

KEY AND TELEGRAPH



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John La Hiff and the Vibroplex Company

John La Hiff's name is not usually associated with the success of the Vibroplex company during its New York era. That credit usually goes to James and William Albright and Horace Martin. However, La Hiff's contributions, made over a fifty-year period, were just as significant.

In order to appreciate his role, it is important to understand the operational structure of the Vibroplex Company while it was located in New York. Vibroplex was then essentially a mail order business with a dealer network. It operated concurrently with the typewriter/office equipment business of J.E. Albright & Company.

The Vibroplex Company was incorporated in the state of New York in 1915 by the Albright family. James Albright then owned 80% of its stock. A former telegrapher, he had been operating J.E. Albright & Company, a typewriter business located at 253 Broadway in New York City. He was also the sole selling agent for Horace G. Martin's Vibroplex.

The formation of the Vibroplex company was based on patents acquired by James Albright primarily from Horace Martin. It is commonly thought that Albright closed down the typewriter company after establishing Vibroplex. But in fact, J.E. Albright & Co. and Vibroplex operated together under the same roof for the next 63 years.

John La Hiff applied for employment at J.E. Albright & Co., then located at 825 Broadway, during the early 1920s. He had left high school and worked various temporary jobs in the city, but was now looking for permanent employment. La Hiff was in his early 20s with no particular job skills. He was also physically handicapped, having lost his left leg in a trolley accident as a young boy.

James Albright, who must have seen some-

thing he liked in the young man, offered him a job as a bookkeeper. La Hiff worked in that capacity for the next five years. Then he was moved into sales, focusing primarily on the typewriter/office equipment side of the business. But Albright soon recognized his innate business talents and gave him additional responsibilities in both sides of the house.

During the 1930s Albright began to groom La Hiff to become General Manager of both opera-



1959 promotional photo shows John La Hiff demonstrating an Underwood typewriter to a group of students. It provides a rare interior view of the J.E. Albright & Co. store at 833 Broadway.

tions. By 1939, Albright was 69 and his younger brother, William, technically the vice president of both operations, was now 63. Both brothers had been old-time telegraphers, but the similarities ended there. William was a happy-go-lucky type who lacked his older brother's business savvy.

It was around this time that James Albright officially made John La Hiff General Manager of both J.E. Albright & Co and Vibroplex. La Hiff was then responsible for running the day-to-day operations of both companies. The total revenues during the next few years were approximately evenly divided between the two companies, as was the total work force of nearly 60 employees.

During the period from 1939 to 1948, under La Hiff's direction, there were many changes in Vibroplex's operation. He had a gift for developing product improvements that would meet market needs and for enhancing operational efficiency on both sides of the house. He also had an engineer's ability to design the new Vibroplex models he envisioned—models that would not only be appealing to customers, but also keep the company ahead of any competition.

Soon after he became General Manager, several changes were made in Vibroplex's product line. The "Vibroplex #6," a model designed by Horace Martin in 1927, was renamed the "Lightning Bug," using a trademark that had been granted to Vibroplex back in 1920. La Hiff also created two new models derived from the #6/Lightning Bug design. These were named "The Champion" and "The Zephyr," giving potential new customers a choice of two excellent inexpensive models.

There is an interesting document that had been kept in John La Hiff's personal files from this period. It is a September 1938 receipt from Horace Martin Jr., the eldest son of Horace Martin. It was for a payment made by John La Hiff, representing the Albright brothers, to purchase the assignment of a patent application Martin Junior had pending at the U.S. patent office. The patent was for an "improvement in telegraph transmitters."

The patent was never issued to Martin and it is unclear what it covered. But what is significant is that La Hiff and the Albrights felt this patent application was important enough to ac-

quire (a characteristic business move of James Albright's and the time line). Four months later, in January of 1939, La Hiff filed for a patent that was assigned to the Vibroplex Company. It is not known if these activities were related.

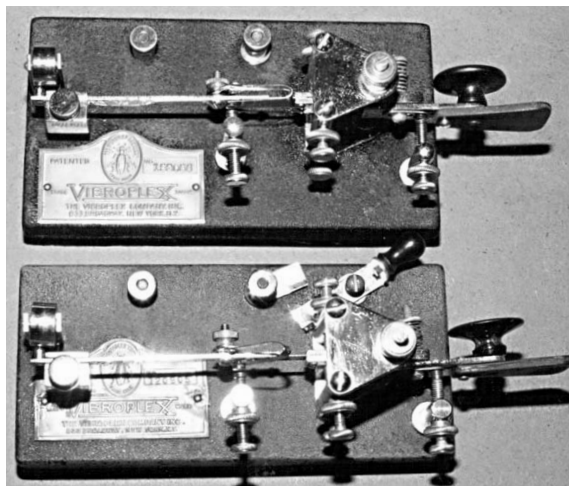
The La Hiff patent consisted of four improvements to semi-automatic transmitters. Two were for a new damper and a threaded main pivot that were not used in any model. The other two were for designs to adjust the mainspring's amplitude and the utilization of jewel bearings in the upper and lower pivot screws. The jewel bearings were later claimed by Vibroplex to give an operator "feather-touch" sending.

La Hiff used the bearings in the design of new "DeLuxe" models that would prove to be very important in Vibroplex's future business. Most radio operators from the 1940s on were probably influenced by the very effective ads produced by Vibroplex during this period. The enticing language used to describe the Deluxe models stressed the jeweled movement, polished chromium parts and base, and colorful red knobs. The DeLuxe models were available as upgrades from the standard Original, Lightning Bug, and Blue Racer models.

In April of 1941, Vibroplex moved across the street from 832 Broadway into a newly-purchased five-story building at 833 Broadway. During World War II, Vibroplex's manufacturing facilities were relocated to the second floor of 833 from J.E. Albright & Co.'s other store at 796 Fulton St. in Brooklyn. Also during this period, La Hiff negotiated contracts with the U.S. Army for the production of the J-36 key using the firm's Lightning Bug design.

And contrary to the folklore that exists about Vibroplex requesting and receiving help from Lionel (the toy train manufacturer) to keep up with the J-36 production needs, Lionel was actually considered a direct competitor for these contracts and no friendly relationship existed. Vibroplex did a respectable job of war production utilizing a work force of approximately 20 people.

In the late 1940s La Hiff designed the "Presentation," a model that he was very proud of. It was the only key in the line that incorporated two improvements from his patent. Not only did it have jewel bearings, but the operator could vary the length of the mainspring—which allowed him to vary dot speed over a wide range.



"The Champion," advertised for radio use only, is shown above. "The Zephyr" is below. Note circuit closer.

The patent describes two sophisticated designs for varying the mainsprings's "amplitude" on a model (such as the "Zephyr") that uses a flat pendulum bar. In these designs, the pendulum bar is adjustable to different positions on the mainspring. The "Presentation" uses a simpler design in which the operator can loosen set screws on the main lever, then slide the mainspring itself to the desired length. This attractive "Super DeLuxe" model has a 24k gold plate mounted on top of the chrome base.

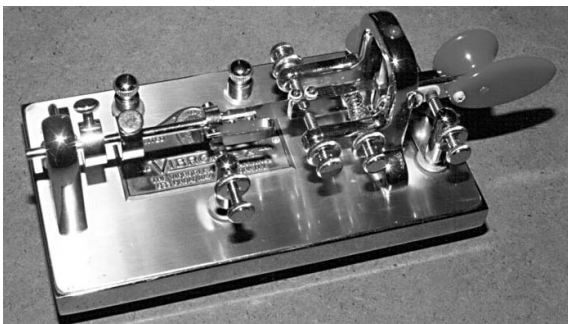
In September of 1946 James Albright passed away, making his brother, William, the President. La Hiff continued to run both companies as General Manager and also became Vice President. During the 1950's both companies continued to prosper but the J.E. Albright & Co. side of the business started to surpass Vibroplex.

La Hiff also had other business interests during this period. He and three others ran a small tool and die company based in Union City, N.J. The firm made bullet dies for the U.S. Army during the war and right into the early fifties. No Vibroplex parts were produced from this operation. He also owned and operated two liquor stores in New Jersey.

In 1959 La Hiff recognized that there was a market for a key to be used with electronic keyers, which were growing in popularity. Using some parts from existing models, he designed a device to fill this need. It was mounted on a small $3\frac{1}{2}'' \times 4\frac{1}{2}''$ base and named the "Vibro-Keyer." It is important to note that this very popular new key design was the only Vibroplex model that La Hiff took complete credit for. All the other models he introduced were the result of improvements, enhancements, or modifications done to earlier designs.

Another interesting item from John La Hiff's files is an undated and un-filed patent drawing by him showing an articulated knob design that allowed the operator to vary the angle of the knob assembly. It is unclear why he never put this design into production.

When William Albright passed away in 1964, La Hiff became the owner and president of both companies. The J.E. Albright & Co. side continued to surpass the Vibroplex business as the ratio



"The Presentation" featured an adjustable main spring. The decorative plastic button atop the main frame is symbolic of the "jewel" bearings in the pivot screws.



John La Hiff designed "The Vibro-Keyer" in 1959 for the growing electronic keyer market.

between the two companies increased from 70/30 during the 1950s to 90/10 by the 1960s. Nevertheless, Vibroplex was still considered to be a very profitable operation.

If you had tried to locate Vibroplex at the famous 833 Broadway address occupied from 1941 on, you probably would have had a hard time doing so. The name above the storefront was J.E. Albright & Co. You would have had to search for a small Vibroplex sign that was placed in the window. As you can see from the picture of John La Hiff demonstrating a typewriter, the interior of the store was filled with typewriters and office equipment. A showcase featuring Vibroplex products was located in the back of the store for the benefit of the occasional walk-in key customer.

In May of 1973 John La Hiff passed away and the ownership of both companies went to his eldest son. Vincent La Hiff had started his career with the operation in 1960, doing assembly work in the Vibroplex shop. After returning from two years of Army service in 1966, he became much more

(continued on page 22)

some degree with pencil triodes upon arrival of RCA's Nuvistor line. Some Nuvistors, like the 8058 receiving triode of 1962 and the 8627 power type of 1965, were intended for use in grounded-grid amplifiers (the grid was wired to the metal shell) [7]. They were both competent to 1.2 GHz, and to some degree eroded the market for pencil types.

Demand for pencil types lasted beyond the closing of the Harrison, NJ receiving-tube plant in 1976, so production moved to the power-tube factory at Lancaster, PA. There was some second-sourcing of pencil tubes in the U. S., like 5794s offered by Raytheon and Sylvania or 7533s from Sylvania and Tung-Sol. A few were sold here by Bomac Labs and MPD Inc.

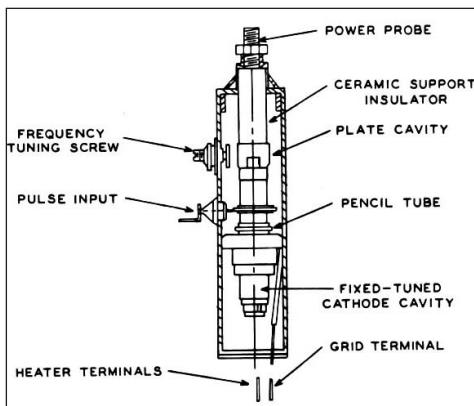
The pencil idea reached foreign shores. The more popular types were sold in Europe by Philips, Thomson-Houston, and Valvo. The Soviet tube industry adopted the pencil idea too, via (in Roman letters) the 6D8D, 6D10D, and 6D13D diodes; and the 6S11D, 6S16D, and 6S21D triodes [8]. The latter were receiving tubes in roughly the 5675 class.

Acknowledgement

Bro. Patrick Dowd supplied RCA photos and literature that greatly aided production of this article. The Dowd-RCA Archive, a holding of the AWA Museum, yielded the identifications of many tubes that were never publicly announced, and "inside facts" on the others.

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KEY AND TELEGRAPH, continued from page 19

involved in the business, focusing on the office equipment side. He ran both operations for five years after his father's passing. Then, in 1978, both companies and the 833 Broadway property were sold off separately—thus ending the classic New York era of the Vibroplex company.

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