

Building a better door

Owner of door manufacturer Special-lite turned his love of tinkering into a thriving business

By ALEXANDRA NEWMAN
HP Staff Writer

Door making isn't the sexiest sounding career, but it combines the things Henry Upjohn II of Kalamazoo loves to do: designing and building machinery.

The chairman of the board, chief executive officer and chief technology officer of Special-Lite, Inc., said these passions have been a part of his life since he fixed up brass-era cars with his father while growing up.

"During WWII, people took all the valuable materials out of vehicles like that. So I had to learn how to make everything like the brass headlights, all the drive-line parts and I really liked doing that," Upjohn said.

Having discovered his passion early, Upjohn went to engineering school and along the way, in his on-again/off-again pursuit of a degree, worked for quite a few different companies, he said. He even obtained a few patents.

He eventually finished his degree at Western Michigan University and headed out into the world.

"So I was looking to either start or buy a business where I could do the machinery building," he said. "Someone suggested that I find a manufacturing company that was just coming out of the 'garage-shop phase.'"

In 1987, Upjohn found himself working at Special-Lite, a door-making company in Decatur, founded in 1971.

After working there for about a year, most of the original shareholders were looking to retire, so he convinced some of his family members to buy that stock with him.

He, his family and his partner at the time held about 70 percent of the stock, so between them they controlled the company.

"I thought, 'Doors? You gotta be kidding me.' It seemed boring and simple," Upjohn said.

But he soon found there was a need for his skills to improve the door-making process.

"Special-Lite had way more orders than they could handle. And the machinery they were using was kind of concocted together," Upjohn said.

For example, the process they were using to cut a rabbet around the edge of the fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) sheets led to cutting all the way through the sheet or not cutting it thin enough.

"That became kind of an emergency because some of our dealers were complaining that when you shut the door you could hear it rattle. I ended up designing and building the FRP saw," he said.

Cutting the rabbet precisely allowed the FRP sheet to sit flush in the skeleton of the door without any rattling.

Another problem Upjohn solved was decreasing the time it took to train someone on every part of the door-making process.

The rate at which the business was growing called for hiring more people and training them fast.

"We broke it up from having people just making doors on top of each other to having departments for cutting, brackets, foam, shipping," he said. "It was a lot easier to train people to do stuff. We were able to grow and build equipment to make it all simpler."



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Henry Upjohn II is CEO and chairman of the board of door manufacturer Special-Lite, Inc. in Decatur. However, Upjohn is not afraid to get his hands a little dirty, and over the years he has designed and refined many of the machines in use at Special-Lite. The company earlier this year announced the purchase of a Benton Township building to house an expansion.

HIGHLIGHTS

Name: Henry Upjohn II
Job: Special-Lite chairman of the board, chief executive officer and chief technology officer
Town: Kalamazoo
Fun Fact: Upjohn used to race cars.

For the next 10 years Upjohn built and designed most of the equipment in the plant. As he was finishing up with the machine that shoots the foam inside into the door, he started to get concerned about the direction his partner was taking the company. "I thought maybe I'd go out and fly my own flag or something. When I mentioned that to him, the next morning he called and asked if I wanted to buy him out," he said. "Now between me and my family we own over 90 percent of it. Some of the original shareholders have the rest."

In the mid 2000s Upjohn was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease, meaning his kidneys were failing.

"By 2009 I was not able to work very much and finally in 2011 I had a kidney transplant," he said. "I was kind of out of the act for 4.5 years. So now I'm back trying to do as much engineering as I can."

He said the door-making market isn't bad. Over time more companies have started doing what Special-Lite does, but with that Special-Lite also has expanded what it does.

Special-Lite now not only makes doors for schools, hospitals and commercial spaces, but interior doors, restroom partitions and interior doors for offices and doors rated for ballistics, fires, hurricanes and tornadoes.

The building Special-Lite purchased in Benton Township earlier this year will house the operation for making the indoor office spaces.

That operation is currently housed in Niles, but that facility is leased and simply doesn't have enough room.

When examining the cost to build on to the Decatur plant vs. buying an existing building, it just made sense to buy the plant in Benton Township, which can be expanded if the need arises.

Upjohn's own life story has influenced his man-



Jerome Gillam works on a door's window frame at Special-Lite, Inc.'s factory in Decatur. The company was founded in 1971. Henry Upjohn II of Kalamazoo, along with family members, purchased a majority share in the company in the mid-1980s.

"If my parents hadn't had the resources to keep sending me back to college, I would have ended up working on a plant floor like this designing and making parts. So I look at the people on our factory floor as where I might have been."

A portion of Special-Lite, Inc.'s 180,000 square-foot Decatur factory is shown here.



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