

Eberl Iron Works Keeps on Ticking After More Than 80 Years in Business



A recent group shot of the Eberl Iron Works family.

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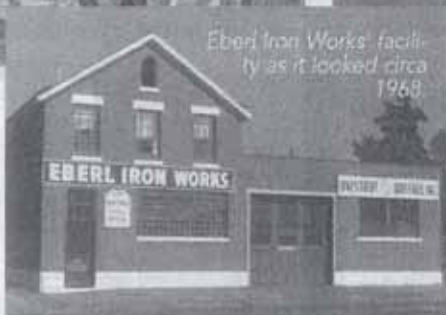
Eberl Iron Works Inc. has been family owned and operated out of the same building at 128 Sycamore Street, Buffalo, N.Y., for more than 80 years. People have come and gone, additions have been put on the building, history has moved the company in numerous directions, but the family roots are planted deep. Simply looking underneath the building during a recent renovation reflected much of what's happened in Eberl's long life span.

"We had some concrete work done a few years ago and there was all kinds of stuff buried under there. You couldn't believe what they found. I remember they turned up a watch that had to have been there for at least 30 years," said John Eberl, sales and marketing director and part of the third generation of Eberls in the business.

If that seems reminiscent of the old Timex commercials that gave testament to how much their products could go through and still work, it is fitting that Eberl, a company that has survived a lot and keeps on going, brings that to mind.

George Eberl founded Eberl Iron Works in 1923 when the local welding shop with which he was employed went out of business. Left with the pressure of being out of work with a young family to support, he reasoned that the closing of the old shop left a void in the town's industry and, inviting his younger brother Frank to join him, opened his own shop for the fabrication of wrought iron railings, exterior fire escapes and miscellaneous iron.

The brothers made a success of the shop until 1929, when things took a sharp downturn with the death of George and the beginning of the Great Depression. George's children were far too young to become a part of the family business, so Frank asked his three younger brothers, Leo, Anthony and Edward to keep the shop running with him.



Eberl Iron Works facility as it looked circa 1968.



Eberl Iron Works today, expanded and modernized, but still holding on to the original red brick building.



Founders Frank (L) and George (R) Eberl with friend Marin Koebel in a photo called "Moving Day" taken in August 1923.

This they did, helping the shop to survive the Depression while so many other businesses failed, through what Frank's son George, current co-owner of Eberl Iron calls, "German determination and grit. They just decided they would survive. This is a family-based business and at the time, it was a very tight-knit family of eight siblings. When George died, the remaining seven brothers and sisters, along with three loyal employees rallied and kept things going."

By the time World War II broke out, Eberl had evolved into a fabrication shop, and much of its business involved aiding the war effort. According to John, several more blows were struck along the way, because Leo, Anthony and Edward all died during the 1950s and early 1960s, leaving behind children too young to help with the business. After the three deaths, Frank relied on George's son Norbert.

A Change for the Better

In 1946 things began looking up when Unistrut, a metal framing

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A photo of long-time Eberl employee George Hartman taken in the late 1970s.



Frank (L) and George Eberl in 1998, celebrating the company's 75th anniversary.



Employees hard at work in Eberl's shop in a photo taken in 1924.

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company that had started up the year after Eberl Iron was founded, approached Frank to do fabrication with them. After a short time working together, Unistrut asked Eberl to be its distributor in New York state and later, New England.

Showing the same entrepreneurial sprit that George had when he started the company, Frank and Leo decided to enter a partnership with Unistrut and Unistrut Buffalo was born and remains a division of Eberl, selling non-residential building products throughout upstate New York.

The 1950s saw Eberl go from strength to strength. In 1954 Grip Strut followed the same pattern that Unistrut had, asking Eberl to be fabricators and then distributors for them. Frank's nephew Dennis Barry came on board in 1955.

Walt Disney designed the official mascot for Unistrut, Mr. Strut, in 1957, giving Unistrut an easily recognized and likeable face, which in turn boosted Eberl's Unistrut Buffalo division. By 1959 sales had expanded to the Rochester region and Eberl was ready for another new decade to begin.

Sales expanded again, this time into Syracuse and Albany in the mid-1960s, giving Eberl greater strength. And a big milestone came for Frank when his two sons, George and Frank, entered the business in 1967.

"Dad married late and had children late," George explained. "When Frank and I came into the business, it was being run by our father and our two cousins, Norbert and Dennis, who were 15 to 20 years older than we were. Frank started full-time and I started part-time and now we've been in the family business for 40 years each. One cousin is deceased and the other is happily retired."

Growing New Divisions

Today, Eberl Iron Works has four divisions all of which, according to John, have all been built on the company's core value of delivering quality and service to its customers, which was at the heart of George and Frank's original welding shop, now evolved into the metal fabrication division.

In addition to the metal fabrication and Unistrut Buffalo divisions, Eberl also runs a traffic safety division. Long before this division was launched, it got a start in 1966, when Eberl began sell-

ing Telespar products, starting with signpost material. Telespar sign posts are currently used all over New York state. But it wasn't until 2003 that the division was officially launched, carrying Telespar products as well as many other offerings.

John said the most recent addition to the traffic safety division came "about a year ago. We started offering work zone and temporary work zone garments, class 1, 2, and 3. We have jackets, pants, vests and all that sort of thing. The customers were asking for garments, so we answered them."

The systems installation division works with everything from safety equipment to medical supports, from decorative building accents to plant-required items. Fall arrest systems, ceiling grid systems and rooftop walkways are just a few of the things that the division can handle.

Impressive, particularly for a company of just 22 people, "and we're looking for a 23rd," said John. "A lot of the people have been with us for a long time. Three of our guys, George Hartman, Steven Paveljack and Tom Huber have been with us for over 25 years. We have some very loyal employees."

George added, "In the last 20 years, five employees retired with an average work experience of 40 years [with us]. Currently, we have 11 employees with an average of 23 years. When we hire, we hire carefully. We want employees to fit into our team. We impress on new hires our Core Values

Statement right from the start.

"The Eberl Iron Works' Core Values: integrity, teamwork, safety, respect, communication, quality service and innovation are the guideposts for our company since its inception. Core Values are ageless and define who we are, what we believe in, where we are going, and how we will get there. Driving on a road without guideposts does cause accidents. Operating a business without values does cause disharmony and uncertainty.

"Our new employees begin on the very first day sitting through safety presentations while they begin to learn about our other core values. They are encouraged to make suggestions: 'there is always a better way.' They are teamed with an experienced employee for the first six months to a year to learn the 'Eberl' way. Quality service is impressed by an old Eberl axiom: 'A mistake doesn't occur until it goes out the door.'"



Eberl employees back when disco was king. George Hartman (standing, second from left), Tom Huber (standing, far right) and Steve Paveljack (kneeling, center) are all still with the company.

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Lean Manufacturing

Just as most companies do, Eberl receives help from outside sources from time to time to work out problems. One example is its recently completed Lean Manufacturing training. Eberl entered this by partnering with University at Buffalo's Center for Industrial Effectiveness. The company submitted an application and was granted an NYS Department of Labor 37L Training Grant.

Eberl had gone through a lot of growth, both in the size of the company and in the size of the customer base in the early part of the decade. It was bursting at the seams of its facility and experiencing quite a backlog in its orders. Lean Manufacturing, which focuses on the elimination of waste in every area of production, seemed like a perfect option for getting Eberl on track. The Lean grant began on July 1, 2006.



The 1940s brought World War II and gave Eberl Iron plenty of work to do in aid of the war effort. Employees at Eberl in 1943.

The Lean grant came to an end in July 2007 and everyone is pleased with what has taken place. People from the company call it a "life-changing experience for everyone involved. Our shop is cleaner, more efficient and handles more volume with less of a backlog. We can't say enough about how much of a difference Lean has made to our organization."

Setting Standards in Safety

With results like that, Eberl has reason to be proud. But what the company is most proud of, said John, is "Our safety committee. We've had it for 10 years and we're very proud of our safety record. The committee consists of six people, four permanent and two rotating, which is not easy to do when you only have 22 people total. They are

responsible for training procedures and updates and inspections."

Safety meetings are held on a regular basis. The committee reviews any accidents and near misses and decides what action to take to correct the situation. There also is a safety log, which is used to record the number of incident-free days. Employees receive lunch on the company's dime every time an entire quarter is recorded without injuries or lost time.

"Since its inception, a more focused effort by all employees has contributed to a safer work environment. In addition, this committee maintains and implements the OSHA required inspection and training programs," said George Eberl.

In the Future

After his 40 years with Eberl, George said, "With renewed energy, you never know where the next generation will take us. The next generation brings new ideas, thoughts and determination."

"My brother and I are mentoring John [George's son] and Nora [Frank's daughter] and the next generation. It's interesting and we've been pleasantly surprised at where they've taken us. I don't have any plans at the moment, but you never know what might be going on in John's head," he finished with a laugh.

When asked about what's going on in his head for the future, John keeps it simple. "We want to keep developing business, increase our customers, products and services. We've had a lot of success in the past four years gaining new customers and retaining old ones. We want continued growth in all facets of the company."

As for picking up stakes and moving to a new facility, John just replied, "No. No new branches, no new facility."

And why should they abandon the old place? After all, there's been a lot going on in that red brick building at 128 Sycamore Street, Buffalo, N.Y. P

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