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Remaining Manufacturers Harken To Route 5's Golden Era

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In the early years after World War II, manufacturer George Giering Sr. marveled at the demand in the U.S. and abroad for the treated metal products churned out by his father's business.

Giering Metal Finishing pulsed with three shifts daily churning out plated and painted bolts, fasteners and other metal products for a global post-war economy. With a glance out his office window — at Route 5/State Street traffic — Giering Sr. could tell instantly when business was good for others.

“It was so busy, it was hard to cross,” Giering Sr. recalls. “There were [tractor] trailers end to end in both directions.”

Bigger manufacturers eventually made the same stretch of Route 5 their business address: Pratt & Whitney, Upjohn Co., American Cyanamid, Detroit Steel and United Aluminum. Of those, only American Cyanamid spinoff, CyTec Industries, still calls the road home.

Today, those four plants and others are but a memory, victims of a change in American industry's focus on consolidating production to cheaper markets at home or abroad.

Route 5 also reflects the change. Minivans and SUVs have replaced most of the semi-trailer traffic, while plant buildings and warehouses have given way to storefronts, shopping plazas, filling stations, car dealerships and restaurants.

The roadway's evolution into a retail-service corridor in many ways mirrors the broad shift in the Connecticut and U.S. markets away from a producer to a consumer economy.

Still, Route 5 contributes to the estimated \$157 billion in goods trucked to and from Connecticut over the state's roads, according to TRIP, a Washington nonprofit that promotes upkeep and preservation of the nation's transportation infrastructure.

Once a brickyard

As a kid, George Jr. recalls going to the Hamden plant at 2655 State St./Route 5 and seeing pallets lined floor to ceiling with auto, machine and other parts waiting to be treated.

His German immigrant grandfather, George II, started his business in a Hamden barn handpainting the metal on new and reconditioned barbers' chairs in between his job as a night watchman at the Eli Whitney gun factory. Connecticut Metal Finishing chrome-plated machine gun barrels for Winchester Repeating Arms during WWII. In 1950, the company moved to two acres on Route 5 that was once a brickyard.

"We worked two shifts five days a week and Saturdays," said George Jr., the third-generation operator who oversees sales. "In the '60s, we ran three shifts.



Third-generation owner George Giering Jr. inspects freshly painted rods at Giering Metal Finishing in Hamden.

"Now, it's one shift four days a week," he said, at the main plant and a satellite in Waterbury. "We're a job shop. We rely on other companies to supply us work."

Curtailing shifts and hours lowers the fuel cost to fire Giering's ovens used to cure the powder coating on modern industrial parts. The company long ago stopped plating parts due to environmental concerns.

Business prospects in the near term aren't promising. In the next one to five years, "it looks very lean," Giering Jr. says.

"I'm very much concerned for the outlook for manufacturing in this country," Giering Sr. said.

American producers of all sizes, he said, are burdened with high taxes, labor costs and regulatory rules that add to overhead. That's the reason many farmed out production overseas to Asia, where wages run about \$140 a month in China and 35 cents an hour in Vietnam, Giering Sr. said.

But the elder Giering sees a hopeful glimmer in that manufacturers are fed up with the blatant copying of their products to sell on the overseas black market.

"It's a very small crack in the dam," he said, "but we've had two or three companies come to us and tell us they're bringing their products back."

Ulbrich's million-dollar pieces

Heading north into Wallingford, passing Italian, seafood and fast-food restaurants along the way, more evidence of Route 5's manufacturing past and present emerges.

Ulbrich Stainless Steel & Special Metals Inc. is visible in several locations along the corridor.

Chris Ulbrich, another third-generation operator of his family's business, says there is a reason 400 of Ulbrich's 500 employees worldwide call Wallingford home. Proximity, he said, to a skilled labor pool — fueled largely by immigrants in its early years — has been the key to Ulbrich's success.

"We're in this area because we have these million-dollar pieces of equipment that not everybody can operate," said Ulbrich, chief operating officer of the company with \$250 million in annual sales.

Wallingford, with its own municipal utility, also offers relatively cheap electricity and is central to Ulbrich's main customer base in Connecticut and the rest of New England, he said.

Ulbrich Stainless cold rolls steel, aluminum, titanium and other metals into various thicknesses to be used in everything from aircraft wings to auto parts to metal washers. Customers include Pratt



Chris Ulbrich, third-generation owner of Ulbrich Stainless Steel & Special Metals Inc. in Wallingford, is optimistic about a pick up in global demand for his rolled steel stainless and other metals.

and some of the other divisions of Hartford's United Technologies Corp., along with most U.S. and foreign automakers Ford, General Motors and BMW, to name a few.

Sales slumped last year 30 percent, prompting layoffs of about 80 workers, Ulbrich said. A pick up in business of late has led to 20 of those workers being recalled.

Parts of the U.S. and international economies, particularly aerospace, are picking up, leading Ulbrich customers to restock their inventories.

"But it's still not to the levels we saw in 2007 and 2008," Ulbrich said.

Those positive signs aside, the operations executive worries that recent efforts in Connecticut at workplace reforms, including paid vacations to all workers, will further erode Ulbrich's bottom line.

"If [Connecticut] becomes anti-business, that's a problem," he said.

KAMCO, a building-products supplier, is down to 30 people in its Wallingford facility, after consolidating workers to its East Hartford distribution center, on Burnham Road.

Jay Sheehy, president and chief executive officer, said KAMCO is trying to lease out a portion of the 125,000-square-foot building originally built in the 1950s with high ceilings and a rail siding to serve as a steel-distribution facility.

Started in 1979 in West Haven by Sheehy's father, KAMCO merged a decade ago with Colony Lumber in Wallingford. Sales peaked in 2007 at about \$100 million. But with less than robust demand today for acoustic tiles, drywall, steel studs, lumber and commercial doors, sales are down to about \$75 million annually, he said.

But Sheehy is optimistic.

"We believe we've made the turn from a declining economy to a growing economy," he said. "We think there's steady improvement ahead in our [New England] market."