

# BUILT to Last

AISC full member steel fabricators that have reached the century mark share some of their secrets to success.

BY GEOFF WEISENBERGER



▲ Michelmann Steel Construction's shop. The company was started in 1865 by current president Laura Gerdes Ehrhart's great-great-grandfather.



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**ONE HUNDRED YEARS** is a long time.

Well, actually, it depends on your perspective. In the grand scheme of existence, it's merely a blip.

But for an American company—especially one that rides the ups and downs of the construction industry—staying in business that long is quite the achievement.

In fact, of AISC's 926 current member fabricators, only 20—two percent—have been in business for a century or longer.

## Evolution

So how did they do it? Adaptability and diversification are the names of the game, note representatives from a handful of these 100-plus-year-old shops.

"Our corporate structure doesn't just represent a steel fabricator that works in several different markets, but also includes steel service centers, a powder coat facility and a manufactured products division," says Tyler Owen, executive vice president of Paxton and Vierling Steel Company, which was established in 1885. "We're also committed to exploration of new markets for growth potential. For example, when the local commercial fabrication markets ran dry, we explored industrial markets with success—and in turn when the nuclear market presented itself, we pursued projects of that nature, and so on."

Thomas Latona, president and CEO of Buffalo Structural Steel Construction Corporation, credits similar characteristics for his company's

success. “The secret to our longevity has been to continually monitor the marketplace and adjust to the customer’s needs, while at the same time providing clients with quality products at competitive prices,” he says.

“Our ability to adapt to the needs of our customers has allowed us to be one step ahead of our competition and grow as a leader in the metals industry,” concurs Andy Galinsky, CEO of Sioux City Foundry. “By diversifying our company, we are able to make our customers’ products better.”

But a little luck also doesn’t hurt, notes Laura Gerdes Ehrhart, president of Michelmann Steel Construction Company.

“A lot of hard work, a little luck, five generations of a caring and committed family and some wonderful, talented managers and employees,” she offers. “Plus, some loyal and long-term customers and some great vendors. We also live in a small, supportive community.”

And sometimes, it’s about belt-tightening.

“The business always comes first,” notes Philip Stupp, executive vice president of Stupp Brothers. “While we are a family business and recognize the importance of taking care of all shareholders, retaining profits and building capital reserves for future growth or surviving downturns are more important than distributing profits.”

### Hard Times

Of course, it’s not always easy. Part of staying in business for so long means dealing with the general ebb and flow of the building industry, as well as challenging economic cycles.

For example, Owen explains that just before the bank holiday during the early years of the Great Depression, Fred Owen, the facility manager for Paxton and Vierling at the time, withdrew enough cash to cover payroll during the bank closure.

“Putting employees first has always been a cultural strength of the organization,” he says.

Going back even further, Stupp notes that the Panic of 1873 caused severe hardship to the first and second generations of Stupps. “We were in a growth mode and had an outstanding loan with an unscrupulous lender that took advantage of our founder’s lack of business acumen,” he notes. “When the loan was called, the business was lost and we had to start over. Never again would we be in such a position.”

And there’s no doubt that more recent downturns have also challenged the fabrication business, specifically the Great Recession of 2008. But firms with a long history of weathering storms are in a better position to handle tumultuous times.

“We got through it by changing the way we operate to adapt to the times,” explains Ehrhart. “We didn’t let anybody go, but we didn’t replace anybody who left either. And we worked hard on our customer relationships, which allowed us to do more contract work and less bid work. We learned to do more with less and to make the most of what we had.”

### Making a Mark

The concept of steel fabrication as a local business really gelled back in late 19th and early 20th centuries. Of course now, the geographic ranges are farther, but many of the oldest member fabricators started off almost exclusively with projects in their hometowns. Early projects, marquee and otherwise, have allowed these companies to make a name for themselves—and being associated with other well-recognized names doesn’t hurt.

“We were bigger than Anheuser-Busch at one point and did most of their work in the last quarter of the 19th centu-

ry,” notes Stupp. “Of course, the gates for Lafayette Square Park in St. Louis were our big break in the earlier 1870s, and they still stand today. And we won second place for our exhibit at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis. In addition, we developed a relationship with International Paper in the 1920s and designed and fabricated over 100,000 tons for their Southern Craft division over the next 60 years.”

For Buffalo Structural Steel, most of its largest early projects are in, you guessed it, Buffalo: the Statler Hotel, the Lafayette Hotel, the Touraine Hotel, the Larkin Soap Company, the Buffalo Pottery Co., the Buffalo Leather Co., the United States Government Building at the Pan-American Exposition, the Pratt and Letchworth Co., the Buffalo Smelting Works, the International Railway Company in Buffalo, the Historical Society Building, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery and the Prudential Building, to name a few. Over the first few decades of the 20th century, Buffalo Structural Steel broadened its geographic scope as well as its project types, even building landing barges for the Navy during World War II. And in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the expansion of the New York State Thruway presented a new opportunity for the organization, which fabricated and erected over 70% of all the bridges carrying the Thruway from New York City to the Pennsylvania border, as well as many of the secondary bridges crossing over the Thruway system.

In Paxton and Vierling’s case, it was the little things. “Many of the oldest structures in the city still bear some evidence of our involvement, be it through step plates or manhole covers,” says Owen. “As a foundry, we made light poles that, to this day, line many of the older Omaha neighborhoods. Perhaps our most interesting project in the early days was the development and fabrication of the world’s first ski lift, which was installed in Sun Valley, Idaho, in the 1930s. The Union Pacific Railroad owned Sun Valley and needed a way to move skiers up the mountain.”

### Origins

Like comic book superheroes, each fabricator has its own origin story.

“Our company was founded by my great-great-grandfather, J.H. Michelmann, in 1865,” says Ehrhart. “A Prussian immigrant, he worked as a boilermaker under another man in Evansville, Ind. When his boss moved his business to Quincy, Ill., J.H. came with him. In time, he bought a small boiler and tank shop from his boss and started his own company, the Michelmann Boiler Company, and his son Henry L. Michelmann went into business with him.” Around 1900, the company changed its emphasis to fabricated structural steel, incorporated and moved to its current location, and the modern-day Michelmann Steel Construction Company was born.



▲ Michelmann ironworkers on the job.

A recent fire in Quincy helped unearth relics from the company's past. The fire claimed a building that had originally housed the Newcomb Hotel. "From the wreckage, we were able to claim pieces of the two original Michelmann boilers that had been in the basement," Ehrhart explains. "The talented welders and shop workers in our plant were able to assemble one complete set of boiler doors from the pieces, which we now proudly display in our sales office."

West of Quincy, all the way across Iowa, Paxton and Vierling Iron Works was established in 1885 through a partnership with Vierling Iron Works (Chicago) and local businessman William Paxton. It started as a foundry that specialized in storefronts and miscellaneous items, then branched out to fabrication shortly thereafter. "Its original office wasn't on the wrong side of the tracks, but rather between the tracks—literally," says Tyler Owen. "The shop was located between active Union Pacific rail lines, eventually moving to Carter Lake, Iowa, just outside of Omaha. Fred Owen, patriarch of the current line of ownership, got his start as a draftsman in the Chicago office of Vierling Iron Works and began his career at Paxton and Vierling by running payroll on the train from Chicago to Omaha in the early 1920s. The guns he carried to protect himself on the train are on display at our offices."

Buffalo Structural Steel Construction Corporation was founded in 1894 by another German immigrant, Casper Teiper, who came to the U.S. at the age of six in 1852. According to Latorna, Teiper's connection with steel bridge building and similar operations dated from the infancy of the use of steel for structural purposes. From constant study and practical experience, he gained knowledge in engineering, railroad and bridge construction, iron and steel manufacturing and metallurgy.

In 1891, Teiper moved to Buffalo and with his partner, Carl Meyer, he started the Buffalo Bridge and Iron Works, whose plant was situated on Perry Street. Shortly afterwards, the partners sold the business, and in 1892 Teiper purchased land at Bailey and Seneca Streets. In 1894, he sold the enterprise to John Wilson and that same year purchased the property at the corner of Dart and Letchworth Streets in the Black Rock District of Buffalo, erecting the Plant of Buffalo Structural Steel Works. The business grew rapidly and steadily. In 1899, it was organized into a stock company as the Buffalo Structural Steel Company, with Teiper as president, a position he held until his death in 1906.

Back to Iowa, Sioux City Foundry and Machine Works was established in Sioux City, Iowa, to produce engines, gristmills,

▼ The early days at Michelmann, when boilers and tanks were the company's bread and butter.



▼ Said the *Sioux City Journal* of Sioux City Foundry's opening: "Sioux City is now in the possession of an institution... of which the people of this section may well be proud."



### Work Rules

How times have changed. Early in the 20th century, employees of Michelmann Steel Construction Company in Quincy, Ill., had to abide by a posted list of "Work Rules" created and ostensibly enforced by the company's founder, J.H. Michelmann. Here are some of them:

1. Office employees will sweep the floor and dust the furniture, shelves and show cases daily.
2. Each day, fill the lamps, clean the chimneys and trim the wicks. Wash the windows once a week.
3. Each clerk will bring a bucket of water and a scuttle of coal for the day's business.
4. Make your pens carefully. You may whittle your nibs to your individual taste.
5. Male employees will be given an evening off each week for courting purposes—or two evenings if they go regularly to church.
6. After an employee has spent 13 hours of labor in the

office, he should spend time reading the Bible and other books.

7. Every employee should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of his earnings for his benefit during his declining years, so that he will not become a burden upon the charity of his betters.
8. Any employee who smokes cigars, uses liquor in any form, gets shaved at a barber shop or frequents pool and public halls will give me good reason to suspect his worth, intentions, integrity and honesty.
9. The employee who has performed his labors faithfully and without fail for a period of five years in my service—and who has been thrifty and attentive to his religious duties and is looked upon by his fellow men as a substantial and law-abiding citizen—will be given an increase of five cents per day in his pay, provided that a just return in profits from the business permits it.



## Century Club

These AISC member fabricators have been in business for 100 or more years. As other member fabricators reach the 100-year mark, AISC will recognize their achievement. And if you happen to know of another 100-year-old fabricator, let us know by emailing Carly Hurd at [hurd@aisc.org](mailto:hurd@aisc.org).

A Lucas and Sons, Peoria, Ill.

Art Iron, Inc., Toledo, Ohio

Buffalo Structural Steel Construction Corp., Amherst, N.Y.

Central Texas Iron Works, Waco, Texas

Geiger and Peters, Inc., Indianapolis, Ind.

Huntington Steel and Supply, Huntington, W.V.

LB Foster Fabricated Bridge Products, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Michelmann Steel Construction Co., Quincy, Ill.

Paxton and Vierling Steel Co., Carter Lake, Iowa

Ralph H. Simpson Co., Elmhurst, Ill.

Reno Iron Works, Reno, Nev.

Romak Iron Works, Benicia, Calif.

Salem Steel, Winston-Salem, N.C.

Sioux City Foundry Co., Sioux City, Iowa

Standard Iron Works, Scranton, Pa.

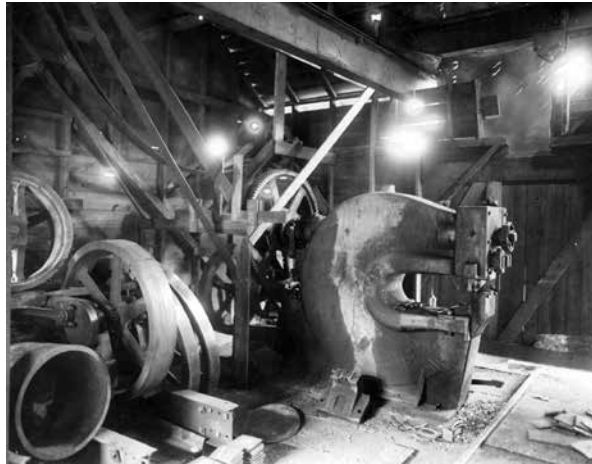
Stupp Bros., Inc., St. Louis, Mo.

The Berlin Steel Construction Co., Kensington, Conn.

Woerner Wire Works, Omaha, Neb.

Wyatt Resources, Inc., Fulshear, Texas

Zalk Josephs Fabricators, LLC, Stoughton, Wis.



- ▲ Old machinery at Sioux City Foundry, which opened in 1871.
- ◀ The Illinois State Bank building in Quincy, Ill., in 1915.
- ▶ Working the Wheelabrator at Sioux City Foundry.

sawmills and building columns, as well as to provide general repair work of machinery and iron. The November 26, 1871 issue of the *Sioux City Journal* commemorated the company's opening, saying, "Sioux City is now in the possession of an institution, the want of which has been long felt in northwestern Iowa—an institution of which the people of this section may well be proud." Now that the town had secured a foundry and machine shop, it "no longer will be obliged to [travel] 200 or 300 miles for iron work and machinery." In 1890, the company moved to its present location, producing boiler parts as well as one of the earliest steam-driven tractors.

Huntington Steel in Huntington, W.V., is another fabricator that has stayed in the family. "The year was 1904, and my great-grandfather, Jim Diddle, and my uncle, Pete Diddle, started Huntington Boiler Works after being employed by the C&O Railroad Company," says R. Sterling Hall, former head of Huntington and father-in-law of current president and CEO, Michael Emerson. The company began its operation in a riverbank facility, and its business was boiler repair and manufacturing small 20-hp boilers that were mainly used in the dry-cleaning business. It evolved to provide more fabrication of plate, miscellaneous steel and structural shapes, and the name was

changed to Huntington Boiler and Supply Company.

"By the time I entered in the business in 1955, boiler work was much a thing of the past, and we had moved in the direction of steel supply and miscellaneous fabrication," Hall notes. "The goal for the company was moving more into steel processing and structural steel fabrication. At this time, the name was changed to its current name, Huntington Steel and Supply Company. Since then, we have expanded in Huntington multiple times and now operate several sites in West Virginia and one in Kentucky."

The patterns of German origin and family involvement for an entire company history are also embodied by Stupp Brothers. "Johann Stupp was a blacksmith in Cologne, Germany," explains Philip Stupp. "The guild system was in place, and as a journeyman then an apprentice, he traveled to Moscow and then to Vienna. Some of his peers had immigrated to St. Louis and repeatedly tried to get him to join them. He finally said yes and was in business for himself a very short time after getting settled in St. Louis."

Business acumen, adaptability and luck—or a combination thereof—have kept each of the Century Club members afloat for 100 years, and they are poised for the next 100. ■