

China Steel embraces new technology

BY NADINE ROBINSON

SAULT STE. MARIE

A proud family tradition of blacksmiths and metalworkers dating back to 1814 in Friuli, Italy led to China Steel's inception in Sault Ste. Marie. The business carries the family name of its founders, China, which is pronounced 'keena.'

Fred China and his father Luigi started the business part-time in the late 1950s, and by 1963 it was a full-time operation. Fred's younger brother, Carlo, a Dalhousie University law school graduate, joined the family business full-time in 1974 after having been called to the Ontario bar.

Once known internationally as a chrome plating shop that manufactured truck bumpers, the business evolved over the years from miscellaneous steel works to fabrication and machining. The scope of projects range from custom one-piece orders for spacers and bolts to bigger orders for large locomotive underbodies.

Proud of being the first company in Canada with a Mazatrol CNC installation back in 1981, Carlo China, vice-president of China Steel said, "It was time to evolve from numerical control to computer numerical control (CNC) machinery. We believe in technology strongly...If you don't, you may as well close your doors."

China Steel continues to keep pace with technological advancements in turning and milling. It acquires new machinery routinely, including a machining centre in 2006 that reduces costs, improves product accuracy and compresses lead times for customers. The 60,000 square feet of shop floor also boasts a robotic welding machine.

The newest addition to its lineup is a 2007 Horizontal Boring Mill, used for chocks and specialized equipment like Slag Skimmer bodies. In total, China Steel now has nine pieces of CNC equipment and calls itself a "complete CNC shop that does turn-

ing, vertical milling, and horizontal boring."

However, it continues to utilize conventional lathes and other machinery for maintenance and general equipment repair.

"We upgraded to better service our customers and to remain competitive," said Carlo, but he mentions that not everyone in the community has always approved of the upgrading and automation.

"Sometimes we were asked if we wanted to see other shops close."

Technology is important in its business, but Carlo stresses the importance of China Steel's 45 employees to its success.

"We have a core of dedicated, loyal and talented long-term employees, including our first employees, Frank Battocchio and Sergio Marson."

China Steel's customer list includes Algoma Steel, Danieli-Corus, Dofasco, General Dynamics, CVRD Inco, St. Marys Paper and Tenaris. It focuses on business in Northern Ontario, but has customers in China, Indonesia, Czechoslovakia, and across the Americas.

"These days, you have to be global and open to changing environments," said China Steel President Fred China.

Referring to the Essar purchase of Algoma Steel, he said "We welcome the changes for the further opportunities it may create for our business."

Part of running a global business is the need to also keep pace with industry certifications. China Steel boasts American Petroleum Institute (API), Canadian Welding Bureau (CWB) and a veritable alphabet soup of industry certification acronyms including being ISO 9001: 2000 Registered.

The product lines cover a diverse range of custom manufactured industrial and commercial equipment, products and services in steel and other alloys.

"We do quality work and demand a fair price in return. We refuse to sacrifice quality for a cheaper product," said Fred.

It is a wide product mix, with fabricated plate products (storage tanks, silos, stacks, ductwork); structural steel, stairs, railings, and ornamental products; custom machining; custom bending; pipe-cutting, and more. It has a number of verticals that are targeted as well, including mining, oil, steel and construction.

Currently in the shops and on the lot are oil tanks headed for the oil fields in Mount Pleasant, Mich., ladle covers bound for Algoma Steel, rolls for the Tenaris plate mill, and some of the 72 parts they make for the Stryker army vehicle.

Photos of its bigger projects involving fabrication and erection hang throughout the office, including three huge stainless steel dewatering wheels exported to India and the new highway bridges at Garden River and Root River.

"Our success has been through diversification," said Carlo.

"We have constantly adapted to the landscape of the economy — things change rapidly and you have to be ready to react."



Carlo China, left, and Fred China pose with some rolls manufactured by China Steel.

Nadine Robinson Photos



A welder at work at China Steel.



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