established in the crystal market, and employment approached 40. Bliley soon became a key member of a corps of crystal manufacturers called upon to support the war effort. Bliley's filled all of the space available at the Union Station Building, and a federally funded manufacturing building was built.

Many industries had difficulties finding qualified people to fill positions during the war. Robert Johnson, Industrial Relations Manager, described Bliley's solution to this problem during a 1979 interview with Charles Bliley (Johnson, 1979). Mr. Johnson designed courses to teach Bliley trainees at an area high school for specialized job openings. The trainees were mostly recent female high school graduates and housewives. They were paid a small salary during the training program to ensure that they would go to work at Bliley's. This program created an initial cadre of trained employees the company needed to support their expanding war effort.

The Army Signal Corps ordered millions of crystals from numerous companies in preparation for war. Bliley crystals proved to be the most reliable after months of storage, so the Signal Corps asked Bliley's for an explanation. Eventually, Bliley's provided plant tours and explained their processes to company competitors. Because of this patriotic action, Bliley's lost a competitive advantage over other companies in the crystal industry.

After the War

After the United States declared victory over Japan, most war contracts were terminated. Bliley's employment dropped from a wartime high of 1,300 to less than 100. To ensure the long-term survival of the company, Bliley's engineering department pushed wartime prototype projects into marketable products. During this same time period, Dawson Bliley and Charles Collman disagreed about the future of the company. Mr. Bliley bought out Collman's interest in the company, and Bliley's was once again held by one man.

As time went on, Bliley's redirected its focus into ship-to-shore commercial broadcast radio, and government markets for sales. The company still tried to keep up its sales with the increasingly competitive amateur radio market in spite of competition from a number of companies using reground war-surplus crystals or other inferior products. Bliley's chose to remain a producer of first-quality products. Eventually customers chose to put quality before price.

Korean War

During the Korean War, from 1950 to 1953, Bliley's saw a boom in business. However, it remained small compared to the boom the company saw during World War II.

Twenty-five Years

The company excitedly approached 1955, the year marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding by F. Dawson Bliley. Shortly after the anniversary, Mr. Bliley suffered a fatal heart attack. After his passing, a Board of Directors was formed to ensure the company continued its activities without change in policy or financial structure (Bliley, 1955). Dawson Bliley's wife, Isabelle M. Bliley, was named Chairman of the Board. George Wright was named President and John Wolfskill was named Vice-President.

Company Employment

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 describes unlawful employment practices in SEC. 2000e-2 [Section 703] as follows:

(a) It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer —

(1) to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; or

(2) to limit, segregate, or classify his employees or applicants for employment in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Title VII, 1964).

Charles Bliley provided a number of 1940s-era employment applications for review. The applications requested information that would be considered inappropriate by 1964. Employees were asked ancestry of father, ancestry of mother, and religion. The employment applications also requested information on employees' marital status, number of children, whether they lived with their parents, and if they had any physical defects.

There is no evidence that the information provided on the employment applications was used to screen employees. It was considered acceptable to request the information at the time, and the Bliley Electric Company did so.

During World War II, the Bliley Electric Company sent out letters requesting character references for their employees. The letter explained, In compliance with the recent suggestions issued by the War Department and in the interests of maintaining a safe, effective working force, insuring continued congenial relations among our employees, it is necessary to secure pertinent outside information on the character of each (Pero, 1943). References were requested to indicate how long they had known the employee and to grade the employee related to personality, honesty, cooperation with others, willingness to learn, and loyalty to U.S.A. Finally, references were requested to indicate if an employee was a proper person to employ in a war industry or in a position of confidence (Pero, 1943).

Unionization in 1945

Charles Bliley provided paperwork on the unionization of the Bliley Electric Company. The company signed a union contract agreement on 13 September 1945 (Union Contract, 1945). The agreement outlined compensation for absence of salaried employees, reasons for termination of union membership, the working week and holidays, overtime work, seniority, layoffs, equal pay for equal work, time studies, vacation pay and allowances, working conditions, and wage scale.

Salaried employees with the Bliley Electric Company were eligible to receive compensation during absence subject to the following conditions and outlined time limitations:

- Death in the family — 5 days
- Serious illness in the family — 3 days
- Death of a relative — 1 day

The company could, at its option, and in unusual cases, authorize further allowance based on individual circumstance.

Whenever any employee was promoted to the rank of foreman, shift foreman, sub-foreman or higher rank, the membership of such employee in the union would be terminated.

The working week was established at no more than 40 hours per week, eight hours per day, five days per week. All work in excess would be paid time and a half. Saturdays, Sundays, and the following holidays were time and a half: New Year's Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Overtime work would be distributed as evenly as possible.

Seniority ceased if an employee was absent for 3 working days without notice to the company. No new employees would be hired after layoffs until all employees on the layoff seniority list had been given the opportunity to return to work.

Any employee who had completed a probationary period and was drafted or volunteered to enter the armed forces was returned to work with full seniority (with seniority accumulated during service). The Bliley Electric Company established a war service bonus, dated 1942 and retroactive. Any employee (with the company for at least 6 months) serving in the armed forces or the Women's Auxiliary Corps would receive between 4 weeks and 9 weeks of pay per year depending on time with the company.

All work performed would be paid for on the basis of equal pay for equal work regardless of gender.

An employee and his steward would be notified before a time study was taken of his work.

An employee received vacation pay and allowances of 2% gross earnings. An employee with 5 years' seniority would receive 4%. Vacation pay was issued prior to time off providing two weeks' notice was given for the time off. The recognized vacation period covered the months of June, July, and August, and included the week of December 15. If, in the opinion of the company, the vacation program would interfere with attainment of production goals, at the option of the company, any eligible employee could be required to work and receive pay in lieu of time off.

The company agreed to maintain satisfactory working conditions in matters such as lighting, ventilation, heat, hot and cold water, and first aid, unless prevented by wartime conditions. The company also made an earnest effort to ensure adequate food and eating facilities were provided.

Hourly rates of pay, adopted in 1945, included the following:

Position	Starting Rates	Guaranteed Rates
Shift Foreman	\$1.12	\$1.46
Group Foreman.....	\$0.97	\$1.20
Sub-Foreman.....	\$0.89	\$1.11
Section Foreman	\$0.82	\$1.02
Laborer	\$0.73	\$0.91
Handler.....	\$0.64	\$0.79
Tester/Inspector	\$0.64	\$0.79
Machinist.....	\$0.99	\$1.23
Draftsman.....	\$1.03	\$1.28
Clerks	\$0.64	\$1.05

Three months time was considered sufficient to learn the job of assembling operations, for women, and punch press operations, for men.

In 1942, the wage scale for general laborers was as follows: Starting wage of 50 cents-per-hour with an increase to 60 cents-per-hour after 8 weeks. This was a minimum. From there, employees were rated on a point system and given wages according to their point bracket. For every 5 points over 130, they received an additional 4 cents-per-hour. At 150 points, they received a 3 cents-per-hour raise for every 5 points. So, 160 points would bring the pay rate up 22 cents-per-hour, or to 82 cents-per-hour. In 1945, the starting wage jumped from 50 cents-per-hour to 64 cents-per-hour.

Up to 35 points were given for productivity. Up to 20 points were given for quality. Up to 15 points were given for knowledge. Up to 10 points were given for each of the following: versatility, dependability, and attitude. The maximum points would be 100 points. A good operator was expected to earn 80 points. A poor operator was expected to earn 60 points. A good operator would take 2 years to earn 160 points, or 82 cents-per-hour. It would obviously have taken some people longer to reach the maximum pay rates.

1950 Company Handbook

Robert Johnson, Industrial Relations Manager (H.R.), prepared the 1950 Employee Handbook of the Bliley Electric Company (Handbook, 1950). Charles Bliley provided two versions of the company handbook, one for general site workers, and one with a foreman's supplement. The Handbook describes the organization of the company as well as company rules and regulations. Mr. Johnson not only described the company, but also explained why the company was organized the way it was and why rules and regulations were implemented. The Handbook includes the following introduction:

In this handbook we have collected a lot of the rules and regulations which are a part of our work-a-day lives here at Blileys. Most of these rules are old and established, and the acid test of time has shown them to be necessary and reasonable. We expect everyone to observe the spirit as well as the letter of our regulations because in this way we make our

work situation pleasant and efficient, and keep our shop a place where we like to work (Handbook, 1950).

Handbook: Organization Structure

In 1950, F. Dawson Bliley, the company founder, was President and General Manager. Under him, the company was divided into five general departments — Sales, Engineering, Accounting, Production, and Personnel.

The head of the Sales Department was George Wright, who was the Vice-President and General Sales Manager. The Sales Department was described as having the job of making work for the rest of the company by selling their products. There were thirteen sales representatives across the United States and Canada. The sales representatives stayed in contact with 430 authorized radio parts distributors. The Bliley Electric Company's foreign trade was handled through two exporting houses that took care of sales in Mexico, Central America, all the islands in the Atlantic, the European Continent, the Pacific Area, and Asia. A Distribution Sales Manager working under Mr. Wright had the responsibility of planning company advertising and handling it through a commercial advertising agency. A small department within the Sales Department was the Purchasing Department. It was the Purchasing Agent's function to provide the company with all the materials needed to run the business. Mr. Johnson explained that many materials were difficult to procure, so the Purchasing Agent had to continually work with the Sales Department to find substitutes in parts and materials which he could get to take the place of those specified. The Purchasing Agent was part of the Sales Department because it was essential that the Sales Manager know whether parts and materials were available before the company agreed to take a new order from anyone.

The head of the Engineering Department was John Wolfskill, who was Vice-President and Chief Engineer of the Company. The Engineering Department was responsible for Research, Electrical and Mechanical Maintenance, Inspection, and Time Studies. The Research section found new uses for crystals and was responsible for the company being able to show other companies how these uses would benefit them. The Engineering section was responsible for taking the bugs out of new units and finding out how to get them started in production. The Time Study section set production standards and also hunted for improvements in methods of doing the company's work. They had the job of standardizing labor costs so that the company's cost estimating on new orders could be done in an intelligent way. The Inspection section checked all incoming material and checked the company's work as it went through the various production departments.

The head of the Accounting Department was Donald Stout, who was the Secretary-Treasurer of the company. His department was divided into General Accounting and Cost and Payroll Accounting. The Accounting Department was responsible for keeping accurate records of all financial transactions and for interpreting all State and Federal legislation. Accounting Department Time-keepers had the responsibility of keeping detailed accurate records of time spent on each operation so that the company could develop accurate cost figures.

The head of the Production Department was Joseph Haller, who was Production Manager for the company. The Production Department turned out products after the Sales Department sold

them and the Engineering Department designed them. Everyone who had a part in producing the crystals and other products was reminded that they had the responsibility of making Bliley products good enough that other companies and individuals would continue to buy them.

The head of the Personnel Department was Robert Johnson, who was also the Industrial Relations Manager. The Personnel Department handled the human problems of the company. Mr. Johnson and his staff were interested in working with Bliley employees and their foremen to help keep the company a good place in which to work, and to make it easy for them to clear up any problems that developed. The Personnel Department was responsible for employment, wage administration, job evaluation, job transfers, first-aid, company paper (newsletter), personnel records, company-wide fund drives for charitable organizations, labor negotiations, and administration of the company's rules and regulations.

Handbook: Rules and Regulations

The Handbook defined seniority beyond what was found in the 1945 union contract. The length of continuous service would be computed from the first date of employment except that no seniority was counted for anyone who had not completed 12 weeks of employment. After 12 weeks of employment were completed, seniority was related back to the first day of employment.

Maternity leaves of absence were included in the 1950 Handbook. The leave could be granted, in those cases where the employee wished to return to work, for any necessary period not less than 6 weeks or longer than 3 months after delivery.

The Handbook stated that overtime was paid at the rate of one and a half times the regular hourly rate of pay, as described in the union contract. However, holiday pay was increased to twice the regular rate of pay. The Memorial Day holiday was replaced with Decoration Day. Overtime would still be divided as equally as possible, but with the proviso that the ability of the employees involved to do the work without supervision or technical help would be considered. Employees who did not work the week in which a holiday was celebrated would not be entitled to pay for that holiday. Employees were reminded that they could enjoy the paid holidays without suffering any decrease in their weekly paychecks.

The Handbook described time lost due to injury at work where the employee returned to work during the same work shift as paid time. The amount of time compensation extended for lost time occurring as a result of personal illness was based on total service with the company. After one year's service with the company, employees were given 12 full workdays of compensation. Two full workdays were added to the base allowance for each additional year of service between one and six years. Thereafter, the two-day service allowance increment was calculated for additional five-year periods of employment. There was an added one-half day compensation allowance for employees who were victims of extended illness. The total number of days available for one-half day compensation was computed on the same basis as the regular sick leave allowance.

Job evaluations were described in the Handbook as being the yardsticks that measured employees' jobs (Handbook, 1950). The job evaluation was used to determine the proper pay rate for each company job. Each job was rated fairly and properly in comparison to all other jobs

because the same yardstick was applied to all jobs. The yardstick had eleven measuring factors, including:

- Working conditions — which evaluated the conditions of noise, heat, fumes, etc. to which employees were exposed on their job
- Unavoidable hazards — which evaluated employees exposure to possible injury
- Responsibility for equipment — which evaluated the degree of employees responsibility for care in the use of equipment
- Responsibility for material — which evaluated the degree of employees responsibility for any material which they handled
- Responsibility for safety of others — which evaluated the care that employees must take to prevent injury to others
- Responsibility for work of others — which evaluated employees responsibilities for governing the work of others
- Physical demands — which evaluated the amount and continuity of physical effort required to do a job
- Mental and visual demands — which evaluated the degree of mental and visual concentration required to do a job
- Education — which evaluated what an employee would have to know before starting a job
- Experience — which evaluated the amount of time normally required to learn a job
- Initiative and ingenuity — which evaluated the kind and amount of independent judgment, decisions, and planning which were necessary to handle a job.

Bliley s set up an old-age pension and insurance plan for the benefit of all employees who could look forward to years of service with the company. The company paid half of the cost of the pension plan and the employee paid half. An insurance feature was optional and was paid by the employee. The pension plan was set up in such a way that at age 65, an employee would have an annual income amounting to 40% of his previous average annual earnings. The income was guaranteed to the employee or his beneficiary for 10 years and was paid in regular monthly payments. The company developed rules for employees who left the company before retirement. In no case did an employee receive less than his contributions plus accumulated dividends. To be eligible for the plan, men were required to have a minimum of two years of service with the company and women were required to have a minimum of five years of service.

Employees or their dependents were subject to compensation for disabling injuries or death arising out of, and in the course of, employment with the company. The company paid the cost of the insurance.

Bliley Federal Credit Union was started during the war to give employees a means of saving money and of borrowing money easily in time of need. Loans could run as long as two years and were charged an interest rate of 1% per month on the unpaid balance. The loans could be repaid in monthly or payday installments.

Employees of the Bliley Electric Company were eligible to join the Blue Cross Hospital Plan. Monthly fees were \$1.00 for an individual, \$2.00 for husband and wife or parent and child, and \$2.50 for a family membership.

In the back of the Handbook was a series of frequently asked questions. The questions and answers described the Bliley Electric Company pay system for hourly paid employees.

Handbook: Foreman s Supplement

A foreman s supplement to the Handbook reminds foremen that they must be capable personnel officers. Each foreman was reminded if he is not a leader of men or doesn t know how to handle men, [the company] may soon find he is causing an industrial relations situation that will involve the company in severe labor troubles (Handbook, 1950). The first responsibility to the company listed for a foreman was to enforce and practice all safety rules and regulations of the company. At the same time, employees were reminded that legally it [was] just as binding for an employee to obey a safety regulation as for the company to enforce it (Handbook, 1950).

The foreman s supplement describes a foreman s responsibility to other supervisors as follows:

It is a well-known fact that we must have lateral support in order to progress. Look at a brick wall. One brick alongside another is tied in as well as receiving support from the bottom and the top. That is how a good structure is always engineered. Harmony among supervisors is essential to top-flight organizations (Handbook, 1950).

The foreman s supplement went on to describe a foreman s responsibility to his employees. A foreman was described as a leader, not a boss or a driver (Handbook, 1950). The Handbook explained that good leadership required that employees be handled in such a way that their personal desires could be fulfilled and group objectives reached. Foremen were expected to be sincere with praise and considerate with reprimands.

Observations on the Bliley Electric Company

The Bliley Electric Company was progressive in many ways. The company had a written policy of equal-pay for equal-work, which seems very progressive for the times. However, the company had different requirements and jobs for men and women. So, even though they had an equality policy, some jobs apparently were set up for men while others were set up for women. This is significant because roles of the sexes were defined by the culture of the company. A woman was due the same compensation as a man, but may not have had the opportunity to ever get equal pay because she may have been kept from performing certain jobs.

The company had a policy that women serving with the Women s Auxiliary Corps would receive between 4 weeks and 9 weeks of pay per year depending on time with the company. At the same time, the company sent out Christmas cards depicting scantily clad or unclothed, buxom women. One 1950s-era card was even illustrated by well-known pin-up artist Gil

Elygren. These apparent contradictions reflected a time when the roles of women in the workplace were beginning to change.

The Bliley Electric Company outsourced several aspects of their business, including foreign sales and advertising. The company appeared to be focusing on core competencies at a time when few companies were doing this.

The Bliley Electric Company ensured some level of diversity in their workforce by not only hiring women, but also by hiring Wendell King, an African-American, as an engineer in 1935. Julie Cicero, secretary to Mr. Schlaudecker, explained to Charles Bliley, during a 2003 interview, that Mr. King was given considerable support at social events. Ms. Cicero went on to explain that a reservationist would call ahead to see if the destination had any issues regarding [Mr. King] participating in company functions on their premises. If they did, [the company] would go elsewhere. Mr. King would habitually walk behind and to the side of anyone he was accompanying through the plant. Ms. Cicero made it clear to Mr. Bliley that Mr. King was well liked by personnel in all strata of the company. He stayed with Bliley's for almost 30 years, retiring in 1963 at the age of 64. Mr. Bliley added his long-term tenure gives testament to what he must have perceived to be a reasonable balance between wages, intellectual challenges, prejudice, and social acceptance (Bliley, 2003).

Dawson Bliley did not place complete faith in the Social Security system and encouraged his employees to explore the retirement plans put into place by the company. Pension plans were available in over 700 United States companies by 1938. By 1955, there were more than 25,000 pension plans established and nearly half of the population had some type of health care coverage (Steidler). Bliley's pension plan was adopted in 1941 and revised in 1952. The company also established a profit-sharing plan that allowed employees with at least one year of seniority to share in the company's profits.

In 1950, U.S. President Harry S. Truman described the Bureau of Employees' Compensation, which administered programs to compensate workers and their dependents for death or disabling injuries suffered in the course of employment. The workers' compensation system only covered four major groups of employees: Federal employees, longshoremen and harbor workers, industrial employees in the District of Columbia, and private contractors located at overseas United States bases (Truman, 1950). By 1950, the Bliley Electric Company had a written policy on workers' compensation.

President Truman went on to explain that an accident prevention program was always a necessary part of a workers' compensation system. The Bureau of Labor Standards, through the establishment of industry safety standards, would carry out this activity (Truman, 1950). Dawson Bliley understood the importance of safety, making enforcement and practice of company safety rules and regulations the first responsibility of a foreman to the company, as described in the 1950 Handbook.

Charles Bliley is justifiably proud of his father's legacy. Dawson Bliley understood and implemented, in the 1940s and 1950s, what are considered to be good business practices that are taught in today's Masters' level business classes.

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