

# The California Perfume Company

## 1886-1939

By Rusty Mills

The year 1892 was especially significant in the history of an entrepreneurial venture pioneered by David Hall McConnell and his young bride, Lucy Hays. McConnell received a letter in 1892 from his previous employer, who was then in California, wherein he suggested that the name of the "Union Publishing House" be changed to the "California Perfume Company" to coincide with McConnell's refocusing of this New York-based publishing company toward the exclusive manufacture and sale of perfumes, extracts, and other household consumables. "The name," as McConnell's previous boss purported, "provides the allusion to far away Californian fields, filled with beautiful flowers." And the rest, as they say, is history.



**David H. McConnell, age 28, c. 1886, founder and president of the California Perfume Company**

hard work and proper training developed a good, strong, hardy, rugged constitution. When I started out in the world "to make my fortune," I had this positive advantage over many who were less favored.

My first experience in the business world was as a book agent [for the Union Publishing House,

McConnell authored a substantive article detailing the historical development of the California Perfume Company in 1903 entitled, "the Great Oak." Following are key excerpts from the Great Oak article, punctuated with amplifying comments:

In 1878, when but a mere lad, I left my father's farm located near Oswego City, New York State. Here I spent my boyhood days, and through



**The second catalog of the California Perfume Company, dated 1897. There are only three known to exist.**

Chicago]. I took this up during my school vacation, and developed quite a faculty for talking, which I have since learned is quite essential, and has stood me well in hand many times.

My success in canvassing was such as to invite me into the same field the following year, and after two years' hard work in the canvass, I was promoted from local canvasser to that of General Traveling Agent. As General Agent I traveled in nearly every state east of the Rocky Mountains; this gave me a valuable knowledge regarding the country; and my experience, both as canvasser and as General Agent, gave me a good insight into human nature.

It is uninteresting to you to follow me through the different work from Chicago to New York and from New York to Atlanta, Georgia, and back to Chicago, and finally back to New York. During all these years I represented in different ways the same publishing company [the Union Publishing House] with which I originally started as a canvasser; canvassing, appointing and drilling agents; starting and drilling General Agents, and corresponding with both after they once entered the field. My work as a canvasser and on the road taught me not to enter right into the everyday work of the canvasser and advise and encourage, so as to obtain the best results. If I learned to be anything, I learned to be practical.

On my return from Chicago, I purchased the entire business from my employer [Union Publishing House, New York – at 126 Chambers Street, New York, N.Y.] and managed it myself for some time. During this time the one thing I learned successfully was how to sell goods to the consumer.

My ambition was to manufacture a line of goods that would be consumed, used up, and to sell it through canvassing agents, direct from the factory to the consumer.

The starting of the perfume business was the result

of most careful and thorough investigation, guided by the experience of several years' successful operation in the book business; that is, in selling goods direct to the consumer or purchaser. I learned during this time that the proper and most advantageous way of selling goods was to be able to submit the goods themselves to the people. In investigating this matter nearly every line of business was gone over, and it seemed to me, then, as it has since been proved, that the perfume business in its different branches afforded the very best possible opportunity to build up a permanent and well established trade. Having once decided that the perfume business was the business, the question naturally presented itself, "By what name are these perfumes to be known; by what name is this company to be called?" The gentleman who took me from the farm as a boy became in the past years, not only my employer but my personal friend, and after buying him out he moved to California, and while there wrote me glowing accounts of the country, and to him belongs the idea of the name California, as associated with this business [from the letter received in 1892].

I started the perfume business in a space scarcely larger than an ordinary kitchen pantry [a single room at 126 Chamber's Street.] At first I manufactured but five odors: Violet, White Rose, Heliotrope, Lily-of-the-Valley, and Hyacinth. I soon found it necessary to increase the odors, and to add to the line other articles for the toilet. Among those first put out were: Shampoo Cream, Witch Hazel Cream, Almond Cream Balm, Tooth Paste, which afterwards was made in the Tooth Tablet, Toilet Waters, etc.

As the business increased the laboratory must, of necessity grow, so that at the end of two years [approximately 1894] I was occupying one entire floor in this building for manufacturing purposes alone.

While in the book business I had in my employ as General Traveling Agent, a Mrs. P.F.E. Albee, of Winchester, N.H. Mrs. Albee was one of the most successful General Agents I had in the book work, and it was in her hands I placed the first sample case,

or outfit, in the perfume business. Mrs. Albee was the only General Agent employed for the first six months of the business. During that time she secured a number of good workers, some of whom are with us today. It is, therefore, only befitting that we give her the honorary title of Mother of the California Perfume Company. For the system that we now use for distributing our goods is the system that was put in practical operation by Mrs. Albee.



**Little Folks Set – 1912**

As the business grew, through the work of our agents, we were forced from time to time to increase our laboratory space, and in 1895 we built our own laboratory in Suffern, New York, 32 miles out on the main line of the Erie Railroad. This building has been enlarged and remodeled three different times, until today we have a building 120 feet long, main building 50 feet wide and the wing 30 feet, all three stories and basement giving us four working floors, each floor having 4,800 square feet of floor

space, or a total floor capacity of 17,200 feet. This building is equipped with the best possible machinery and latest devices for bottling goods and so on, until I feel we can truthfully say that there is not a plant of our kind in the country so large and so well fitted for our business, as the laboratory of the California Perfume Company.

As well directed efforts and hard work must eventually win their way to the front, so the manufacturing end of the California Perfume Company grew out of my hands; that is to say, I found that it was almost impossible for me to manufacture, to give the personal attention to both manufacturing and correspondence which the merits of each required. Therefore, in 1896, I secured the services of the best perfumer I could find, a gentleman who had been in the perfume business himself for 25 years and had the reputation in New York and vicinity for making the finest perfumes on the American market [this perfumer was Adolph Goetting, founder of Goetting & Company, New York.] In order to secure his services I was obliged to buy out his business and close up his laboratory, and he now has full charge of the manufacturing of every ounce of goods we put out.





### California Lavender Salts – 1898

Please see [www.californiaperfumecompany.net](http://www.californiaperfumecompany.net) to read the entire Great Oak article as well as much, much more on the history of the California Perfume Company.

The California Perfume Company (CPC) continued to grow and thrive in the succeeding years. A few of the company's important historical milestones: the first catalog (text only) – 1896; the company's first trademark (the Eureka trademark) used – 1898; the first national advertisement (1/4 page Roses perfume advertisement in Good Housekeeping magazine) – March, 1906; the main office moves from 126 Chambers Street to 31 Park Place in New York—1909; achieved the status of international



### California Tooth Tablet - 1910

company with the opening of the Montreal, Canada office – 1914; won a gold medal award for quality at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco – 1915; the Avon line of products introduced – 1928; the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval awarded to 2 first set of CPC/Avon products – 1931; Mr. David H. McConnell died -20 January 1937 (and was succeeded by his son, David H. McConnell Jr. as the president of the California Perfume Company); the company was renamed Avon Products Inc., in honor of David H. McConnell Sr. – 6 October 1939.

Collecting the products and sundry memorabilia of this vast American company (that still dominates the cosmetics



### Natoma Rolling Massage Cream – 1914



### Bay Rum – 1915