

The Argus Museum—Ann Arbor's Hidden Treasure

By Henry Gambino, PhD

According to one Ann Arbor Visitors Guide Book, about 102,000 people visit the University of Michigan Museum of Art each year. It is probably the best known, and perhaps most widely toured, of the 28 Ann Arbor-area museums listed in the book. Just a few short blocks away, at 535 W. Williams St., is another museum. It is not listed in any guide book, nor does it receive anywhere near the number of visitors of its much larger cousin.

And that's a shame. Because the Argus Museum is a veritable shrine to one of the icons of American photography—the Argus Camera Company—and is deserving of far more attention than it gets from the general public.

It was the introduction of the Argus model A camera in 1936 that established the supremacy of the 35mm film format by creating a mass market for miniature photography and convincing Eastman Kodak Corporation that the 1x1-1/2 inch format had a viable future.

The camera was the brainchild of Ann Arbor entrepreneur Charles A. Verschoor, the president of the International Radio Corporation, which was located in the building that now houses the museum. It was the middle of the Great Depression, and Verschoor was looking for a product that would keep his factory busy and his employees working during the slow periods of the radio business, which was highly seasonal. He had become familiar with the Leica camera during a visit to Europe and believed he could design and mass-produce a 35mm camera that could be sold cheaply yet was capable of making pictures of a quality suitable for the audience he had in mind. The Argus A was not a Leica. It didn't have the fine machining or precision optics of the German miniature. But it didn't have to. It was ideal for the amateur market Verschoor envisioned.

The camera debuted with a list price of \$10.00. More than 30,000 were sold in the first week. The success changed the company's direction. Verschoor sold his radio patents, changed the name of the firm to International Research Corporation, and set about developing a line of cameras, slide projectors, darkroom equipment, and other photographic accessories. One of the most important developments was the introduction of the Argus model C in 1938. This would eventually become the Argus C-3 in 1939, which would become the best selling 35mm camera in the world. The Argus C-3, the venerable "brick," would remain in production until 1966 and sell more than 3,000,000 units in its three decade life-span.

The photographic end of the business was very successful. Unfortunately, a combination of shoddy bookkeeping, poor cost controls, and diversification into small appliances like electric razors, destroyed the company's profit structure. By the end of 1938, Charles Verschoor was forced to resign. The new management team restructured the company and eliminated the unprofitable lines.

Verschoor took control of the Electronic Products Manufacturing Corporation, also based in Ann Arbor, and continued manufacturing low-end cameras, projectors and darkroom accessories. In 1942 the firm was renamed the Verschoor Corporation. After Verschoor's death in 1943, the company became

the Vokar Corporation and moved to Dexter, Michigan. By the mid-50s, it was defunct.

Argus, in the meantime, now calling itself the Argus subsidiary of International Industries, dropped its line of darkroom equipment and concentrated on cameras and projectors. It returned to profitability, but only barely. A major introduction of this period was a roll film camera, the Argoflex E twin-lens reflex, the first American-made camera of that type.

It was the onset of World War II that saved the company. Argus, like all photo equipment manufacturers, received government contracts and produced optical and radio equipment for the U. S. Armed Forces. These included items such as tank periscopes, components for proximity fuses, telescopes, as well as some cameras. The business grew to a point where the firm expanded into other buildings in the Fourth and Williams St. area. The government also built a completely new optical manufacturing facility for Argus across the street from the original building. In 1942, the company again changed its name, this time to Argus, Incorporated. By the end of the war, Argus had become the largest private industrial employer in the city.

After the war, Argus kept a number of government contracts to produce materials for the Armed Forces. The government business continued through the Korean War. The firm also resumed production of cameras and photographic equipment for the consumer market, resurrecting its Argoflex E twin-lens reflex and Argus model A2 and Argus C-3 35mm cameras while introducing a number of new models. Once again, though, the company tried to diversify into the home appliance market. The late 40s recession, minimal name recognition and lack of a competitive edge in that field doomed the venture, however, and once again, brought Argus to the brink of bankruptcy.

Management got rid of the appliance division and went back to what it knew best, photographic equipment manufacture. It signified its new emphasis on this market by changing its name again in 1951, this time to Argus Cameras, Incorporated.

Business was relatively profitable for the next few years. In 1957, the company was sold to Sylvania Electric Products and became a division of the electrical company. Sylvania had big ideas for Argus and the future looked bright. Then, in 1961, General Telephone and Electronics bought Sylvania. The new management did not share Sylvania's outlook for Argus, so Argus had to go.

In 1962, in a move that left the photographic industry shaking its collective head in amazement, Mansfield Industries, a small, Chicago-based company that manufactured a line of inexpensive movie cameras and projectors, bought Argus on a "pay-as-you-make-a-profit" basis. Mansfield promptly appropriated the better-known Argus name and named itself as a division of Argus. It moved the Argus/Mansfield headquarters to Chicago, although some manufacturing stayed in Ann Arbor.

The company never made much of a profit and never was able to pay Sylvania. In 1965, Sylvania took back control of Argus and Mansfield faded into obscurity. By this time, though, the American camera industry was in severe decline. Like the other American camera manufacturing companies, Argus found it difficult to compete with the feature-rich, less expensive and higher quality Japanese imports. Argus had already been importing foreign-made cameras

rebadged as Argus and this practice would continue for the rest of the company's life. In 1966, Argus manufactured its last American-made still camera, fittingly enough, an Argus C-3. The company continued to manufacture movie cameras and movie and slide projectors. All of its still cameras were imported.

In 1969, Sylvania sold Argus to a group of Italian financiers. Argus once again became an independent company. In 1970, Argus opened a projector manufacturing plant in West Columbia, South Carolina, while management promised to keep some manufacturing going in Ann Arbor. By this time, the Ann Arbor part of Argus had gone from a peak complement of 1,200 employees to fewer than 100. The promise to stay in Ann Arbor was soon forgotten and by 1973, Argus had left the area, leaving its buildings empty.

The Argus building was eventually purchased by the University of Michigan, which used it for storage. In 1985, two Ann Arbor businessmen, William Martin, an area developer, and Joe O'Neal, owner of the O'Neal Construction Company, formed a partnership and bought the Argus building. The structure became the headquarters of O'Neal Construction in 1987.

That the two men were aware of the historical significance of the facility was evident from the name they gave their partnership—C3 Partners, coming from Argus' most famous product, the C-3 camera. They purchased a large collection of Argus cameras and accessories from Don Wallace, a former Argus employee and long-time collector of the company's products.

With the help of ardent Argophiles George and Gene O'Neal (no relation to Joe O'Neal) the Argus Museum was established in 1987. It occupies the second floor area just up the stairs from the main entrance to the Argus Building. The Wallace collection formed the foundation of the exhibits. Donations and other acquisitions have since expanded them.

The Argus Museum houses a broad array of Argus products. The cameras and accessories of the Argus "Classic Era," the 30-year period from 1936 to 1966 when Argus was still manufacturing its cameras, are well represented. To be sure, the more widely known of the cameras are there—the Argus model A and Argus C-3 are well represented—but the museum also houses many Argus rarities, seldom seen production models and prototypes. These include such gems as:

- The Argus C with the fast/slow shutter speed switch on the front. This camera, produced in 1938, was the first variant of the camera that would eventually become the C-3. Fewer than two thousand were built and most of the first thousand were sent to dealers as not-for-sale samples for their comments. Very few of these survive.
- The Argoflex II, an upgraded twin-lens reflex designed by Harley Earl of Buick fame. Produced in 1948, only about 300 were made before the model was recalled because of mechanical problems.
- The cream-colored Argus 75, a box-camera-like TLR. The Argus 75 was produced by the thousands in dark brown plastic. The cream colored versions are extremely rare.
- The all black Argus C-4 thought to have been produced as a prototype for the military in the early 1950s. The civilian version in chrome trim was produced by the thousands, but fewer than ten of the all black version are known to exist.

- Three Argus Model 12 prototype cameras, possibly the most valuable and rarest items in the collection. Very little is known about these prototypes. They probably date to just after World War II. These may be the only examples in existence.

The Argus Museum showcases an era in the American photographic industry and the history and products of one of the leading companies in that industry. It also memorializes an important piece of Ann Arbor history. The Argus Camera Company is still in business, a small firm operating as an importer/distributor of inexpensive point-and-shoot and digital cameras. The Elk Grove Village, Illinois-based firm has kept the Argus name alive. The Argus Museum has kept the Argus spirit and history alive.

The Argus Museum is a non-commercial venture. It is open to the public during normal business hours Monday through Friday. There is no admission charge. Visitors are free to wander through the exhibits on their own.

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