

LARSON FORGINGS

Now celebrating its 113th year in business, this fourth-generation, privately-held company is the culmination of a Swedish immigrant's American dream.

By Russ Willcutt

In the late 1800s a blacksmith left Sweden and traveled to America, settling in Chicago, where he planned to build a new life. He set up shop downtown, beside the Chicago River, and immediately picked up work making horseshoes and forging gears and replacement parts for ships plying the Great Lakes. His family's size kept pace with the growth of his business—he had 11 children, five of them boys—and he decided to launch his company as Charles E. Larson & Sons, Inc., in 1895, which is now known familiarly as Larson Forgings.

"Every one of those sons joined the company, and it remains a privately-held, family-owned business to this day," according to Glenn Larson, who is vice president. "My brother Don is president of the company, and we're members of the fourth generation of Larsons who are carrying on Charles' legacy."

In the 1930s the company relocated from its riverside site to another one bordering a rail line, which delivered the forge's stock and also an industrial hammer that records show cost a whopping \$1,500—which was a pretty penny, at the time. The company continued its growth trajectory over the years, and Don Larson joined it straight out of college, after earning his degree in engineering. Glenn Larson chose a different path, majoring in business and political science at DePauw University, and then working for nine years in retail management. Then, in 1979, he decided that it was time for him to join the family business as well.

"This was when retail stores were just starting to stay open seven days a week, which meant additional hours for me, and the company had just purchased a second building beside its main structure, so when they told me they needed help I felt that it would be a good idea for me to fill that position myself," he says. "Besides, the work I'd been doing was the perfect training ground for what I'm doing now, which involves managing our sales activities and handling about half of our purchasing, along with my cousin Keith."

Business was good, so the company bought a 1,000-ton press which was installed in the newly acquired building—there are now

three, for a total of 250,000 square feet of office and manufacturing space—and began to define its market presence. This was during the oil-field boom of the early eighties, which brought in a great deal of work, and Larson Forgings also began making its mark in the aerospace industry, to the extent that it now represents the company's primary focus. "We also do a lot of valve work, whether that be for the oil/gas or petrochemical industries," Larsons says, "and we also forge parts for the nuclear energy and power generation industries."

This variety provides one of his favorite aspects of his job. "As a purchasing agent I get to visit the mills where our materials are made," Larson explains, "and then in my sales role I get to sell it to our customers and then visit their plants to learn about how their products are manufactured. It's fascinating to get this 'inside view' of how things are made, and it really keeps me excited about what I do."

In recent years these site visits have required traveling longer distances, since the company now ships its products and materials all around the world. "We're now doing business with companies in China, Europe, Asia, Singapore, Australia... it's amazing how many countries we serve these days," Larson says. "And that's definitely something we'll continue to pursue."

As for the company's capabilities, it works with a wide variety of materials, the larger portion being high-temperature and nickel-based grades, as well as stainless, carbon, and alloy. "We do shapes, bars, blocks, and discs for all the markets we serve, but we mainly do rolled rings," he says. "We were a partner with U.S. Steel after World War II in developing 'stainless W,' which was the precursor for all the precipitation hardened stainless steels, and we also work with aluminum, titanium—you name it, we forge it."

Larson Forgings has all the necessary certifications in place, including ISO 9001:2000 and AS 9100, as well as NADCAP certification for its heat-treating activities. Despite the wide range of its capabilities and customer base—and the fact that it now employs some 85 people—the company still sees itself as a hands-on, can-do operation where everyone pitches in wherever they're needed. "This really is a family, and in many senses of the word," Larson says. "We have fathers and sons who are working here together, and if a light bulb needs changing, you change the light bulb. We still think of ourselves as a small company, so you do what needs to be done, whatever your job title may be. And that's certainly the case for all of the Larsons who are working here, because when your name's on the door, you take a special interest in what's happening inside."

This is especially true when it comes to customer service, on which Larson Forgings places a premium. "This is one of the few places I know of where a customer might end up talking to the president of the company when they call," Larson laughs, "because when the phone rings, you answer it, no matter who you are. And I think that's one of the many things that makes this company special." ■

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