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120 Years of the “Wolkerstorfer Way”

Minnesota finisher still growing after more than a century.

BY TIM PENNINGTON EDITOR

Growing up in the family finishing business, Steffen and Chris Wolkerstorfer watched their father, Joe, branch out into the aerospace industry about 20 years ago to help grow Wolkerstorfer Co.

The company, located just outside of Minneapolis, has flourished over the years and has become one of the top aerospace finishers in the U.S. Both of Joe’s children saw that the growth at first was slow and tedious, a lesson they learned was simply a part of their business and the finishing industry.

“Some people talk about planting seeds, but around here we plant acorns,” says Steffen, who is vice president for support services. “We know that things don’t happen overnight, and we have to be diligent. That is how we’ve grown this business.”

And grown it has. Wolkerstorfer has a large list of accreditations by the most recognized names in the aerospace, defense and heavy industrial markets, and specializes in surface finishing, painting, non-destructive testing and some of the most intricate masking around.

- Aerospace is one of the fastest growing markets for the

company, especially with increasing demands for testing in addition to finishing. The company is Nadcap-accredited for nondestructive testing and chemical processing, and works with Boeing, Airbus, Rolls Royce, Honeywell, Gulfstream and others on a daily basis.

- Defense has been a mainstay, and in addition to its Nadcap approvals, Wolkerstorfer added “International Traffic in Arms Regulations” (ITAR) registration in 2013.
- Heavy Industry has also been a growth area, especially with Wolkerstorfer being one of the few large finishers capable of not only performing chemical finishing, anodizing and testing, but also painting. Capabilities include several large ovens and spray booths as well as chain on edge and overhead conveyor systems.

While serving these three major industries, Wolkerstorfer Co. has been an industry leader recognized with the Governor’s Award for Pollution Prevention by the state of Minnesota. The owners say it is this commitment to their customers and their community that drives what they call the “Wolkerstorfer Way—Exceptional quality with responsive lead times.”

Large Part Capacity

And with an 83,000-square-foot facility—and room to expand on its more than six acre site—Wolkerstorfer is certainly able to handle the size and demand of any customer in any market.

But more impressive than the size of their plant and the knowledge base they provide their customers is the longevity that the Wolkerstorfer family brings to the table. The company has been in business more than 120 years, with a male family member at the helm—until now. The sister-brother team of Steffen and Chris, who is vice president for production, is taking over for Joe Wolkerstorfer, who is still president but is turning over the reigns of the company, just like his father before him, and his grandfather before that.

In fact, the Wolkerstorfers are in the fourth-generation of family ownership, an extremely rare feat. According to the Family Business Institute, only about three percent of all family businesses operate into the fourth generation or beyond.

“Our history and vast experience gives us a unique knowledge base to pull from to solve problems for our customers,” Joe says. “We are often approached and asked to tackle the near impossible when it comes to testing and finishing.”

Wolkerstorfer is aware of the customer’s investment in its parts, which is not limited to labor and materials.

“A single part may be worth in excess of \$250,000,” he says. “But it is the time to repair and replace that component that far exceeds its actual worth. With this in mind, it is even more imperative that we get it right the first time.”

Near Perfection

That experience has given Wolkerstorfer a rejection rate of less than one half of one percent of its work, a remarkable number considering what is at stake.

Chris Wolkerstorfer says the leadership team will bring together as many in-house experts as required to help troubleshoot the often complex projects.

“As many as we need for their expertise, that’s who we bring together,” he says. “It really is a team effort, and our goal is to finish the part right and to shorten the amount of lead time so that we can get it back to the customer.”

One of those experts that Wolkerstorfer has on staff now is Kurt Weamer, a finishing industry veteran who heads the company’s sales and marketing efforts. He is working all industry channels to help grow the company, and he knows there is more work to be captured.

The major aircraft manufacturers are projecting a sustained growth pattern in the coming years. Over the next two decades the expected production numbers are approximately 33,000



The company traces its roots to 1895, when Joe Wolkerstorfer’s grandfather opened his company. Chris and Steffen Wolkerstorfer (top left) are now taking over for their father, Joe, (bottom left) who plans to fish as much as he can in the lakes of Minnesota.



units by Boeing and Airbus, and 40,000 planes by mid-sized jet company Bombardier.

“Wolkerstorfer Co. is well positioned to serve this growing market due to our extensive experience and expertise,” he says.

The company was founded in 1895 when Joe’s grandfather—also named Joseph—started out pin-striping horse carriages, barber poles and dental chairs. In 1918, the company acquired the Nelson Plating Co., which occupied the second floor of the Wolkerstorfer building in downtown Minneapolis.

Defense, Construction Boom

During World War I, the company thrived in the defense industry with coating and plating military parts, and then survived the turmoil of the Great Depression a decade later. During the period of World War II and after, Wolkerstorfer Co. experienced its biggest growth spurt, attributable to the defense work it was performing, as well as the follow up after the war when a construction boom took place, in both residential and commercial markets.

Wolkerstorfer was hired by many companies during the 1950s to coat commercial goods, such as appliances and electrical cabinetry.

“Up to this point, our focus had been on industry and servicing those needs, but that focus began to change,” Joe says. “The national prosperity created leisure time that allowed people to travel, and that created the explosion of the aircraft industry throughout the 1960s and 1970s.”

In 1978, Wolkerstorfer Co. was forced out of its location in the downtown Minneapolis area by the construction of the Minnesota Vikings football stadium. The company bought and added on to a building in New Brighton, just north of the Twin Cities.

The new facility also signaled the company’s entry into the architectural coatings industry. Wolkerstorfer began painting the Kynar system, which was a polyvinylidene fluoride resin that was a major advancement in the protection of aluminum doors, windows and other assorted products.

The company went through its most significant change in the early 1990s when Joe redirected the market focus from commercial work to the aerospace industry.

“That was pivotal for us,” he says of leading the company into Nadcap processing capabilities, including fluorescent penetrant non-destructive testing (NDT), anodizing and other coatings for the aircraft industry.

“A customer approached us with an opportunity to process structural ribs for Boeing aircraft,” Joe recalls. “The issue was that we did not have an anodize line in place and we weren’t Nadcap certified for NDT and

anodizing, let alone Boeing certified paint.”

NDT, Plating and Painting

Moving ahead with the project included installing a fluorescent penetrant inspection line and—more importantly—purchasing the rights from Boeing to perform boric sulfuric acid anodizing. The company also qualified for the Nadcap certification, and did it all in just six months.

“The need of our customer was real, and we responded,”

Wolkerstorfer offers fluorescent penetrant non-destructive testing, as well as salt spray and scribe adhesion testing.



Joe says. “We’ll paint tennis shoes if that’s what our customer wants, and we see that the demand is there.”

The NDT inspection component is a critical step with Nadcap, and Chris Wolkerstorfer says the company offers water washable fluorescent penetrant inspection with pre-etch that meets the MIL-STD-1417 requirement with various sensitivity levels and developers.

“We have two lines to accommodate parts that are up to 8 feet long, all the way down to small parts you can hold in your hand,” he says.

The company offers a variety of value added services, two of which are blasting and multi-step masking. The blasting equipment ranges from

hand cabinet blasters to a 15- by 12- by 14-foot room and an assortment of media including glass bead, aluminum oxide and ceramic. Wolkerstorfer specializes in complex masking operations including tape, paint on and reusable fixtures.

On the plating side of the operation, the company offers boric-sulfuric, chromic and sulfuric acid anodizing. Wolkerstorfer also provides hexavalent and non-hexavalent

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The shop offers boric-sulfuric, chromic acid and sulfuric acid anodizing, as well as hexavalent and non-hexavalent chromate conversion coatings.

A number of tanks and booths at the Wolkerstorfer plant can handle parts that measure up to 15 by 15 by 4 feet in size and weighing up to five tons.



chromate conversion coatings with a number of tanks at the plant that can handle parts that measure up to 15 by 15 by 4 feet in size and weighing up to five tons. Zinc and manganese phosphate, electroless nickel, black oxide, and stainless steel passivation complete their current offerings. The company is in the process of evaluating phosphoric acid anodizing for metal bonding applications and thin film sulfuric acid anodizing for unique aerospace applications.

On the paint side of the plant, Wolkerstorfer Co. applies aerospace, defense and CARC primers and topcoats. Also available are dry film lubricants designed to provide reduced friction, improved wear and break in protection, and corrosion resistance with typical thicknesses of 0.0002 to 0.0010 inches. The spray booths and curing ovens are large enough to accommodate any part pretreated in house.

Steffen Wolkerstorfer says the company is expanding its anodizing capacity, retooling its masking department and working on programs that expand well past what may be needed in 2020.

“If you build a 5-foot tank, then the next part in the door will be 6-foot,” she says of the constant evaluation and expansion plans. “This is a common lament amongst those of us in the finishing industry. Although we have some of the largest tanks in the Midwest, we have had recent requests for expanded capacity that has prompted us to consider



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even larger tanks for nondestructive testing and chemical processing.”

Of course, bigger buildings and larger tanks have not been the only way that the company has grown.

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One-Stop Shop

Chris Wolkerstorfer says the importance of offering both destructive and non-destructive testing—in addition to coating offerings—is that the company wants to be a one-stop shop for its customers.

“It reduces transit time, process time, handling and it reduces the chance of damage,” he says.

Steffen Wolkerstorfer says that, although it takes a lot of planning, the stringent process controls they have in place is why they have such low losses.

“We have a great experience base, and we follow tight timelines,” she says. “Our multi-step processes aren’t easy to fix, especially when you have parts that are large, expensive and have a long lead time to recreate.”

Weamer, who joined Wolkerstorfer several years ago from the chemical side of the industry, says that one of the traits that sets the company apart is an old adage: location, location, location.

“A typical metal finisher may have a geographical customer base of a 75-mile radius,” he says. “But due to our unique offerings, the ability to be vertical with the testing and processing under one roof, and that strong demand pressuring the pre-existing metal finishing vendors, we have customers spanning from the east to the west coast.”

In 2011, Joe and his two children completed a stock

purchase that transitioned the business from the third generation—Joe and his two cousins—to the fourth. As he continues down the path to retirement, the responsibilities of the day-to-day operations have been assumed by Steffen and Chris.

The Wolkerstorfer family knows that what lies ahead for the company is both exciting and challenging. Celebrating 120 years of business in the testing and finishing industry allows Wolkerstorfer Co. the unique perspective of being able to look back and pull from history as they plan for the future doing it the “Wolkerstorfer Way.” ■■

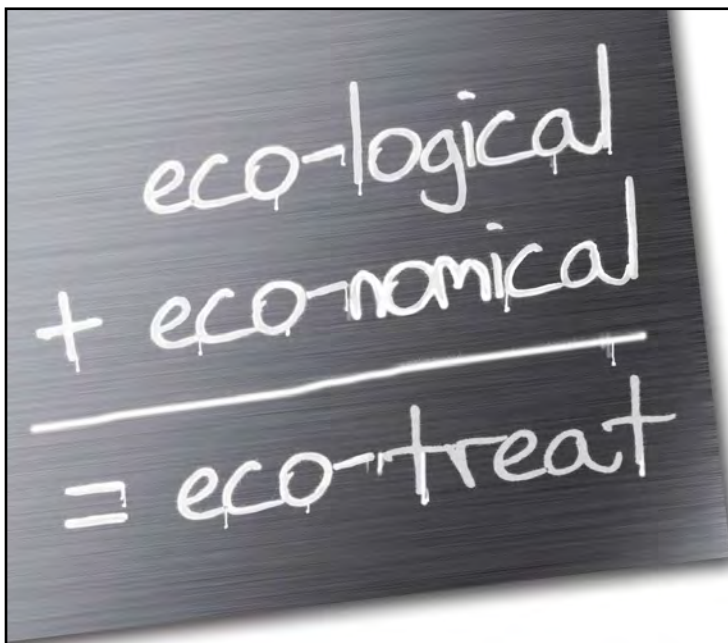
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