

# SMALL BUSINESS

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Four members of the Eberl family from two generations operate the Buffalo business that their ancestors launched in 1923. They are (from left) Nora Eberl, John Eberl, George Eberl and Frank Eberl.

## Founded in iron

Family owned since 1923,  
the firm is a metal fabricator  
and supplier of framing products

### ■ Eberl Iron Works Inc.

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### ■ SMALL-BUSINESS CASE STUDY

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Six years after Eberl Iron Works Inc. was founded, the family business suffered a crushing blow that threw it into crisis.

George Eberl, one of two co-owners, was killed in a construction accident.

George was the brother of the other founder, Frank Eberl. His death sent shockwaves through his family and the young business which, like the nation in 1929, would soon enter one of the critical junctures in U.S. history, the Great Depression.

"He was supervising two of our ironworkers who were making repairs on a roof when he said, 'I'll show these guys how to do it.' Those were his last words ever," says his nephew, the company's current president, also George Eberl.

"From what I know, family members and the three key loyal employees that the company had pulled together and kept the business going," Eberl said. "My father was the second oldest of eight children. They just circled the wagons and through sheer German determination made it through."

Eventually, three other Eberls - Leo, Anthony and Edward - joined the business.

Together, the four brothers laid the groundwork for a metal fabrication business that today is more diversified in its products and services, and serves markets not only throughout upstate New York but with some product and service lines also covers the Northeast and a large area east of the Mississippi River.

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## IRON: Began as a small welding shop located on Sycamore Street

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**Who's Who:** The family-owned Buffalo company is operated by second and third generation members of the Eberl family: George Eberl, president; Frank Eberl, vice president; Nora Eberl, chief financial officer; and John Eberl, sales manager.

**What's happening:** Formed in 1923, Eberl Iron Works is a metal fabricator and supplier of industrial framing products. Among its products are hot and cold rolled sheets and plates, galvanized sheets and floor plates.

The company has four divisions: Metal Fabrications; Unistrut Buffalo; Traffic Safety Products; and Systems Installation. Each of the first three divisions accounts for about 30 percent of total revenue.

- Metal Fabrication makes products for the construction industry.

"We do a lot of bending and forming of metal that is used for stairs," George Eberl said. "For example, we did the stair pans that the concrete is poured into for M&T Fountain Plaza, Niagara Center on Elmwood and the new federal office building."

- Unistrut Buffalo sells metal framing and Grip Strut-brand safety grating.

- Traffic Safety Products markets traffic control products, street signpost equipment and parking lot safety supplies.

- Systems Installation designs and installs Fall Arrest-brand safety systems and Unistrut medical supports.

**Company history:** Eberl Iron Works, now 83 years old, began as a small welding shop at its present Sycamore Street location. The business fabricated wrought iron railings, exterior fire escapes and miscellaneous iron work.

Over the years, Eberl brothers and cousins have owned the company or held key positions. In addition to the first generation



Eberl Iron Works employee Jeffery Ersing operates a saw to cut Unistrut metal framing for a future job.

brothers and current management, they include cousins Norbert Eberl and Dennis Barry, who retired in the 1990s.

**Customers:** Among the company's biggest customers are the Erie County Highway Department, John W. Danforth Co. and Kaleida Health.

**Revenues:** \$5 million in 2005; \$5.5 million (est.) in 2006. The company has had four consecutive years of 10 percent annual growth or better and absent a recession or other economic slowdown of that type, future growth prospects for the company are good, Eberl said.

**Employees:** 18.

**Biggest challenge:** "In 1989, we put on a major addition and at the same time - for the first time in 10 years - we suffered a downturn in business and margins. It was a struggle to get over the slowdown and at the same time a greater intensity of competitiveness," Eberl said.

From 8,500-square-foot of space, the company grew to 20,000-square-foot. The warehouse converted from being an overhead hoist operation to forklift and rack storage. It went from being labor intensive to more material handling.

"We expanded at a bad time, but as it turned out we were able to meet the chal-



### Timely lessons

■ **Find consultants.** "I don't mean just accountants and attorneys, though they are important, but also technology consultants, marketing consultants, family business consultants and lean manufacturing consultants. The University at Buffalo Center for Industrial Effectiveness has been especially valuable in helping us apply lean manufacturing techniques."

— George Eberl

lenge because we became much more efficient. We couldn't have done it with our old material-handling method," he said.

**Looking ahead:** Because of the company's success in the traffic side of the business, the manufacturer of its sign posts authorized it to service the New England region. The goal is to generate \$1 million in business there within two years.

**Personal business belief:** "You have to treat a family business as a corporation. Many times, families see it as a family business. All employees have to be treated fairly and honestly," Eberl said.

**Proudest moment:** "Encouraging John, who is 29, and Nora, who is 36, to take charge and watching them develop into the next generation owners of this business makes us proud," Eberl said.