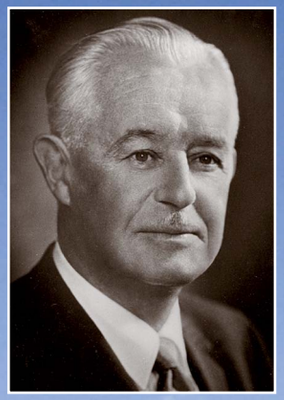
They made Chula Vista History!

Fred Rohr

Fred Rohr: an Aircraft Pioneer



Fred Rohr was born on the East Coast but lived most of his life in Southern California.

Born in 1896—before the Wright Brothers made their first airplane flight—Fred Rohr grew up to become a leader in the aircraft industry. His company changed Chula Vista from a small farming community to one that employed thousands making airplane parts during and after World War II.

Frederick Hilmer Rohr was born in New Jersey and his family moved to California two years later. His father, a German immigrant, opened a sheet metal shop. (Sheet metal is made when metal is hammered into thin layers—like a sheet. Sheet metal is desirable for its lighter weight.) As a young boy, Fred Rohr attended school and apprenticed in his father's metal shop.

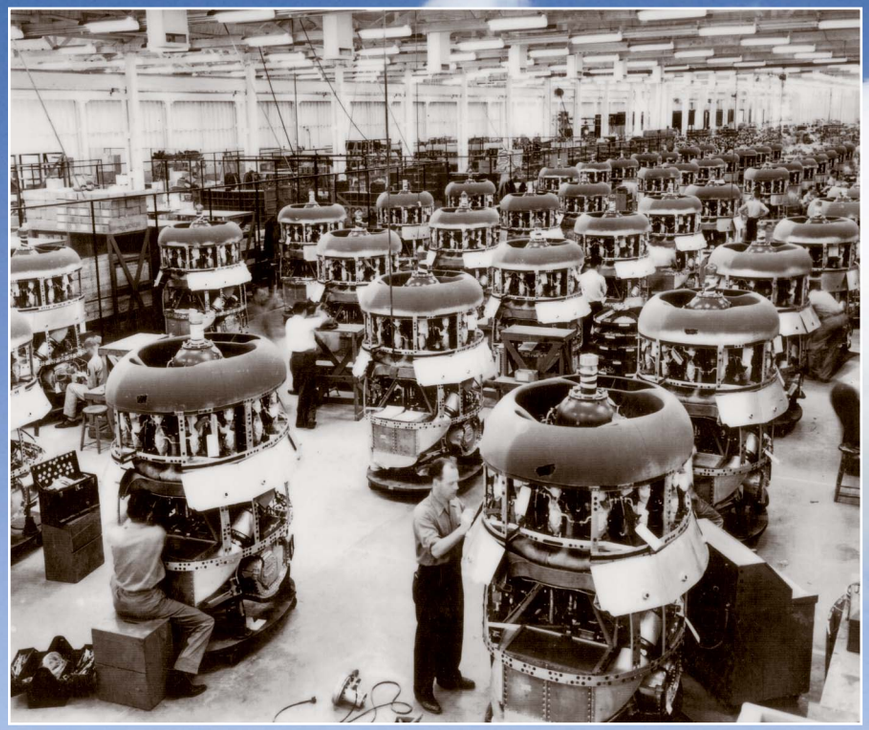
During World War I, Rohr served in the U.S. Navy. After the war, a lifelong interest in aircraft began when Rohr and a few friends bought, repaired and flew old war planes. In 1920 he got married. Four years later he moved his family to San Diego and started his own sheet metal shop. He learned that Ryan Aeronautical Company, a local airplane factory, needed fuel tanks for a plane it was building. His shop quickly made and delivered the tanks, which earned him a job as the sheet metal foreman at Ryan.

While working at Ryan, Rohr met Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh was interested in a $25,000 prize that had been offered to the first person to fly solo nonstop from New York to Paris, France. Several men had tried and failed. When Lindbergh contracted with Ryan, the company formed a "Night Hawk" team to build the plane and Rohr was one of the proud members. The result of their efforts was Lindbergh's famous flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927 on his plane the "Spirit of St. Louis."

Fred Rohr was part an elite group that built the plane "Spirit of St. Loiuis" for the famous pilot Charles Lindbergh.

In 1928, Rohr became factory manager at Solar Aircraft Company. While there Rohr designed a machine called a "drop hammer." Instead of hand hammering pieces of sheet metal, the machine automated the work. The success of the drop hammer led to a job for Rohr at the Boeing Airplane Company in Seattle. In 1935, he returned to San Diego to manage the factory at Ryan.

Factory workers used Rohr's "drop hammer" machine to produce thinner and lighter metal for airplanes. The machine had a dramatic effect on the aircraft industry.



Operating around-the-clock, assembly lines at Rohr in the 1940s built airplane engine components. This assembly line was for the B-24 bomber.

In 1940, Rohr and four other men started Rohr Aircraft Company. At first they leased a building in downtown San Diego. With World War II already underway in Europe, the company received its first big contract to make parts for bombs. Looking for a larger site to build its factory, the company bought ten acres on Chula Vista's bayfront with help from the city.

The company grew quickly since President Franklin Roosevelt had called for the production of 60,000 military planes—a huge increase above the 7,000 previously made. That production became even more important when the U.S. entered World War II after the attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

Because of World War II, Rohr Aircraft Company grew quickly. In just a few years it had many large industrial buildings along Chula Vista's bayfront as well as space for fully assembled airplanes.

During World War II, thousands of women worked in factories building the planes, tanks and guns needed in the war effort. They became known as "Rosie the Riveter."

Rohr was known for making engine parts for other companies that built planes like the B-24 bomber. With thousands of men joining the military, women started doing jobs at defense factories. During the war years, these women got the nickname "Rosie the Riveter." By 1945, the company had almost 10,000 employees.

Like many companies that made war materials, in the years after World War II Rohr looked for other products to make. For a short time, Rohr even made items like radios and toy boats. The change to jet engines for commercial planes in the 1950s led to new opportunities for Rohr. Later the company also made large antennas and rocket motor parts. Still Rohr's main product continued to be "nacelles"—the part that surrounds jet engines.

Mainly because of Rohr's growth, Chula Vista's population went from about 4,000 in 1940 to almost 30,000 people in 1955.

Fred Rohr and others in his company supported many community activities in Chula Vista. Although community leaders liked what Rohr did for the city, he planned to show Chula Vista the impact of his company. On a payday in late 1954, all employees were paid only in silver dollars. The silver coins—which had arrived on a special train from the mint in San Francisco—soon filled the cash registers all over town.

To show the impact of Rohr in Chula Vista, the company paid all of its employees in silver dollars on one payday in the 1950s. Instead of paychecks, each employee received their share of the 12 tons of silver coins in individual canvas bags.

Rohr leaves its lasting legacy in Chula Vista

Rohr continued to head his company until his death in 1965 at the age of 69. When he died he was honored for his 41 years of service to the community of Chula Vista. At the time, his wife and two children survived him.

The company continued to prosper after Rohr died. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the company built the first transit cars for the Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) in San Francisco and was involved in marine technology. The company was sold to BF Goodrich in 1997.

Over the years, much of the company's manufacturing was moved to other places. The buildings that once buzzed with thousands of "Rosie the Riveters" at work were vacant. In 2005, the San Diego Port District began demolition of the huge buildings south of H Street.

While the man and the company he started are gone, the legacy of Fred Rohr and Rohr Industries continues. The growth of Chula Vista was helped by the company, and the products it made contributed to the success of the aircraft industry from World War II into the jet age. The company provided good paying jobs for thousands of residents of Chula Vista and helped the community. Fred Rohr's contributions are recognized at Rohr Manor, Rohr Park and Rohr Elementary School, which were all named after him.

Part of the lasting legacy of Fred Rohr is Rohr Manor (pictured) located in Chula Vista's large Rohr Park.

This booklet is one of five produced cooperatively by the Altrusa Club of Chula Vista Inc. Foundation; the Chula Vista Elementary School District; and the Chula Vista Public Library. Altrusa initiated the project and its Foundation printed the brochures as the club's contribution to the celebration of the City of Chula Vista's Centennial in 2011. The project leads were Altrusa member Jeri Gulbransen Gustafsson, who researched and wrote the brochures; CVESD Assistant Superintendent John Nelson, who edited the copy and coordinated use of the booklets with the third grade local history curriculum; and CVPL Librarian Donna Golden, who provided research materials and photographs from the library's Local History Collection. The graphic design was completed by Komin Design.