

The Allis Chalmers Proving Grounds in New Berlin

Allis Chalmers was a large industrial conglomerate that manufactured agricultural equipment from about 1915 until 1985. Its headquarters in West Allis was only four miles east of the NE corner of New Berlin. Many New Berliners found employment there. Commuting was facilitated in the early years by the electric interurban rail line (TMER&L).

The company's connections to New Berlin include:

1. The former Roberts Golf Course located at the NE corner of New Berlin
2. The Albert Schroeder farm on Calhoun Rd. that served as a beta test site for the first production rubber tired tractor.
3. The Allis Chalmers Proving Grounds.

This note deals primarily with the Proving Grounds, which was located on land south of Cleveland Avenue, near 166th street.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 are the three aerial maps available which help to establish location and tenure of the operation. The 1950 map of Figure 2 shows a lane leading from Cleveland Avenue south to a small building, and an indication of a test track in the SW corner of the picture. Not surprisingly, the track would be located as far from the main road as feasible.

The 1941 map, Figure 1, shows no signs of the development, whereas the 1963 map, Figure 3, shows the property being transformed to accommodate the Industrial Park complex we know today.

Plat maps of the area indicate AC had obtained the 40 acre parcel by 1949. The 1964 plat map is the last to list the property as held by AC.

The brick building constructed by AC survived the site transition to the industrial park. It is shown in that setting in Figure 4. As of this writing (2020) the building remains standing.

Further research is needed to determine the timing more accurately, but one could speculate the AC proving ground in New Berlin was established after WWII, and operated until about 1960 when a new facility was constructed near Union Grove, WI.



Figure 1. 1941 aerial view of future proving ground property (center) showing open farm fields.



Figure 2. 1950 aerial view of proving grounds property. New service building and test track outline are visible.



Figure 3. 1963 aerial view showing road development in progress for the coming industrial park.

A search of Norm Swinford's¹ archives has revealed only one photo that was positively taken on this site. Figure 5 is a staff photo taken in 1953 of a WD 45 tractor outfitted with a diesel engine, the first diesel to be marketed by AC. Note the test track in the background.

The photo of Figure 6 shows a field test being conducted on a WD 45 tractor pulling a 4-bottom moldboard plow in alfalfa sod. The picture illustrates the technology available in the 1950s for conducting such tests. Here, drive wheel slip is being measured by recording revolutions of the drive wheel as compared to actual travel distance measured by the "fifth wheel" device running freely on the ground behind the tractor. Other measurements may have been the lift cylinder pressure which would indicate weight transfer to the rear wheels. The test could have been structured to document the performance of the "draft control", snap coupler hitch system AC had introduced on the WD tractor.

Allis Chalmers marketing department staged promotional equipment photos at the proving grounds. Figures 7-9 have been scanned from advertising brochures the company issued about 1953-54.²

The building AC constructed at this site is shown in Figures 10, 11, and 12 as it appeared in December, 2009. The bays were once likely used to service tractors under test and to build prototypes.

Forested for thousands of years, open fields for crops and livestock for 100 years, an industrial park for the last 50 years, what does the future hold for this land?

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1. Norm Swinford has authored several books on the history of Allis Chalmers agricultural equipment.
2. Courtesy of Fritz Meyer, a native of New Berlin, who was employed at the proving grounds from 1953-1956.



Figure 4. 2007 aerial view of property now part of the New Berlin industrial park. The service building remains intact.



Figure 5. A preproduction WD with new diesel engine is shown in this 1953 photo taken at the New Berlin proving grounds.
(Courtesy of Norm Swinford)



Figure 6. Field test of WD45 pulling 4 bottom plow c.1952
(Courtesy of Norm Swinford)



Figure 7. Color photographs of Allis Chalmers machinery used by the company on promotional material. Both were taken in 1953 on the New Berlin proving grounds. Fritz Meyer of New Berlin is driving the tractor in the lower photo. The scene includes some buildings on the Joe Bonness farm on the north side of Cleveland Avenue.

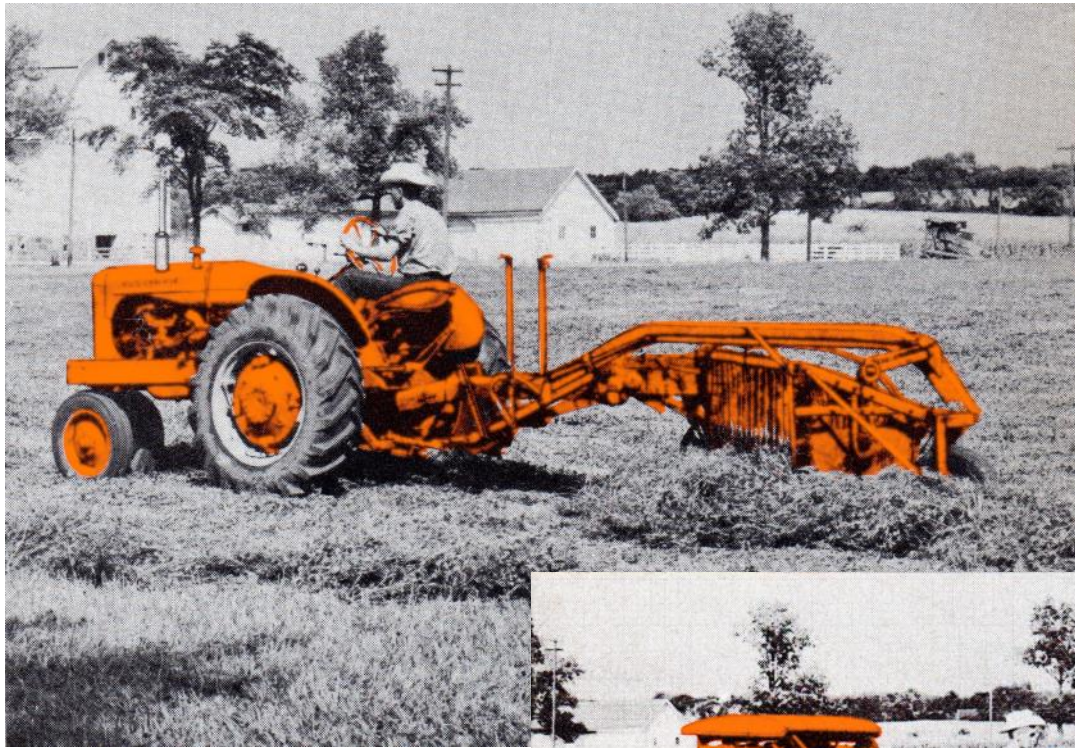


Figure 8. Fritz Meyer operates the side delivery rake and round baler at the Allis Chalmers New Berlin proving grounds on Cleveland Avenue. Views are NE toward the Bonness farm. These photos are from an advertising brochure titled "Fast....One Man low cost harvesting"



Figure 9. This 1954 proving grounds scene features Fritz driving the newly released WD 45 tractor.



Figure 10. Former proving grounds service building as it appeared in late 2009



Figure 11. South side of service building 2009



Figure 12. West side of service building as it appeared in late 2009