



Mickey (lower front-and-center) is posing above with the Westbrook Engineering Company team last month. Mick with his compact, athletic build, fit right in with the Westbrook group. His outgoing, friendly, and energetic presence has made Mick a hit throughout the country.

CLOSE TO HOME

Last month's Travels with Mickey ended up being a holiday gathering at the Westbrook Engineering Company, an interview with the Brothers Szarek, and reflection about this new year.

By Thomas J. Lynch
Metalworking Machinery Mailer

This month (December) Mickey and yours truly decided to stay close to home. With the holidays creeping up after Thanksgiving, there was a tugging inside of me to be close to home. Still, there was an urge to travel and explore different parts of our industry in this country. When I hear or read of another unique person or company in this industry, I want to go see them for myself, that will never change. I always want to be the one who sees for myself, I just need that for some reason.

There was an inkling in me to visit a good and better climate in December but I've visited good climates before during the winter months and it bores the hell out of me. I've always liked weather better than climate. The change-of-the-seasons is like life. As we grow older, the days grow shorter, and in just passing through the season of a Midwest autumn, we know it'll be followed by the silent listlessness of winter. We're always running out of time.

I decided to stay close to home to seek out this month's story. We traveled to Warren, Michigan, on the east side of the Detroit metropolitan area. Actually Warren, Michigan, is the third most populous city in Michigan and metropolitan Detroit's largest suburb. It's larger than Flint, Michigan. In fact, Flint is the fifth largest Michigan city trailing another Detroit suburb, Sterling Heights. Six of the 10 largest cities in Michigan are Detroit and five of its suburbs. As Detroit goes, so goes Michigan.

Warren, Michigan, is home to the General Motors (GM) Technical Center, U.S. Army Tank-Automotive and Armaments Command (TACOM), Tank Automotive Research, Development and Engineering Center (TARDEC), and the National Automotive Center (NAC). The Detroit suburb has been a manufacturing hub since it incorporated as a city in 1957.

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The dog, Mickey, is a bond between people. Many conversations en route through our travels have started with, "What kind of dog is that?" Mick is a Yorkshire Terrier or as often called, a Yorkie. Mickey has that free, jaunty, and confident gait about him, with both head and frumpy tail held high.

Mick's ancestors were bred as ratters in England. They were used to sliver through cracks and into small, cramped quarters to capture their prey with their "scissors bite." Yorkies have that terrier temperament, too. Standing about nine inches tall and weighing four pounds, Mick-the-Quick, is ready and willing to confront any challenge at the outset but like us, becomes overwhelmed by the size of the challenge sometimes.

With the Mickster navigating in the front passenger seat, I pulled into the parking lot of the Westbrook Engineering Company at 23501 Mound Road in Warren, Michigan, last month. It was a cloudy, overcast December day. Mick was attired with his Harley-Davidson motorcycle jacket because it was just one of those days.

Needless to say, most of the Westbrook staff emptied into the company's reception area to meet the Mick. As usual, he was a real hit with the ladies. In no time at all, a company group shot was arranged in Westbrook's conference area with Mick front-and-center in the photo. (See opposite page.) After exchanging pleasantries with the Westbrook staff, Randy and Marty Szarek and I retired to Randy's office for a meeting.

Success story

One of my closest friends, if not closest, in the industry was Al Szarek. Our wives were friends and Al would give me invaluable advice when I started my business nearly 20 years ago. Unfortunately, I didn't listen all the time. Advice like, "Buy it right and it's half-sold" wasn't adhered to because I thought that was applicable only to his industry not mine. Years later, it would finally dawn on me that it was relevant to all businesses, including mine.



The Westbrook Engineering Company stands as a reminder to its founder, Al Szarek. A man with his own code of honor. A man who always paid his debts. He would never let a man do more for him than he did for that man.

We lost Al in August of 1996. It doesn't seem that long ago, really. I still miss those after-hour phone calls around 7:30 pm at my office, when I'd answer the phone, "Tade Publishing. Can I help you?"

Al retorted, "I doubt it." To know him was to love him.

I regret that Al's not around today because of the job his sons have done in taking the company, not only to the next level but the next several levels. When I talk to people like Harold Finegood, they'll exclaim, "Can you believe the job that those two boys have done? Al would be so proud of them." And Al would be, too. I think their success would shock even the founder of the Westbrook Engineering Company.

The two brothers have a way with the business. In metalworking, people have to know equipment and know the business. The Szarek brothers know both. Their father had laid the foundation and put up the scaffolding of the company, and now the sons were filling things out and raising their sights as one of the most successful metalworking companies in Michigan or anywhere else.

Soon there were many machinery transactions scattered throughout parts of Michigan (both new and used), and used sales across the country and around the world. Like their father before them, they measured not their hard work but their efforts in helping the customer.

There's a special kinship between the two brothers. Together, they're building the company for bigger and better things. Despite the tough times after the 9/11 days, the Westbrook Engineering Company rarely missed a beat. Randy and Marty Szarek remained focused on "what they could do rather than what they couldn't do." They never lost heart and kept going to keep the company out of the tough times other companies were experiencing.

You can call it vast ambition but it was a drive for both of them that characterized the wellspring of their characters. They were reaching. Always reaching. A new line. A big buy. Another building. It was always there. The reaching. They never feel that they have it made. They were always reaching for the next level. Is it a gamble? Sure. The Szarek brothers aren't afraid to take a gamble because the "dividend of sweat" minimizes the risk.

Men that work hard, know exactly how hard other men have to work. The work, the effort, had become very important to both brothers. They understood the sacrifice, the effort, the work, the grinding, tough way, their father had to work and they admired it. Now the brothers worked fiercely to make the company bigger. The appetite grows by what it feeds on, and now the brothers' dreams were bigger. They sought out more-and-more business by building good and tight business relationships with users.

Being businessmen first and foremost, the brothers have no time for anger, for petty feuds and squabbles, they are, in the most hardheaded and calculating way imaginable, dreamers, and they're always dreaming about the company's growth and success: the commercial future of the Westbrook Engineering Company, tied as it is to both of their commercial futures. This is of the essence. The company was the instrument of their father's commercial interests and it's of theirs too.

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They're upwardly mobile in the industry. They may not be as loud as their father could be at times but their vision may be far bolder and broader; they don't need to shout or flaunt, it's simply there. Randy and Marty Szarek can, as if they were architects, design the future of their company, its growth and its limitless possibilities, and their share of it.

Their company reflects this; it's ancillary to the essential cause of the Szareks, which is company expansion through improved customer services and profit. The Westbrook Engineering Company is a bustling, prosperous company that exists to an uncommon degree because the family envisioned it that way.



Randy Szarek thinks defense manufacturing may be up this year. He feels that some automotive work may switch to defense.

The meeting

Randy Szarek's corner office is bedecked with personal, family, and a lot of sports memorabilia throughout the environs. It's a comfortable, comradely place like its occupant and brother. Their manners, as well as the office furniture, resembled their father's of over 11 years ago. It's a place of handshaking, camaraderie, and fellowship.

The 1st question I asked, was, "What are the advantages of selling new and used?"

Marty quipped, "I don't know if we wanna divulge those secrets?"

His brother cleverly followed up, "I can't think of one?"

After the guffaws subsided, Marty followed up seriously with, "Service. Both our service department in-house and on-the-road allows us to back up our used machinery, just like our new machinery. We can offer full-service to both new and used. And we do think that we go the extra yard when we refurbish our used machines. Our people have the qualifications and knowledge."

Randy interjected, "Also, trade-ins for sure. It's a source for used equipment. And with the economy here in Michigan, we can sell used equipment anywhere in the world, we're not locked just into Michigan."

Marty: "And, one (new) works well in conjunction with the other (used). When one's down the other seems to pick up and vice versa."

"You've invested in a major expansion with the purchase of your new 20,000 square foot building behind this building (Westbrook's 17,000 square foot office, showroom, and refurbishing facility). Are you going to have just new in this building and used in the other?"

Marty reflected, "Well that was always the plan when we were leasing the other building which was strictly used also. We always wanted this building here to be the showroom."

Randy: "Yeah, this was always supposed to be the showroom here (for new equipment), which it's generally now. Although, the back of this building is still used for refurbishing. We work on machinery here."

Marty: "This did (new building) expand our storage area for machines. Also in having everything centrally located is huge for us."

Randy: "Now we can just walk to the next building, we don't have to get into our cars and take a customer to another building, a half-mile away."

Marty: "Especially for meetings like MDNA (Machinery Dealers National Association) meetings. Nobody would wanna go over to the other building. Now we're getting other people into the other building and they've been quite impressed."



Marty Szarek maintains that service is a difference-maker. Both in-house and on-the-road service is offered for used machinery as well as new machinery at Westbrook Engineering.

"How was your year (2007), this year?"

Marty summed it up, "I think what we can say overall about the year, it looks like we're in-line to hit our projections, and that was growth. Today, we're solidly in-line to hit those projections with one month to go."

Regarding next year with a projected U.S. growth figure of 2%, Marty said the company is, "Cautious. Next year's projections won't be as aggressive as they have been in the past."



The above 20,000 square foot building ideally located behind Westbrook's office and showroom facility is a major expansion for the company.

"What sectors may be up?"

Randy chimed in with, "Defense, maybe. Some of the automotive people are changing to defense. Automotive is down so they're switching."

"Tell me about your staff, your people."

Randy started, "What's really important in selling machinery is reconditioning and standing behind it. This is where our staff comes in. They're highly qualified and most of them have been with us now for many, many years. They're very loyal and we're happy to see that."

Marty added, "We have employees here that have been with us for over 20 years. We've cross-trained them, too, so we have people that know parts, repair machines. Cross-training is what we've been doing more of and it's working out pretty well."

"How's your parts business?"

Marty: "Between parts and tooling, we're doing all right. We've put a push on tooling in the last couple of years and we've really increased our business there."

The Szarek brothers are busy and I didn't want to take up anymore of their time than necessary. In closing, Randy said, "We try to carry on dad's legacy, really. You know, he was a honest businessman and people liked him."

Marty added, "Integrity. It's important. It's what he was all about and it's what we want to be all about, too."

Randy: "We still talk about him. He was always positive and we wanna carry that on." (They have.)

Shortly after the meeting broke up, Mick and I were on our way again. We hung a left on Mound Road in front of the large GM Powertrain plant across the street from the Westbrook Engineering Company, and proceeded north to Interstate-75. I was immersed in thought about the two men that I'd just talked to and about their father, too.

Al Szarek and I were in different businesses. Sometimes Al would tell me, "You know we're both lucky. We're in the best businesses." I'd ask, "My business is the best business?" Al retorted, "Sure it is. It's the business you know and that's all you need." He was right. Al believed in "sweat equity." The Gods of Fortune recognize no debt. The law of fortune or luck, good or bad, is that it'll change. The law of averages virtually guarantees it.

Our recent years have been challenging and I've heard many say, "You know, I've gotta change and get into something else." Their thinking is perhaps there's another business, where they'll find good fortune and change their luck. Instead, they immediately encounter the evils of an unfamiliar and perilous land, without the benefit of the road maps that they so painstakingly put together in their past business life.

As we look ahead to take stock of this new year, the "flight not fight" behavior is the sign of a prey animal that can be devoured by a predator. As an old proverb says, "Fortune favors the brave." The 1st century Roman philosopher, Seneca, summed it up best, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." Let me paraphrase Seneca's slant a little, "Preparation multiplied by opportunity."

I wish you all good business and good luck this year. ■