

Growing Together: Aurora & General Conveyors



By Brock Weir

In the latest installment of The Auroran's Sesquicentennial Series on Aurora's oldest businesses, we take a look at General Conveyors, a company now in its seventh decade which found its greatest successes in Aurora ? and could impact your daily life in ways which might surprise you!

Bill Rickard's life changed forever one fateful day on a motorcycle trip in Italy.

A horrific accident with an oncoming truck almost cleanly severed his left arm and his left leg, losing both limbs and enough blood to put his survival in doubt.

As he recovered against all odds, he took the opportunity for prioritizing the important things in his life. But, as the owner of General Conveyors, an Aurora business serving the GTA ? and the world ? for over 60 years, he soon saw his own value to the company.

?According to all medical records, I should not be alive,? says Mr. Rickard. ?When I came back to Canada, one of the first things I asked for when they got me out of the hospital on a weekend pass was to take me back to my business.

?I rolled in, in my wheelchair, having been out of it for more than a year and it was a bit of an enlightenment. The guys here did a pretty good job, but without leadership I noticed it went very quickly. I brought in some management people to run the company, some consultants, and that was a bit of a disaster. This is a family business, custom oriented, and if they had the background I had they would probably be running their own.?

For the first time in its lengthy history, the company started to lose money. They had never had a bad year and had always done well in recessions. Something wasn't working and it took him about five years to recover enough to get back in to right the ship.

It was a long way from taking on the business over 40 years ago after the sudden death of his father-in-law. Thrown into the deep end, Rickard and his wife had no choice but to get their feet wet very quickly.

While he came out of the mechanical engineering business working on the Scarborough subway extension, he didn't really realise he was a particularly mechanical person above an abiding love for fixing motorcycles.

“Our competitors figured the company wasn't going to last, and within two years, we were probably one of the biggest manufacturers in Canada at the time of tabletop conveyor equipment.”

Running with their success, they focused on diversification. He says he was probably too “naïve” at the time to say that they couldn't do something and they learned as they went. They eventually needed more space and moved from Thornhill to Aurora where they continue to thrive today.

“Suddenly we went from a small 5,000 square foot premise to 20,000 with a very visible presence,” he says of their then-new digs. “Suddenly, our credibility was out there. We got involved in many different things, put patents on different equipment, and diversified.”

That is not an understatement. The name “General Conveyors” was almost a misnomer from the start, with Mr. Rickard's father-in-law moving away from tabletop conveyors to dabbling in the aerosol industry and making inroads with products that have become household staples.

General Foods eventually came calling and they developed a new machine to ensure vacuum sealed bricks of coffee were up to snuff and ones falling short were taken out of the system.

“The technology was brand new and we embraced that to come up with a really neat solution for Kraft General Foods. That spun off and we got a ton more work from them?”

They continue to design products for companies like Kellogg's and General Mills and it's pretty likely when you pour out your morning cereal or toast an Eggo waffle, your balanced breakfast is brought to you, at least in part, by something attributed to General Conveyor “including a more recent system developed right here in Aurora which stacks 400 Eggos a minute, which are then slipped into eight-packs of four waffles a stack.

After getting the business back on track, Mr. Rickard took time after his accident to really sort out his priorities. Eventually, he decided to follow his passion for banjos and turning a small corner of the factory into one of the world's leading manufacturers of banjo parts, parts which are made directly on the equipment at General Conveyor. As he follows his passion, many of the day-to-day activities are now handled by Jake Constantine, a man in his 30s who started out at General Conveyor fresh out of college.

Mr. Rickard taught him the business from the ground up, from some of the more menial activities, working through mechanical jobs, through management.

“He has all the youth and enthusiasm, and he's not sitting in a wheelchair,” says Mr. Rickard. “[Having worked almost every job in the factory] nobody can pull the wool over his eyes because he has done it all and has practical experience.”

Adds Mr. Constantine of working his way up: “Bill gave me a unique opportunity as I was able to really experience all facets of the company. I understand how things are made and where we can save some money. Most of the time we like to think of ourselves as innovators, and there will be an idea or a product we make and we will try and make it better and cheaper.”

After 60 years, and far from its early days of focusing simply on conveyors, General Conveyors might soon be in need of a rebrand. “GenCon Industrial Automation” is one name that has been thrown around, say Bill and Jake, to reflect more of what they do.

“People know what we do in the industry, but it is possible to change the image,” says Mr. Rickard. “We're in a very different market right now.”