

A lock on the American market

Wilson Bohannan Padlock Company of Marion, Ohio, founded in 1860, still produces all its components on-site.

BY SALLY M. SNELL

THE STORY OF Wilson Bohannan Padlock Company, whose slogan is “Locks Since Lincoln,” parallels the westward expansion of the U.S.

The company began in Brooklyn in 1860 prior to the first transcontinental railway. Locks for the railroad industry were the company’s mainstay. Founder Wilson Bohannan held 20 lock-related patents.

Today the 65-employee company is owned by the fifth and sixth generations—the founder’s great-great-granddaughter Pam Smith and her daughters, Patricia and Sarah. Pam’s husband, Howard, has worked at Wilson Bohannan since 1973 and has been its president since 1995.

“When my grandfather died, my father worked here,” says Pam. “When my father worked here, my grandfather’s son [Pam’s uncle William Tway] worked here. We would like to keep it in the family.”

In an era when the majority of traditional American industries have moved their operations offshore, Wilson Bohannan not only has kept its products American-made, but also has continued to improve the locks and remain competitive.

In 1927, the third-generation owner—Pam’s grandfather Wilson Bohannan Tway—relocated the business to Marion, Ohio. The small town was close to the raw materials needed to make the company’s products. It also was near a railroad hub, which made distribution convenient.

When the railroad business began to lose steam, Wilson Bohannan began to segue into heavy industries, such as utilities, shipping and refineries. By continually reinvesting in infrastructure and moving toward

automation, Wilson Bohannan is able to produce essentially all the parts of its locks on-site. “We rise and fall on our own abilities,” says Howard.

The company has moved away from cast materials and now uses extruded brass and stainless steel. Using CAD programs and proprietary machinery, the staff designs and modifies all components and finished products on the fly. Final specs are downloaded to a robotic machine.



Wilson Bohannan president Howard Smith and his wife, Pam (seated), with daughters Sarah (left) and Patricia. Patricia’s husband, Davin Koziak, holds their son, Stewart.

“Our niches are basically our ability as a small company to maneuver, and fill anyone’s needs,” says Howard Smith. “We pride ourselves on being 100% American-made. And we’re high quality.”

Wilson Bohannan sells through distributors, as well as directly through trade shows and Internet orders.

Pam worked in education for 40 years, first in early-childhood education and later as a high school guidance counselor. Her youngest daughter, who does not work for the

company, is following in her footsteps. “I have a passion for working with children, but the company is also a passion,” says Sarah, 23. “It’s a big part of who we are.” The shareholding family members stay apprised of changes, Sarah says, “because our future is the company.”

“The company’s always been my No. 1 priority,” says 27-year-old Patricia. She does data entry for the company in the evenings after the second shift ends. Patricia’s husband, Davin Koziak, began working for the company immediately after the couple married.

“You always have to plan for succession,” says Howard. “I try to recession-proof our business. We’re very conservative. We have no debt.”

Most of the senior managers have worked their way up through the ranks, so anyone wondering where the next two generations of senior management will come need look only as far as the production line.

Howard credits Wilson Bohannan’s longevity in part to the fact that the company’s stockholders are limited to his wife, Pam, and their two daughters. “Most companies have many layers of family: uncles, aunts and cousins,” he says.

Even Howard, the president, is not a shareholder. “I’m just the manager here,” he says. “They’re the owners of the company.”

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