

The California Perfume Company: Part I

The Earliest Years

By Russell L Mills

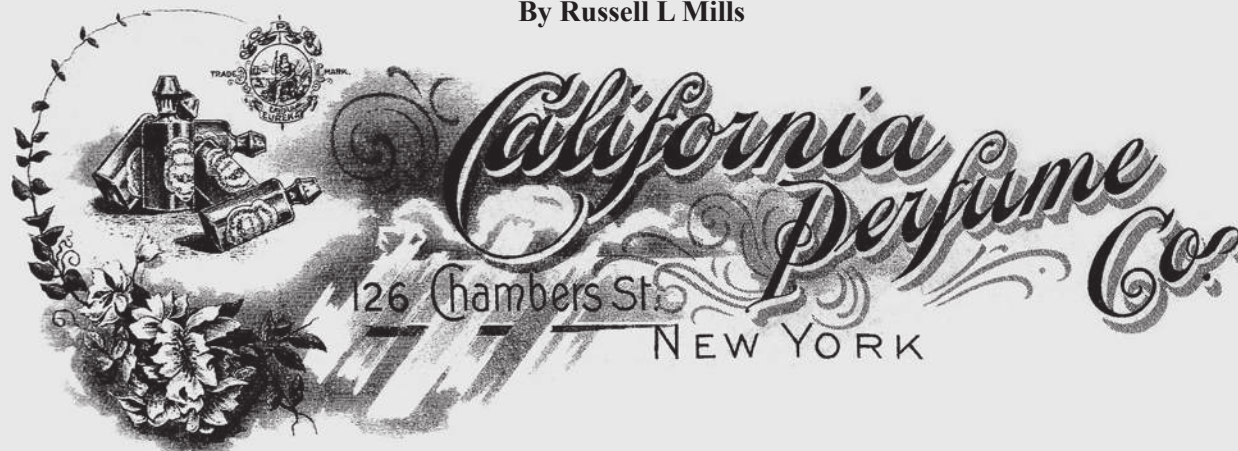


Fig 1: California Perfume Company Letterhead 1901-1906

A single man with a clear, passionate vision can move a soul; an army of souls inspired by that clear, passionate vision can move the world! Such a man was David Hall McConnell. And his army comprised women and men—representatives, office and laboratory staff, and the officials—of the California Perfume Company: the forerunner of the now global Avon Products, Inc.

The beginning of McConnell's entrepreneurial ventures (listed below) can be traced back to the summer months of 1877, when the young David began canvassing books while on vacation from Oswego Normal School, Oswego N.Y.¹ Upon completion of his studies in June, 1878, McConnell, now 20 years of age, accepted a position with the Union Publishing House as a general agent earning \$40 a month plus expenses.² Over the next eight years, McConnell held several positions within the company: general manager of the Union Publishing House's Chicago Branch from 1880 to 1882³; the general manager of the New York Office from 1882 to 1884⁴; and a position in the Atlanta Branch from 1884 to 1886 [probably general manager]. After McConnell personally closed the Atlanta Branch in July, 1886⁵, he spent the final five months of that year traveling in Michigan for the New York Office⁶, most probably assessing the book market, encouraging agents and representatives, and establishing new territories.

In January, 1887, McConnell returned to the New York Office at which time he



Fig. 2: David H. McConnell at age 28

**David Hall McConnell
Entrepreneurial Ventures:**

**Union Publishing House, N.Y.
D. H. McConnell Co., N.Y.
South Am. Silver Company
California Perfume Company
Goetting & Co., N.Y.
Mutual Mfg. Co., N.Y.**

resumed the role of general manager. According to McConnell, "in the spring of 1888 [Mr. Snyder] returned to New York and I bought out his business."⁷ Mr. C. L. Snyder was the president of the Union Publishing Company and a personal friend of McConnell. Snyder had traveled to South America during 1887 to oversee a family banana plantation. It was Snyder that extended a loan of \$500 to McConnell to purchase the company⁸ in 1888, freeing Snyder to then travel back to South America and later on to California.

Fig 3: Photocopy of D. H. McConnell correspondence on Union Publishing House Letterhead dated July 6th, 1888

McConnell advanced quickly through the Union Publishing House. The positions held, and responsibilities conferred, attest to the trust and confidence that McConnell earned over the 11 year period from 1877 through 1888. And most importantly, it was during this time that McConnell learned the foundational lessons that would underpin his business successes for the next 50 years. McConnell learned all aspects of direct sales; he studied book publishing and business principles; and he well discovered

1. Autobiographical notes entitled, David H. McConnell. Avon Archives, IIA, Unknown Date

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Caspar's Directory of the American Book: News and Stationery Trade written by Carl Nicolas in 1889, recognizes D. H. McConnell as the manager of the Union Publishing House,

New York since 1882.

5. Autobiographical notes entitled, David H. McConnell. Avon Archives, IIA, Unknown Date

6. Ibid.

7. Autobiographical notes entitled, David H. McConnell. Avon Archives, IIA, Unknown Date

8. Historical Information on Avon, Alla O'Brien, May 16, 1968. Avon Archives, IIA, 1968

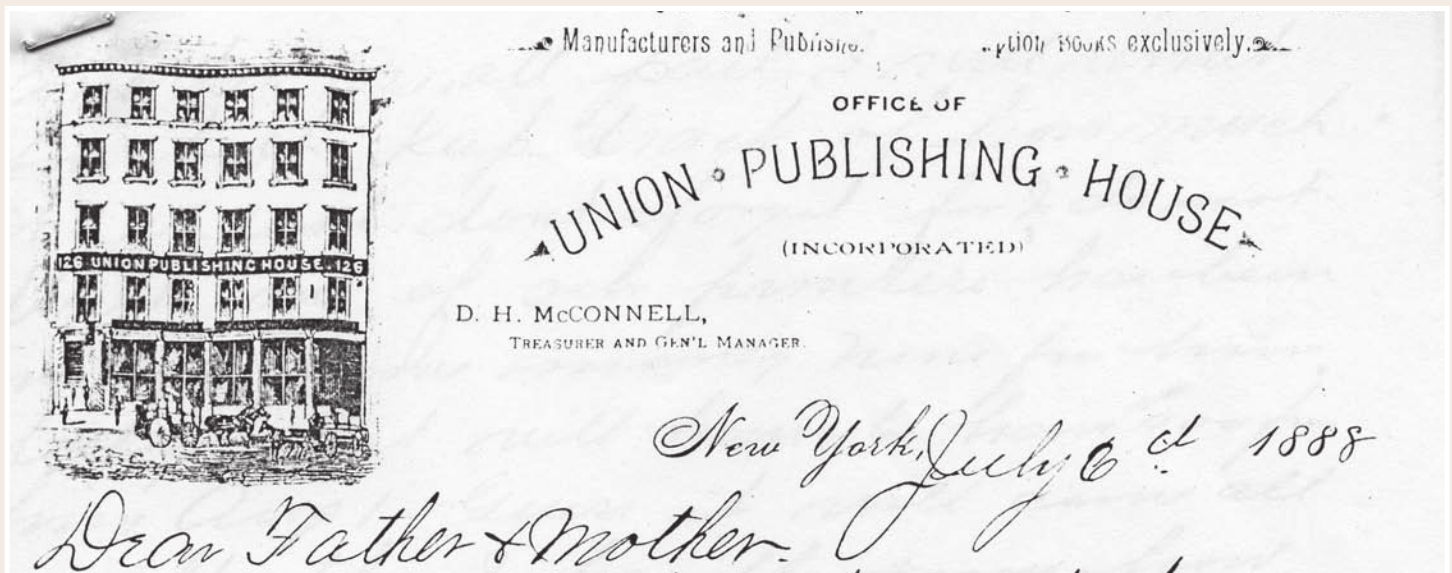


Fig 3: Photocopy of D. H. McConnell correspondence on Union Publishing House Letterhead dated July 6th, 1888

the criticality of selecting the right traveling agents and sales representatives.

In his 1903 autobiography, McConnell admitted that, “[t]he book business was not congenial to me, although I was in every sense successful in it...”⁹ It was McConnell’s, “ambition...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.”¹⁰ McConnell explained that, “[i]n ‘1892...we were selling sets of books to stores for advertising purposes, and we had a number of lady Travellers [sic] that were not as successful appointing agents as they might be; yet they were good business women, so I wanted to get hold of something that they could handle to the trade, and I lighted on a box of Perfumery, three bottles and an atomizer, calling it the Little Dot Box, put up by Mr. H. H. Sawyer.”¹¹ Avon’s 50th anniversary representative’s magazine further mentioned that, “Mr. McConnell trained his sales force, and tried out various products, taking them direct to the consumer—the customer. But one day, a set of perfume was brought to him, consisting of three bottles of perfume and an atomizer. It was called “The Little Dot Set.” All the stars were now in proverbial alignment! McConnell possessed a complete business apparatus (administration, shipping, receiving, storage, etc.); he apparently controlled a sizeable workforce of travelers and general agents canvassing key territories throughout the United States; and he had found the “perfect” product: The Little Dot Box.¹² And with that, McConnell set out to establish a new company trade!

The name? McConnell Perfume? Certainly not Union Publishing House Perfume! C. L. Snyder wrote to McConnell in 1892 from California, where Snyder had taken up residence. “When [Snyder] heard [that McConnell] was going into the perfume business, he suggested that [McConnell] call the company The California Perfume Company because of the great profusion of flowers in California.”¹³ McConnell

recognized the value in Snyder’s suggestion and from 1892 onward his perfumes and toilet articles proudly bore the California Perfume Company moniker.

McConnell not only employed the methodology of direct sales, he also solicited stores and other business establishments for advertising purposes. As noted on the back of this 1892 to 1893 trade card (see left) from Walker Ferry, a boots and shoes dealer located on Chestnut Street in Bethel, Connecticut, a New Industry called the California Perfume Company was being advertised with its box containing a “Little Dot” Atomizer and three bottles of perfume. The front



Fig 4: California Perfume Company’s Atomizer Set Follow-on to the Little Dot Atomizer Box Picture from the 1897 For Beauty’s Toilet Catalog

9. A BRIEF HISTORY of the California Perfume Company, David H. McConnell, 1903

10. Ibid.

11. Autobiographical notes entitled, David H. McConnell. Avon Archives, IIA, Unknown Date

12. Avon’s 50th Year Celebration Outlook, June 1936

13. Autobiographical notes entitled, David H. McConnell. Avon Archives, IIA, Unknown Date

of the trade card explained that any customer purchasing a total of \$15 in cash goods would receive one box of California Perfume Extracts. Numerical values—5, 10, 15, 25, 40, and 50—form two rings along the four edges of the front of the trade card. As customers would purchase goods over time, their sales totals would be “punched out” on the card until the full \$15 was reached. Of Significant Note: this trade card represents the ONLY EVIDENCE thus far discovered, outside of McConnell’s autobiographical accounts, verifying the existence of a set of perfumes and an atomizer known as The Little Dot Box.

From mid-June through late-October, 1892, the Middletown Daily Times, Middletown, New York, carried advertisements for Charles J. Giering, watchmaker and optician, which included the bolded announcement, “California Perfume Give Away.” The ad attracted potential customers with, “Tickets at the desk. Come in and get a box.”

McConnell wrote to his workforce in 1892, “Dear Friends, We have decided to place these goods on the market after our own peculiar method, and will necessarily have to make confidants of a large number of worthy and enterprising people in order that we may carry out this system perfectly...”¹⁴ As history shows, McConnell brought his perfumes direct to the customer through this “peculiar method” and his “New Industry” proved to be a phenomenal success.

Revisiting the Union Publishing House, it must be remembered that the book publishing business continued to be McConnell’s bread and butter during the earliest period of the California Perfume Company. Books continued to be sold under the Union Publishing House banner through at least 1896 (e.g., Picturesque Hawaii by Hon. John L. Stevens and Prof. W. B. Olson published in 1894 and Headlights on the Highway by Rev. T. De Witt Talmage published in 1896). Also, McConnell’s canvassing army



**Fig 5: The Little Dot Atomizer Box
Reverse of Walker Ferry Trade Card
Dealer in Boots and Shoes
Probably 1892 to 1893**



**Fig. 6 Early CPC Representative
1903**

would need time to re-equip and transition from books to perfumes; all the while McConnell watching with anticipation as the California Perfume Company continued to grow and grow and grow.

In the perfume company’s infancy, there were only five fragrances offered: Heliotrope, Hyacinth, Lily-of-the-Valley, Violet, and White Rose. McConnell served as the chief chemist, manufacturer, shipping agent, office manager, supervisor, correspondent, and chief representative. All this was originally accomplished from a single office on the second floor¹⁵ of the five-story building (plus basement) at 126 Chambers St., New York. A peculiar insight into McConnell’s “dual-natured” activities (book publisher and perfume manufacturer) was afforded in an 1895 New York Times article¹⁶ entitled, *Saved Her Employers’ Life*:

“Miss Josephine Sawyer, a young woman employed as typewriter by the Union Publishing House, 126 Chambers Street, distinguished herself yesterday morning by saving David H. McConnell, the President of the company, from possible death by fire.

“Mr. McConnell, while pouring alcohol from one bottle to another, stood near a flaring gas jet. His hand was unsteady, one bottle slipped from his fingers, and the alcohol was spilled over his beard and clothing. At the same time some of the liquid flew over the gas jet, and in an instant it was ablaze. The flame leaped to Mr. McConnell, and before he was aware of his peril his beard and clothes were on fire.

“Miss Sawyer, who had watched her employer’s movements with interest, was horrified when she saw him suddenly break into flames, but instead of shrieking and running away, or fainting, she grabbed an apron and a piece of bagging and tried to extinguish the blaze. She wrapped the apron around Mr. McConnell’s whiskers, but without avail, for the apron took to fire. Miss Sawyer dropped the apron then enveloped Mr. McConnell in the bagging

14. McConnell’s Scrapbook, November 5, 1892.

15. Untitled Notes, Avon Archives VIII, 1925

16. Article, *Saved Her Employer’s Life*, New York Times, March 29th, 1895



**Fig. 7: Main Office at 126 Chambers Street, New York
Photograph taken in April, 1901**

and hugged him, hoping to smother the flames.

“...He fell to the floor, still burning, and Miss Sawyer rolled him all around office until the flames were extinguished.”

The article clearly identifies David H. McConnell as the president of the Union Publishing House. Also, McConnell was working with alcohol and a flaring gas jet—alcohol was used to distill perfume oils into extracts or essences.¹⁷ From a human interest perspective, the article also indicates that McConnell sported a beard. Interestingly, there are NO photographs that show McConnell with a beard (See Fig. 8). Furthermore, after 1905, McConnell was never pictured with any facial hair whatsoever! Could that have been a precaution, a personal grooming choice, motivated by a near-death experience???

McConnell’s fledgling perfume venture did succeed! By 1893, Shampoo, Witch Hazel, a Tooth Tablet, and several other toilet articles, were added to the inventory.^{18,19} As annotated on an early representative’s business card (right), by 1894 the California Perfume Company sold a variety of products: three new perfume fragrances (Carnation, Sweet Pea, and Lou-Lille) were added; five fragrances of toilet waters; eleven toilet articles (e.g., Almond Cream Balm, Sweet Sixteen Powder, Complexion Soap, etc.); and the cornerstone of the company: the Atomizer Box containing one “Perfect” Atomizer and three bottles of perfume in the customer’s “choice of odors.”

Arguably one of the most fascinating achievements is that in just two short years, McConnell went from offering only The Little Dot Box to offering 25 different perfume and toilet articles in 63 distinct size variations. And this phenomenal increase in product variety and diversity continued, as evidenced in the company’s first catalog introduced to representatives on November 2nd, 1896. The 32-page text-only catalog contained product descriptions and prices for 37 unique products available in 134 distinct size variations. To acknowledge the extraordinarily quick growth/success of the California Perfume Company, one MUST, again, recall the complete business infrastructure and the army of able-bodied sales representatives supplied by the Union Publishing House.

The expansive geographical coverage—New York, Boston, Cincinnati,



**Fig. 8: Last photo showing D.H. McConnell with facial hair
1905**



**Fig. 9: California Shampoo Cream
1893-1896**

17. Online Article, Perfume, <http://www.enotes.com/perfume-66380-reference/perfume>

18. Information From Mr. McConnell, April 15, 1936, Avon Archives IIA, 1936

19. Autobiographical notes entitled, David H. McConnell. Avon Archives, IIA, Unknown Date

PERFUMES	
In the following odors:	
Hyacinth, Heliotrope, White Rose, Lily of the Valley.	Carnation, Violet, Sweet Pea, of the Valley.
1 oz. bottle.....40c.	1/2 lb. bottle.\$1.50
2 " ".....75c.	1/2 " ".....2.75
	1 lb. bottle\$4.75.
Lou-Lillie. 1 oz. bottle, 60c.; 2 oz. bottle, \$1.15.	
TOILET WATERS.	
Lavender Water, 4 oz. bottle.....	\$0.65
" " 8 " ".....	1.25
Florida " 4 " ".....	.65
" " 8 " ".....	1.25
Violet " 4 " ".....	.65
" " 8 " ".....	1.25
Lait Virginal, 2 " ".....	.65
Eau de Cologne, 2 " ".....	.35
" " 4 " ".....	.65
TOILET ARTICLES.	
Almond Cream Balm, per tube, 35c.; per jar, 50c.	
Witch Hazel Cream, " " 25c.; " " 50c.	
Lavender " " 25c.; " " 50c.	
Shampoo " per jar.....	35c.
Tooth Paste, per tube.....	25c.
Perfect Cream Shaving Soap, per box.....	20c.
Sweet Sixteen Powder, " ".....	25c.
Sachet Powder, " ".....	25c.
Complexion Soap, " 3 cakes, 40c	
EXTRACTS.	
Bay Rum, XXX, 4 oz. bottle, 40c.; 8 oz. bottle, 75c.	
Witch Hazel, 4 " " 25c.; 8 " " 45c.	
ATOMIZER BOX.	
One "Perfect" Atomizer and three Bottles of Perfume, choice of odors, except Lou-Lillie, \$1.35	

Fig. 10: Reverse of CPC
Business Card
1894-1895

Chicago, Michigan, and Atlanta—canvassed by the travelers and general agents of the Union Publishing House was amazingly fortuitous for McConnell. From the very start of his entrepreneurial venture, he was able to reach hundreds of thousands, if not millions, for a potential customer base: an almost unheard of advantage for a fledgling endeavor.

[HISTORICAL COMMENT: admittedly Atlanta was already closed (1886) before the start-up of the California Perfume Company; however, there were probably prior canvassers willing to handle this new product in and around the Atlanta area.]

In 1895, McConnell's younger brother, George J. McConnell, entered into the California Perfume Company business. George traveled to California and opened the company's first branch office at 506 Mission Street in San Francisco.^{20,21} The offices served as a base of expansion for recruiting travelers and general agents and as a storefront for display and demonstration of the goods. Additionally, the San Francisco office was instrumental as a distribution point from which all orders were filled for the representatives located west of the Rocky Mountains. This reduced the shipping time and cost required to get the products to the customer. Initially, all products were manufactured at the 126 Chamber's Street building in New York, put up in wooden crates, lowered to the street via chain hoist, then carted to various railroad freight depots²² for delivery around the country. The establishment of several branch distribution offices in addition to San Francisco—Luzerne, Pennsylvania in 1895, Davenport, Iowa and Dallas, Texas in 1896—contributed to a positive customer experience: reliable, expeditious handling and delivery of superior quality perfumes and toilet articles.

When regarding the California Perfume Company's earliest years, McConnell had an almost uncanny ability to seize every opportunity to

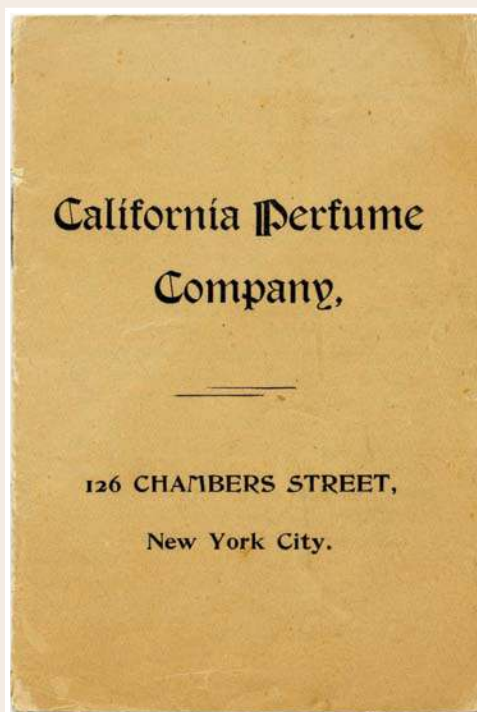


Fig. 11: Cover of the
California Perfume
Company's First Catalog
1896



Fig. 12: The Warehouse Room at the San Francisco Branch
Early 1900s

20. Three 1895 Shipping Receipts, see: http://www.californiaparfumecompany.net/company/cal_shipping_invoices_cu.html

21. Information From Mr. McConnell, April 15, 1936, Avon Archives IIA, 1936

22. Untitled Notes, Avon Archives VIIF, 1925

strengthen his company's market growth and durability. One perfect example of a small opportunity, something others may have considered as trivial, that greatly benefited his company entailed McConnell's use of beautiful, meaningful, affordable product labeling and packaging! McConnell was a genius!

Almost all of the earliest labels adorning California Perfume Company products were illustrated with ornate fonts and lithographed flowers in exacting detail. The labels were brilliantly colorful or monochromatic, but in every sense eye-catching and aesthetically pleasing. Clearly, the appearance of the product was as important to McConnell as the quality of the product itself, exemplified by the 1893-1896 California Shampoo Cream (Fig. 9), the 1895 Extract of White Heliotrope perfume (Fig. 13), or the 1893-1900 California Tooth Tablet (Fig. 14). The vibrancy, detail and simple elegance of the California Perfume Company labels rivaled those of notable perfume manufacturers of McConnell's day!

In stark contrast to the use of these often stunning labels, McConnell actually put up his perfumes and toilet articles in common, mass-produced containers—bottles, jars, and tins—available to any and all manufactures of the time. This shrewd business decision realized at least two phenomenal benefits: 1) cost savings that could be passed on to the customer, and 2) additional business capital for research and inventory expansion.

[COLLECTOR'S COMMENT: Without a label, the containers that might be associated with the California Perfume Company are essentially worthless.]



**Fig. 13: Extract of White Heliotrope
Perfume
1895**

For a very short period between approximately 1895 and 1896, McConnell seized another, almost deceptive, opportunity to advance the California Perfume Company. This opportunity again involved his perfume labels. The labels on the earliest items discovered thus far, those dating back to the early to mid-1890s proudly bore the city name "NEW YORK". In the case of the earliest Bay Rum bottles (left), the labels also included the California Perfume Company's physical address—126 Chambers St.—along with "NEW YORK."

However, during 1895 to 1896, McConnell used labels on his perfume bottles that bore the city names "NEW YORK", "CHICAGO", and "SAN FRANCISCO," as can be seen on the label of the 1895-1896 Extract of Violet perfume bottle shown to the immediate right. The point is that Chicago was never a California Perfume Company branch distribution office. No paperwork found to date even mentions "Chicago" as related to the California Perfume Company. The question begs, "Why Chicago?"

In the 1890s, there were literally hundreds of bona fide, registered perfume manufacturers headquartered in New York City. Considering the previously discussed geographic expanse canvassed by the Union Publishing House's, and now the California Perfume Company's,



**Fig. 14: California Tooth Tablet
1893-1900**



Fig. 15: California Superior Bay Rum
1893-1896



Fig. 16: Extract of Violet Perfume
1895-1896

travelers and general agents, the theory would be that McConnell desired to add a “degree of credibility” to his perfumes. Not only did he wish to sell the allure of California fields of flowers with the company’s name, but McConnell also wanted to impart a “continental” flavor—an implied continental acceptance—to new customers and potential representatives. And really, the inclusion of Chicago was not a great stretch of truth! It was many of the Union Publishing House’s travelers and general agents in ALL the various territories, including the Chicago Branch Office, which first replaced books with perfumes and toiletries in their direct sales businesses. Lastly, and probably just a coincidental fact, the 1900 Census cataloged New York as the most populated city in United States. The second most populous city was Chicago, Illinois. And San Francisco ranked ninth most populated city. Possibly, touting these three very well-known and heavily populated U.S. cities on his perfumes’ labels may have helped sway the purchasing decisions of some of his more discerning buyers and sellers. Sadly, McConnell’s reasoning for the use of Chicago on the labels may now be lost to antiquity.

By the close of 1896, the California Perfume Company was well on its way to greatness, led by a true visionary and exceptional entrepreneur, David H. McConnell. Under McConnell’s seasoned leadership, and with the joining of Alexander D. Henderson as McConnell’s business partner in 1895, the California Perfume Company was definitely set for great success!

For more information on the California Perfume Company, please visit: www.californiaperfumecompany.net

Version 2, Dated 3 July, 2012

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