

## Batavia Metal Products Co., Illinois

- Manufacturer of **Challenger'47** and **Maestro'48** Coin-Op Phonographs -

The story of the jukebox production at Batavia Metal Products Co. started on the 15th July 1937, when the inventive William M. Filben filed a patent on a new 30-selection automatic phonograph mechanism. The same patent was filed in Canada on the 8th July 1938, and both patents were granted after William M. Filben died on the 1st May 1940, only 47 years of age. The inventor William Michael Filben was born on the 24th August 1892 as the second son of the Irish immigrants Patrick J. Filben and Delia Filben (born Flanagan), who were proprietors of a saloon on the corner of Eight Street and Robert Street in St. Paul, and William M. Filben became an inventive young businessman with his own firm Filben Novelty Co. first registered around 1920 at 26 West 10th Street, where he started a production of various radio sets and equipment. His father built and owned an apartment building at 668 East Central Park known as the Filben Court, where the family members also lived for many years, but Patrick J. Filben died young and William M. and his older brother Thomas Patrick Filben (1890-1973) took over the daily management of the saloon and the management of the apartment building. Thomas P. Filben was involved in the slot-machine business, with connections to the underworld in St. Paul in the twenties, running his own Patrick Novelty Co. at 518 St. Peter Street, and the radio sets produced by William M. Filben were in fact exhibited in the front street windows of the slot-machine company. William M. Filben was indeed successful as a businessman and after his marriage to Berniece (1895-1981) he built a new two story Tudor-Villa style house on Summit Avenue designed by the Danish architect William Larsen. The house was built in 1927 and finished early in the spring 1928. At the time William M. Filben, registered as manufacturer of recreational supplies, still manufactured radio sets and operated a radio program service, and it seems he was also manufacturer of coin-op radio sets for use in hotels and restaurants. **This, however, needs to be confirmed by radio history experts.** Then, in the mid thirties William Michael Filben developed a new mechanism for phonographs able to select 30 records, which was new to the coin-op phonograph industry, and this was of course of interest to David Cullen Rockola, when he saw the mechanism able to select each record in 6 seconds at the 1938 coin machine show in Chicago. The Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. then signed a license contract with William M. Filben in September 1938 stating that the Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. owned all rights to the mechanism except if William M. Filben himself or his heirs, just in case, would produce and operate the mechanism on the market with the Filben name. Unfortunately, William Michael Filben died in his home on the 1st May 1940 from instant coronary closure caused by overwork and worry for several years, and his widow Berniece M. Filben and his three minor daughters Patricia, Rosemary, and Dolora, owned the patent rights on the

original 30-selection mechanism under the license contract with the Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp.. The basic idea was that the reliable mechanism with fewer moving parts could be used for stow-a-way units connected to coin-operated remote controls linked to telephone line music systems. In this way a bar or restaurant could have 30 titles to choose from at all times, and then in the evenings or whenever it was crowded the proprietor could connect to the central music library and get hundreds of popular titles available. Around 1939-1940 both William M. and Berniece M. Filben had contact to Leonard E. Baskfield, who moved from his home town St. Paul to San Francisco in California, and in the autumn 1940 Berniece M. Filben and Leonard E. Baskfield decided to form a company named Filben Manufacturing Co., and the patent rights were assigned to the company by Berniece M. Filben against 51% of the shares. Leonard E. Baskfield would then own the remaining 49% of the shares, but the company was not incorporated until October 1945 since the coming of the war made a continued production in the Filben company name difficult. Then, at the end of the war Leonard E. Baskfield (1904-1978) contacted the owners of the Batavia Metal Products Co. to make arrangements for a new production of the automatic changer mechanism, but he had no chance to foresee the problems that came along with major law suits against the owners of the manufacturing company and complaints concerning patent infringements from the license contract holder, the Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp, in the years to come. Leonard E. Baskfield entered into a long-term contract on behalf of the Filben Manufacturing Co. with the Batavia Metal Products Co. represented by Glenn Spathe for an initial production of up to 10,000 units. The contract also provided for re-designing of the cabinets at the expense of Batavia Metal Products Co., and the distribution of the new phonograph line including the Mirro~cle Music selector units would be carried out by an affiliation of the Batavia Metal Products Co., the U. S. Challenge Co. with main offices in Chicago.

**Challenger '47**  
30 RECORD PHONOGRAPH  
(ONE SIDE ELECTRIC SELECTION)

FRONT VIEW

REAR VIEW

(Note: Filben mechanism used on Challenger '47)

So simple in operation NOTHING CAN GO WRONG! No belts, no fly gears, no worm gears, etc. The entire automatic operating, positive action mechanism is mounted by two moving cams.

The CHALLENGER MECHANISM has 60% fewer moving parts and represents the MOST RELIABLE OPERATING PHONOGRAPH MECHANISM IN THE FIELD. It has been in retail operation on hundreds of locations for many years. The CHALLENGER MECHANISM has been one word and proven—SIMPLE, RELIABLE and TROUBLE-FREE!

Challenger Automatic Music and Challenger Drink Dispenser on Permanent Display Chicago Showrooms

**Challenge Industries**  
AUTOMATIC EQUIPMENT  
GENERAL OFFICE AND SHOWROOMS  
FIELD BUILDING, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DIVISION OF U.S. CHALLENGE CO.  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
NEW YORK, N.Y.  
ST. PAUL, MINN.  
ST. LOUIS, MO.

**SIMPLE and TROUBLE FREE**

**SEE FOR YOURSELF**

- Ensures perfect tracking pick-up
- Positive tray take-out slug
- 30 selections one side
- Single entry National Slug Rejector
- Electric money counter
- Positive action record cut off microswitch
- Money divider in cash box
- No main gears or clutches
- Simple positive acting ram
- Microphone pre-amplifier stage, and volume control
- Tricks, tone, and external volume control
- Compact changeable relay box unit
- Wired remote control socket
- Amplifier accommodates six auxiliary speakers

**Challenger '47**

The ONLY 30-Record PHONOGRAPH One Side ELECTRIC SELECTION

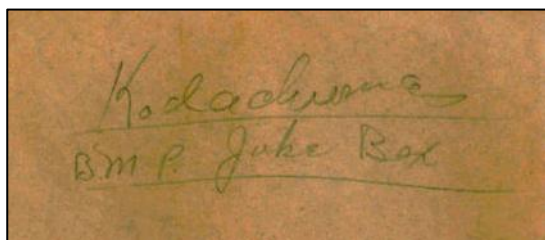
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The Batavia Metal Products Co. was based in the old Challenge Windmill and Feed Co. plant in Batavia, Illinois, and the plant at one time covered more than 165,000 feet on eight acres. In 1940 the brothers Henry M. and Murray W. Garsson bought the plant to make it a part of the wartime munitions combine of Erie Basin Metal Products Co. and Batavia Metal Products Co., but in 1946 the companies owned by the Garsson brothers ran into serious problems due to the investigations by a Senate committee concerning overpayments during the war and bribery of Andrew J. May, a former chairman of the House Military committee. The investigations showed that Henry M. Garsson and Murray W. Garsson controlled a very complex combine of at least nineteen companies manufacturing munitions during the war, and bribery apparently helped them to obtain influential Washington support for the companies including Batavia Metal Products Co.. This is another interesting story, but it is important to note here that Henry M. Garsson sold all the controlling shares in the Batavia Metal Products Co. early in August 1946 in order to make it possible for the company to operate. However, the complex bribery case and pending bankruptcy actions against both the Batavia Metal Products Co. and the subsidiary U. S. Challenge Co. based in Chicago held up the reconversion to peacetime activities, and also the production of the new coin-op phonographs.

The capital stock of the Batavia Metal Products Co. was acquired with a government stamp of approval by two industrial investors, James Stein of the Metalplast Co. and Herman Starr of the Diamond Production Co., both companies based in New York, and a new management headed by Isadore G. Grawoig (1891-1960) was appointed. Isadore G. Grawoig succeeded Charles Daw as head of the company. All this took place while the first new automatic Challenger'47 phonograph was developed and presented to the trade in the Field Building at 135 South La Salle Street in Chicago by the Filben Manufacturing Co. and the U. S. Challenge Co..



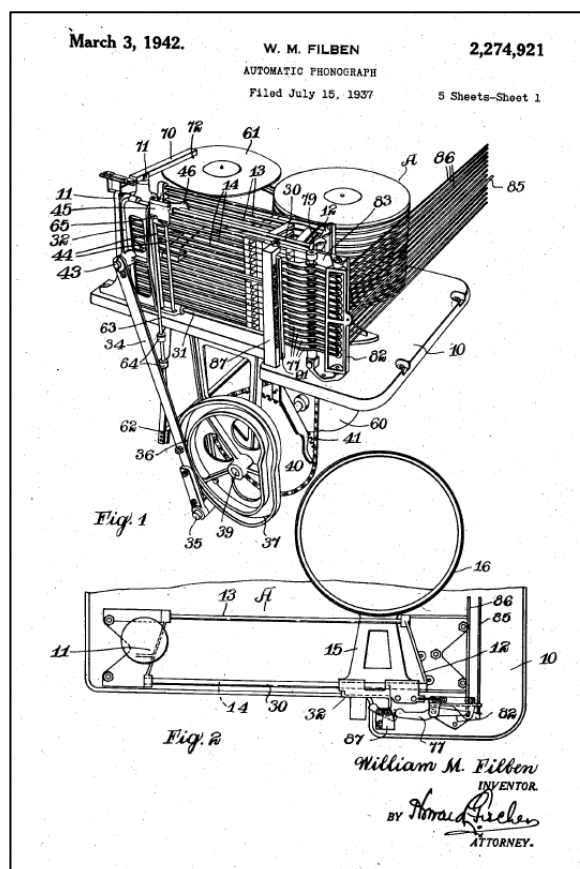
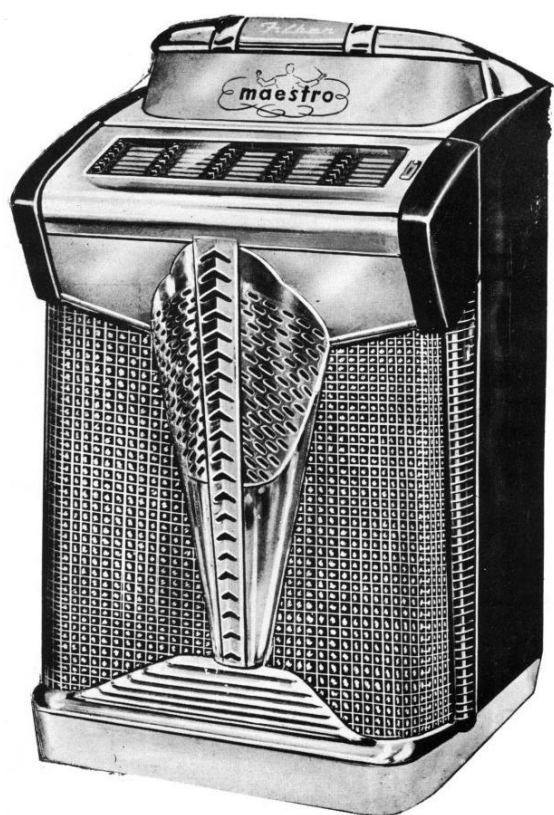
The fantastic photo of the BMP (Batavia Metal Products) Juke-Box discovered by Tom DeCillis.

The new Challenger'47 coin-operated phonograph was presented first on the 16th March 1946 in the Field Building by several people known to the trade, and among them were also Samuel Kresberg and Albert M. Cole, who were asked to establish a new sales division to represent the U. S. Challenge Co. coin-operated equipment in the autumn 1945. The new sales division, Challenge Industries, a venture of Cole and Kresberg, was incorporated on the 2nd March 1946, and the basic structure was that Samuel Kresberg would be in charge of sales in the Middle-Atlantic and New England states with main offices in New York, that he knew so well, and Albert M. Cole would be in charge of sales in the Southeastern area with new offices in Dallas, Texas. However, the sales division Challenge Industries never really came into actual corporation due to differences between the co-partners Cole and Kresberg and the Garsson brothers. On the 17th April 1946 after months of negotiations both Albert M. Cole and Samuel Kresberg accepted the positions as sales agents for the U. S. Challenge Co., but only one month later, on the 16th May 1946, both Kresberg and Cole severed all relationship with the U. S. Challenge Co., and so they had no further influence on the developments related to the original Filben patented mechanism.

In August 1946 Isadore G. Grawoig still considered the possibility of a continued production of phonographs and vendors, and Leonard E. Baskfield of the Filben Manufacturing Co. indicated his desire for Batavia Metal Products Co. to continue the development of the Challenger'47 jukebox. Early in October 1946 the decision for or against resuming production of the Challenger'47 was still on hold until a reorganization plan would be accepted for the U. S. Challenge Co. and other factory facilities in the Batavia Metal Products Co. group. The inventory, however, omitted the phonograph and vendor manufacturing equipment, and Isadore G. Grawoig stated that a decision to resume production would depend on the costs only. One of the main problems was, that the parts for the Challenger'47 jukebox were initially produced at different factory units, the U. S. Engine and Pump Co. in Centerville, Iowa, and the Aeroparts Manufacturing Co. in Wichita, Kansas, plus two facilities at the Batavia Metal Products Co.. The final assembly work took place at Batavia Metal Products Co. only. It is believed that only about three Challenger'47 models were made. One was completely location-finished with removable auxiliary top speaker, and two were only partly assembled, so it seems, to show the mechanism and cabinet construction of the phonograph. The second introduction to the trade and to the public took place at the Park Central Hotel in New York on the 27th July 1946, but the Challenger'47 was a stillborn project due to the legal, financial and management problems at both the Batavia Metal Products Co. and the U. S. Challenge Co..

The original contract between the Filben Manufacturing Co. and Batavia Metal Products Co. also provided for the development of a complete line of musical equipment including speakers and remote control units as well as a new telephone line music system under the trade name Musical Announcer. The latter would be the Mirro~cle Music selector units first exhibited at the Morrison Hotel in Chicago on the

3rd February 1947. The Mirro~cle (an amalgam of mirror and miracle) cabinet could be used with any type hide-a-way unit made by another jukebox manufacturer, and the cabinet was available with either 20-selection or 24-selection panel in addition to the 30-record selection panel for the Filben stow-a-way unit. However, the year 1947 was hard, and the tracks covered with legal problems due to the lawsuits concerning patent infringements and breach of the original license contract filed by the Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp., but the U. S. District Court in St. Paul, Minnesota, ruled against the Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. on the 20th September 1947 in favor of the National Filben Corp., and production of mechanical parts and cabinets for the Mirro~cle Music system continued.



On the 19th-22nd January 1948 the sales division National Filben Corp. based at 1139 South Wabash Avenue in Chicago introduced the new self-contained phonograph, the now famed Maestro'48, to the trade in the Penthouse at the Morrison Hotel in Chicago. At this time the members of the management of the Filben company structure was as follows: William W. Rabin, president of the Filben Manufacturing Co., Leonard E. Baskfield, president of the National Filben Corp., Samuel A. Drucker, vice-president of the National Filben Corp., Bert B. Davidson, sales manager of the National Filben Corp., and Leon Rabin, production manager of the Filben Manufacturing Corp.. Later in the year there were a few minor changes, but

most important to mention is probably, that the chairman of the board, Charles J. Margiotti, was a distinguished lawyer and former Attorney General of Pennsylvania, and this may have had an influence on the first ruling in the court case Rock-Ola vs. Filben.

The Maestro'48 was indeed an impressive jukebox in the Loewy style, which was the popular term for the American Streamline Movement. It has previously been considered a fact, that the famed Raymond Loewy actually designed the Maestro'48, but there are no letters or documents available showing any connection between neither the Filben Manufacturing Co. nor the Batavia Metal Products Co. and the designer group at the Raymond Loewy Associates' studio in New York. The new Maestro'48 model was at last ready for delivery to operators nationwide on the 1st April 1948, but only a few months later, on the 6th July 1948, the U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis, Missouri, handed down a reversal in favor of the Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. in the license contract case. Although the National Filben Corp. filed a petition with the U. S. Supreme Court for a rehearing of the matter on the 1st October 1948, the Filben Manufacturing Co. simply had to stop manufacturing parts for the Filben patented mechanism in the autumn 1948. The Rock-Ola Manufacturing Corp. filed a new series of eight patent infringement suits on the 9th October 1948 against both the Filben Manufacturing Co. and the National Filben Corp., and also against different state agents, and these serious legal problems and the fact, that the manufacturing facility, the Batavia Metal Products Co., was declared insolvent in May the same year, made it practically impossible to continue and the last of the estimated 1,050 Maestro'48 phonographs with either red or green top plastics were assembled and distributed late in 1948.



The famed **Maestro'48** jukebox

The plant in Batavia, Illinois, was acquired by the United States government through the independent agency Reconstruction Finance Corp. in the autumn 1948 as one of the last acquisitions by the RFC, and the buildings were leased for manufacturing and warehousing to multiple tenants. In 1959 the government and the state of Illinois sold the remaining factory buildings to the investor group Batavia Enterprises Inc., and in 1961 the new owners razed the buildings to make way for a shopping center. As a consequence, the birthplace of the Challenger'47 and the Maestro'48 jukeboxes was no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Gert Almind, 10-24-2010*



Filben Mirro~cle Music selector unit, h=72", w=42", d=18"



Filben 8" speaker

The Filben Headstones at the Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul



William Michael Filben ☼ 24th August 1892 † 1st May 1940



Berniece M. Filben ☼ 22nd December 1895 † 1st November 1981

(Note the birth year)

*Photos by Roger R. Hilden, November 2010*