

125 years and five generations: CG Bretting celebrates tradition of quality manufacturing

Open house planned for July 15 and 16

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With over 400 employees and some 280,000 square feet of manufacturing plant, C. G. Bretting Manufacturing takes pride of its place among Bay Area industries, producing technologically advanced machinery with a worldwide reputation for quality.

That is quite an accomplishment in a world where top quality workmanship and service all too often appears to be a rare commodity.

What is even more remarkable is that for the past 125 years, C.G. Bretting has been able to reinvent itself to keep pace of change, and to continue a top quality firm through five generations

It all began in 1890, when Christopher George Bretting bought the Parish Iron Works in Ashland.

Parish, with some 500 workers, manufactured machinery and equipment for the booming lumbering industry. Located on the shores of Lake Superior, surrounded by the greatest concentration of sawmills in the country, Bretting continued the work, but expanded into the burgeoning iron mining and shipping industries as the seemingly inexhaustible timber resources began to wane.

In its turn, the mining industry began to play out after World War II, and at one point, C.G. Bretting had just a dozen workers when Tad Bretting took over the operation in 1960. He soon decided to change the firm's emphasis to paper conversion machinery.

Bretting had made its first napkin-folding machine for Marathon Paper Company in 1929 and in 1965, the first napkin-folding machinery was offered to other companies.

Before long, word of the quality of Bretting machinery got out, and the firm began a series of expansions to its Ashland facility and modernizations to its manufacturing infrastructure that has led to its current leadership position.

"Today our primary focus is designing and manufacturing tissue and towel converting equipment which is sold worldwide," said a news release issued by Bretting, announcing their anniversary. "Years of experience, technological advancement, and dedication to industry leading service are built into every Bretting converting line."

The continuous research and development that has been the hallmark at Bretting means that their product line continues to expand with innovative solutions to a demanding and ever-changing market. These innovations include polywrapping equipment, interfolders, and napkin lines. The product line includes towel and tissue interfolders, hygienic rewinders, and specialty products such as equipment to fold wax paper and aluminum foil."

Bretting also includes Contract Manufacturing Services (CMS) — built-to-order manufacturing — which has been a part of the C. G. Bretting operation since the beginning, but was expanded to customers throughout the Midwest in 2001.

All of these elements combine to make Bretting a world class manufacturer, said current Bretting President and Chief Executive Officer David Bretting, who along with Paul Bretting, the firm's chief

operating officer represent the fourth generation of Brettings to operate the firm. Their sons Ricky and Shawn, both mechanical engineers, make up the fifth generation employed at the company.

“We are pretty lucky to have been here for 125 years and to be into our fifth generation,” Bretting said. “Paul and I are very proud that we have made it through the third and fourth generations and are now into the fifth. Ninety percent of third generation businesses fail, and we are into the fifth, which is almost unheard of.”

Bretting said the key to the company’s success isn’t any secret.

“It’s a lot of hard work by a lot of folks,” he said. “The employee base here in the area has just been terrific over my past 30 plus years here. That has made our jobs a lot easier.”

One indicator of that employee loyalty is the recent retirement of a third generation employee who worked at Bretting for 31 years.

“We have probably celebrated five or six folks in the last two years who have been here over 40 years, and some continue to work here,” he said.

Bretting said another crucial factor in the company’s success is the innovative ability of the firm’s engineering team.

“We are constantly trying to get better at what we do, and not be complacent,” he said.

That is something that works both ways.

“We really do try to keep everybody up to date with what is happening from a business and even financial standpoint,” Bretting said. “We invest a lot of dollars back into the business, for machine tools, engineering tools. You have to stay fresh and that is what we try to do every day.”

In spite of their successes, it has not always been an easy ride.

“It’s like my dad said — the smart thing is you prepare for the bad times, and the good times; then you’ll be OK,” he said. “Every business has its ups and downs. It’s never going to stay good forever, but it’s never going to stay bad forever. Pushing through those bad times, keeping everybody working is something we are pretty unique at handling, and so are our employees.”

It is a philosophy that requires a long-term view of business; thus Bretting has not been a firm in search of the quick buck.

“Everything we do is pretty much based on long term,” he said. “How can we be here in five years, how can we be here in 10 years. That is why we continue to invest in the company, even in bad times.”

While Bretting has always had competition, the contest has become increasingly tough.

“It’s all based outside the U.S. Here in small town Ashland, we truly deal in a global world,” he said. “Over 50 percent of our business in any year is done outside North America.”

Despite the competitive pressures, Bretting has worked hard with the schools and WITC to urge their students to prepare for a career with the company.

“We trying to show kids that there are careers here and that manufacturing isn’t that down, dumb and dirty,” he said. “It’s all computerized, and you’ve got to be able to write a good letter, you’ve got to be able to read blueprints, you’ve got to have good math skills. All those things are important.”

Bretting said those efforts paid off with local kids who go into both the manufacturing and engineering ends of the business.

Bretting said the future continues to hold changes for the company.

“We are diversifying a bit, we are getting into some different products, some different customers in different industries,” he said. “ We can machine, assemble and design just about anything.”

Some of those products include products for the oil and gas industry, for the mining industry and for the food industry.

“We are going to continue to build that side of the business,” Bretting said. “Folks are having us machine parts that used to be made in China, because we are competitive, our quality is great and they love our delivery, and they love dealing with our people, which is the really cool part.”

Marking the 125th anniversary, an open house for the community will be held on July 15-16, 2015, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at Bretting Manufacturing at 3401 Lake Park Road, Ashland.