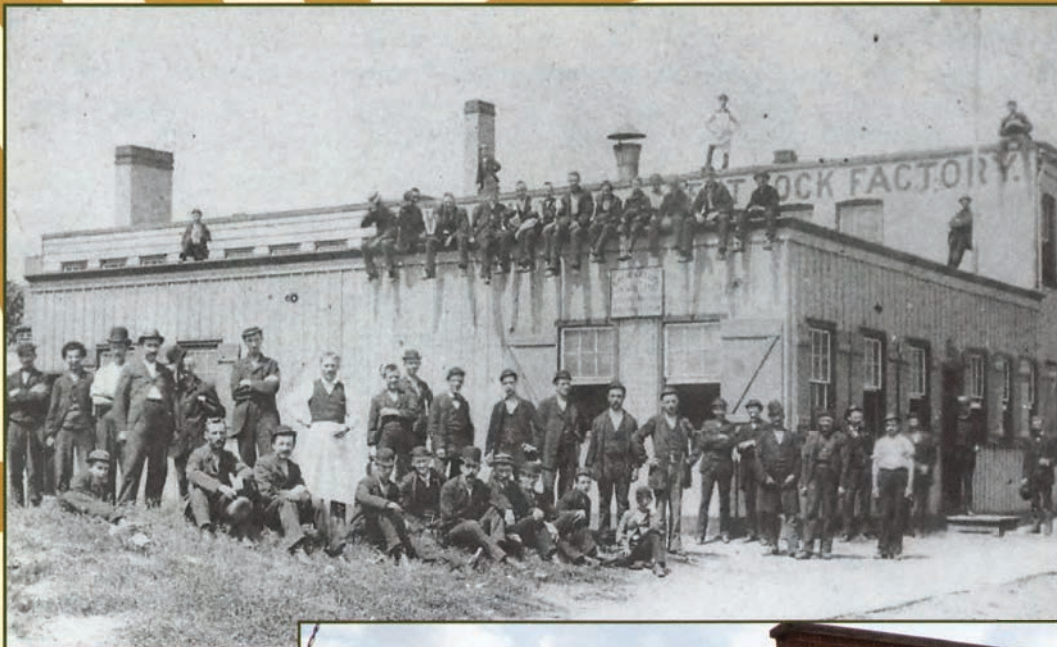


Harvest Magazine

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The Wealth of Work Meet The Wilson Bohannon Company



Circa 1860's...

...Today



The Wealth of Work

*Editor's note: Very few family owned businesses pass to the second or third generation. The reasons are many: lack of interest by the next generation; need or opportunity to sell; punitive tax policy; etc. In this issue of Harvest Magazine it is our privilege to introduce you to The Wilson Bohannan Company, a **seventh generation** family business owned by dear friends and clients, Howie and Pam Smith. Enjoy learning about a remarkable family and a remarkable business whose incredible longevity reflects a legacy of commitment to employees, customers, family and the values that family holds dear.*

The Wilson Bohannan Company...150 YEARS...Seven Generations...One Family...

The story of the Marion, Ohio based Wilson Bohannan Company (WB) parallels the expansion of the United States itself. Established in Brooklyn, NY in 1860 by Wilson Bohannan, the company made padlocks for the rapidly expanding railroad industry. At the time, Bohannan held 20 lock related patents. By 1927, third-generation owner, Wilson Bohannan Tway had relocated the business to Marion, Ohio - Marion was the home of American Malleable Casting Company and WB used that company to make its locks. Marion also was a major railroad center used to ship WB's locks to their customers.



The original Wilson Bohannan Company building.

As the railroad industry consolidated at the turn of the century, the company wisely segued into utilities and other heavy industries. In 1968 it began outsourcing its manufacturing capabilities, as did many companies during that time. Ultimately, outsourcing resulted in shrinking margins and declining product quality so the decision was made to bring manufacturing back in-house in the late 1980's.

With that key decision, and the strategic decision to continue to invest in automation and technology, the Wilson Bohannan Company now produces all of its

own parts. In an era when the majority of traditional American industries have moved their operations offshore, Wilson Bohannan not only has kept its product American-made, but continues to improve the locks it manufactures. Today the 62 employee company sells its sophisticated array of brass padlocks via distributors, trade shows and the internet to an ever growing group of customers at a rate of over 5000 per day. Known for their slogan, *Locks since Lincoln*, the Wilson Bohannan Company is a quintessential American success story.



The Wilson Bohannan Company building and employees today.

Much of the credit for the company's success over the last three decades goes to company president Howie Smith (married to sixth generation owner Pam Smith – granddaughter of Wilson Bohannan Tway). A graduate of Hillsdale College (where he met Pam), Howie started with the business in 1973 and has served as president since the mid 1990's. It was his vision to build a product that would compete globally but remain American-made. He explains proudly, "We rise and fall on our own abilities. Our competitive advantage as a small company competing with the Goliaths of our industry is our ability to maneuver quickly and

Continued...

teach the rest of us – it's a great place to learn about how to run a successful business."

Aaron Russell, a WB sales associate, who will be married soon to Howie and Pam's daughter Sarah, echoed that comment. "It starts with communication. Howie and the rest of the management team constantly ask the rest of us what it will take to improve the business and the quality of our product as well as the quality of our associates' job duties. People can tell they truly care and want to know so they are willing to share their ideas. I'm always in a learning mode here at the company – there's not much these guys haven't encountered over the years."

Flexibility also is part of this learning environment. "We don't draw hard lines around job duties," said Mark Williams. "We're all encouraged to get involved in every aspect of the business and it's that way that we get some of our best ideas." Aaron added, "We even get our customers involved in solving business problems – after all, the customer is why we're here."

Of course, not everything goes smoothly all of the time. With the cost of brass having risen rapidly in recent years, the company has worked hard to reduce other production costs in order to maintain profit margins. Having no debt has given the business financial flexibility and helped immensely in meeting this challenge.

One can begin to see the recipe for building a seven generation company: Treating employees like family; investing back into the business; listening to one another; thinking ahead; building a teaching and learning environment; remaining flexible. These are the values that build sustained excellence and these are the values that have built a company that has remained in one family since Lincoln's presidency. They're also the values that can give this company an opportunity to remain competitive and stay in the family for another 150 years. Wow!

But there's been one more value that this family exudes and that's giving back to their community – it's a value that's been a part of the family's legacy for generations. "Marion has been our business' home and our family's home for many years now, said Howie. "Giving back is vital to who we are." A listing of Howie's civic commitments alone could fill a page. He has been or currently is a board member or president of numerous organizations and causes including Marion's Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, Red Cross, YMCA,

Rotary, Manufacturers Council, CAN DO (development arm of the city and county) and the Warren G. Harding Symposium. Active supporters of education, Howie and Pam have been active with Hillsdale College and with the Leelanau School in Michigan where Howie serves as Finance Director.

Patricia and Davin and Sarah and Aaron represent the 7th generation of family ownership and Davin and Patricia's son, Stewart, hopefully will be the 8th generation family member to become part of the business. But it's clear that it's not just family members who love being part of the business. "Everyone involved at WB is here for much more than just a paycheck," says Davin. "It's the human element that counts and yes it's also how we make the machines run, get the product out, keep the finances in line – but never at the expense of keeping our employees feeling safe and secure.

Howie concluded, "There's a heart and soul to this company. We've brought together very special people whose ideas, innovation and caring serve our customers and build our business. If you treat people with respect and dignity, then you'll prosper. Never compromise on your beliefs, your integrity and how you treat your people and your customers."

Well said Howie, well said. In this, the 150th year of the Wilson Bohannon Company, we join their employees, customers, suppliers and many friends and well wishers in congratulating them and wishing them 150 more years of prosperity and success!



The Smith family: (first row) Pam and Howie Smith and grandson Stewart. (top row l. to r.) Aaron Russell, Sarah Smith, Patricia and Davin Kozlik.