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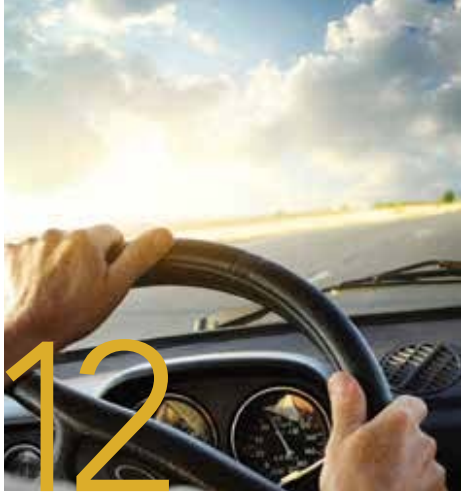
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# A CERAMIC LEGACY

*Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co. is thriving in its fifth generation of ownership* BY DAVID SEARLS

**A**kron Porcelain & Plastics Co. is that rare business that has not only survived 125 years but is thriving under the leadership of the fifth generation, the founder's great-great-grandson. There are no investors or shareholders outside of the bloodline, and the company has spent its entire history in or near the city of its beginnings.

"It's been a real legacy and a huge opportunity," says Dave Lewis, the company's president. "We're honored to be able to carry things forward for this long."

A lot has changed over the years, including the company's name (several times), locations within the Akron area and especially its product line. But Akron Porcelain & Plastics hasn't completely left the past behind. In addition to maintaining its genetic code, the company still works in ceramics, but today, the clay is mostly imported from Kentucky and Georgia rather than being dug from the Akron area. And the product line produced in the 110,000-square-foot space now includes small, molded parts for industries such as aerospace and modern appliances that company founder E.H. Merrill would perhaps never have been able to envision.

Benjamin Harrison was president and Teddy Roosevelt was a decade away from the vice presidency when the company first known as Akron Smoking Pipe Co. put down roots in a plant in downtown Akron and incorporated in 1890.

"At one point, the company made something like 89 percent of the clay pipes in America," says Lewis. "Picture an Indian peace pipe, miniaturized."

The company's smoking pipes consisted of ceramic bowls, some of them highly glazed and quite ornate, with hollowed-out bamboo stems. Its customers were match companies that threw in a pipe with the sale.

Unfortunately for the company, however, the state started using prison labor to make the popular product, and Akron Smoking Pipe Co. was no longer able to compete. It was time to seek out a new line of work, and while it was the first time, it certainly wouldn't be the last time that the family had to retool for the company to survive.

## ELECTRIFICATION

Electrification, the lighting up of cities, was the digital technology equivalent of its day, the innovation that swept the nation and changed American lives forever. In 1919,

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**"A LOT OF THE HIGH-VOLUME WORK HAS GONE OFFSHORE. WE'RE BECOMING MORE OF A LOW-VOLUME SHOP, WITH SHORT RUNS OF SOMETIMES JUST HUNDREDS OF PIECES."**

— DAVE LEWIS, PRESIDENT, AKRON PORCELAIN & PLASTICS CO.

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the family company, which had earlier changed its name to Mogadore Insulator Co., moved to nearby Mogadore to make insulators and other parts to go on electrical poles.

"We made literally millions of insulators," says Mike Lewis, father of the company's president and the company's chairman of the board. "We made all kinds of knobs, tubes and cleats to electrify houses."

In the process, the company had to reach beyond local pits to find more highly refined clays from other states.

As it continued to grow, in 1929, the company moved to the Kenmore area in Akron — where it remains today — and changed its name again, to Akron Porcelain Co. By the 1930s, area business was thriving to the extent that the predecessor of FirstMerit Bank opened a retail location in the Kenmore area specifically to serve the needs of the family company and other manufacturing plants in the area, according to Mike Lewis.

"They built a branch there partially for the purpose of handling our payroll and cashing the checks of our employees," he says.

The final name change came when the company branched into heat-resistant plastics in 1984 and became Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co.

In the early 1990s, it designed and manufactured ashtrays for most America-based automakers.

"They'd tell us the size of the hole in the car and how

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Mike Lewis, left,  
Chairman, Dave Lewis,  
President, Akron  
Porcelain & Plastics Co.



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they wanted the ashtray to open and whether there'd be a lighter or not, and we designed ashtrays to fit," says Dave Lewis.

That was a good source of business for much of the 20th century, until the culture shifted.

"Eventually, they just stopped putting ashtrays in cars," says Lewis.

## MODERN CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Lewis is a strong believer in manufacturing.

"Manufacturing gets in your blood and you have a love for it," he says.

And while that's his viewpoint most of the time, it doesn't mean that every moment is equally as pleasurable, as challenges have mounted for U.S. manufacturers in the form of global competition and the constant need to cut costs and innovate.

Akron Porcelain & Plastics has survived and thrived because of its ability to innovate. After a number of iterations, today it is a custom molder of small parts designed and owned by a roster of customers in industries such as oil and gas, iron and steel, aerospace, appliance manufacturing, electrical and lighting. For instance, for appliance maker Emerson, the company manufactures plastic housing for thermostatic switches that go into refrigerator icemakers shipped all over the world.

That's an example of the company's preferred type of job, high-volume work that entails making the mold just once and automating a process to make, say, a million parts of a single SKU. But the ideal is not always the reality.

"A lot of the high-volume work has gone offshore," says Lewis. "We're becoming more of a low-volume shop, with short runs of sometimes just hundreds of pieces."

Short-run orders are more difficult to automate, so costs are higher.

"We maintain a positive relationship between management and our labor union and keep the relationship vibrant, but there's a whole raft of challenges that has to be addressed in order to remain competitive," says Lewis.

The company also has to stay attuned to tax and health care issues that can quickly impact profitability.

The Lewis family has responded to its challenges with technological and operational changes that have kept it ahead of cultural shifts and competitive pressures to become a company today that has about 100 employees and a second manufacturing plant in Barberton.

## A LEGACY PARTNER

FirstMerit Bank has been a part of the Lewis family legacy since at least that moment in the 1930s when it built a retail location near the plant so workers could cash their paychecks.

"They have always provided our payroll and checking account services, and we have a line of credit with them," says Mike Lewis.

FirstMerit has also been there when the company needed to make capital investments.

"They provided us with a loan to make the major investment in a kiln and a plastic press that were large enough to take on aerospace business we wouldn't have otherwise won," says Lewis. "We're thankful for our relationship with FirstMerit and for the opportunities they've helped us take advantage of."

After all of the changes the business has undergone — from manufacturing smoking pipes to car ashtrays to aerospace parts and from high-volume to short runs — one lesson stands out in Lewis' mind.

"The business cycle is very quick," he says. "If you just sit back and figure you'll supply the same market forever, you won't be in business for long. Not today." ♦

Contact Akron Porcelain & Plastics Co. at (330) 745-2159 or [www.akronporcelain.com](http://www.akronporcelain.com).