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Brothers in Business
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By **Tim Rausch** | *Staff Writer*

Monday, July 13, 2009

If you want a job at Hagler Systems, it helps to have a Georgia Tech degree.

All the bosses do.

And their engineers.

"It just happened that way -- subconscious, I guess," said Bob Hagler, the company founder and a 1981 graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology.

The North Augusta company makes pumping systems that are used in the oil sands of Canada, the phosphate fields in Florida, the dredging barges on the Atlantic Ocean and other places.

The Hagler brothers have a pedigree in slurry pumps, having worked for Georgia Iron Works in Augusta and Grovetown, once owned by their father and grandfather.

Bob, the oldest brother, is the controls and systems engineer.

David Hagler is the salesman and the office manager.

Ben Hagler is the mechanical engineer.

Though Bob started the company in 1993, they are all equal partners in the business.

"There's no rule with an iron fist," Bob said. "And that was my option, since I owned the company. If we can't get along, then we don't deserve to be in business together."

There is some disagreement and brotherly hazing, David said, but the brothers work well as a team. That's because they all have different expertise and roles.

"You got a 20-mile pipeline pumping rocks," David said. "Bob will work the system out and tell you that you need 16 pumps with 20-inch pipe. That's what Bob is best at. He can apply systems engineering better than anybody. He's very technical."

David said he is the people person. He also is the office administrator, the human resources manager.

"I'm pure sales. I'm the personality of the company," he said with a smile. "I'm also the peacemaker, in a way. Ben and Bob are very strong personalities, very technical. I'm the go-between. My mother always seemed to be a peacemaker in the family, and that became my position here."

Ben, an engineer, is a creative detail person, David said: "That is his gift in life."

Where many engineers just work within a model, Ben sees the bigger picture and "is free to design and go," David said.

In the beginning

Bob was on his own for three years until his family joined him. They started in 1996 in an office on Walton Way Extension. The early form of the company was simply as a seller of GIW pumps and European-made hoses, earning a commission on those sales.

"To make more money, we had to start packaging," Ben said.

The leap from selling equipment to designing custom applications for that equipment came with a job attributed to Ben: a new pump that went into an old dredge.

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To avoid an expensive recertification of the vessel, Ben had to get a dredging pump into a hatch and to fit the new pump into a ship that wasn't designed to use it.

"Ben drew the engine room in 3-D" and made a custom pedestal and shaft, David said. Through the three-dimensional drawing, Ben also found a way to get it into the ship.

"It was one of our biggest successes and sent us on our way," David said. "The pump was the center of our universe, and we started revolving around it. We can do a base. We can package engines. We can put together pump houses. It goes on."

Sitting in the 7-acre yard of the Five Notch Road company is the beginning of a dredging barge that will go to Alberta, Canada. It is the latest expansion of the company's offerings: the whole barge, not just the pumping system for it.

"My dad, the (GIW) foundry, they made pumps. It is kind of like making an engine. What we make is cars," Bob said. "The key to our niche is that we can make a machine to fit their purpose."

By September, the company needs to create two pumping sleds for a nitrogen company, PCS, in north Florida. The last one they made for that company weighed 120,000 pounds.

"Our customers can't go rent this kind of stuff, so they have to build it for the job. And a lot of times, you have a short lead time," Ben said. "It is not a product line you keep on the shelf."

Hagler Systems has been a South Carolina company since 2002 when it moved into the vacant Batco Fabricators machine shop: They stopped using outside fabrication shops to produce the pumping systems and wanted to make their own.

When it moved to South Carolina, Hagler Systems had six employees. It now has 50.

In 2007, Hagler Systems was honored as one South Carolina's fastest-growing companies.

"All these pumps out here are going to Denmark, about \$3 million in pumps," Bob said while touring the yard.

The firm's major markets are Canada and Europe. Most of their customers are in the mining or dredging industries.

George McCall, one of Hagler's engineers, said they've done business in 20 countries.

"We have demanding customers in demanding conditions," Mr. McCall said.

Local projects come their way, too -- specifically with the Augusta water plant.

"We were chosen as the expert. The city bought the pump and the gear, and we were chosen to handle the installation," Bob said.

Family legacy

The Hagler brothers have an older brother, Thomas, and a sister, Tina. All are the children of Billie and Thomas Hagler Jr.

Brother Thomas has a pump business in Chattanooga, Tenn., but he doesn't compete with his family because his products are made for industrial settings, not dredging.

Their father was president of GIW from 1971 to 1996, when he sold the company to Germany-based KSB AG.

It had been in the Hagler family since 1947, when Tom Hagler Sr. and his brother John Carroll Hagler Jr. went in with two other partners -- George Baird and Virgil Hollingsworth Jr. -- to buy the downtown Augusta foundry.

Bob recalls being in the original location on 12th Street, which was powered by a water wheel off the Augusta Canal. GIW moved to its current location in Grovetown in 1967.

The company changed hands in 1971 when Tom Hagler Sr. died. Tom Hagler Jr., Danny Hagler, their cousin Jack Hagler and brother-in-law John Lee took over in a partnership.

The new company did more than simply make pumps.

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Back in the Hagler Systems conference room, Bob pulled a slide rule case.

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"Dad and Uncle Danny created this slide rule," he said. "It was passed around. People would go to GIW for that."

"That was the computer of the age," David said. "It made pipeline calculations and pump calculations very simple."

The double-sided slide rule wasn't trumped until 1990, when a calculator was invented to take its place. Even the calculators of the 1970s and '80s couldn't match how quickly a person could find the answer on the family of formulas on the rule, Ben said.

"It is so fast on how it works," Ben said. "The slide, you can solve the problem from any direction."

Under the second generation of Hagler leadership, GIW installed a pump lab. Seminars led to the writing of a textbook on slurry pumps.

"This textbook is not at Georgia Tech," Bob said. "Dad's life contribution to this world is the slurry textbook. He was the businessman that put the money and hired the people and had the dream -- "

"And made it noncommercial," David added.

"What came out of it was world recognition to being the best," Bob continued. "That is the most modern slurry research facility in the world. These big companies with ships making islands ... they send their production and design (people) to Augusta to take a class."

All the Hagler brothers were educated in that lab, too, and they worked for GIW.

Bob branched out in 1993 and became a sales representative for the company.

Ben was concentrating on GIW's European dredge market. David was the Canada regional manager.

When KSB took over GIW, David was the last to leave the company to join his father and brothers in business.

"They wanted me to stay another six months because I had so much going on," he said. "I make the relationships. That's how I sell. I have dear friends now that are my customers, that's how you do it. I chase the money and get to know them."

The Hagler company began as a sales agent for GIW products.

"Dad sold GIW and helped us a little bit," Bob said. "Dad loaned us a little money and went to play golf. He wanted zero ownership."

Golfing brothers

When not working, Bob said, he's working on his "redneck rÃfÃ©sumÃfÃ©" -- hunting and fishing.

Aside from that, he shares a love of golf with his family.

The brothers agree that David is the best player. They said, as chief salesman, he get to play more golf while entertaining clients. David said he's better because he learned the game at an earlier age than his brothers.

David said his mother taught him to play.

"With five kids, she needed to go somewhere, so she went to the golf course," he said.

With Hagler Systems growing as a company, the trio admits they've got less time for recreation. So work and family dominate their time.

"It has to be a job and a hobby or I wouldn't do it as much as I do," David said.

Bob said the firm is still active with Georgia Tech, working with the business school, and occasionally being featured in their publications.

It's not quite like establishing a slurry school the way their father did, but they've begun to add some education components to the business.

Hagler Systems will become a chapter of the American Welding Society, Mr. McCall said, because there is a lot of welding done in the

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shop.

The firm is already the host for the local chapter of the SolidWorks 3-D engineering software.

"It is a way to educate ourselves, and for others in the area to become better at using it," Mr. McCall said.

There are college and high school interns using the software. In 18 months, there have been 11 engineering interns go through the doors, he said.

"We get real work out of them," Mr. McCall said. "It is exciting for them to see something they design one day go into production the next."

Bob said some of the students learned how to use the software at Lakeside High School, but Hagler takes their knowledge to another level.

"I never want to get old with technology," Bob said.

Hagler Systems is in the process of getting some neighboring land rezoned to provide a buffer to the housing expansion in the Aiken-North Augusta area. Bob said they'll put an office building next door so there won't be residences popping up next to the manufacturing plant.

With 350,000 square feet of land on the primary location, there's plenty of room to expand operations if needed.

"We have enough land, easily a 10- to 20-year window to stay," Bob said. "I don't see any change in location. I got tap root in Augusta. We're not going anywhere."

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BOB HAGLER

BORN: Dec. 14, 1956, Augusta

EDUCATION: Georgia Institute of Technology, industrial engineering, 1981

FAMILY: Wife, Becky; children Rachel, Adrian, Robin, Robert Jr., Rebecca and Elizabeth

HOBBIES: Golf, hunting

DAVID HAGLER

BORN: March 25, 1963, Augusta

EDUCATION: Georgia Institute of Technology, industrial management, 1989

FAMILY: Wife, Kelly; children Ross and Will

HOBBY: Golf

BEN HAGLER

BORN: Feb. 11, 1964, Augusta

EDUCATION: Georgia Institute of Technology, mechanical engineering, 1988

FAMILY: Wife, Brooke; children Benjamin, Callie and Ruthie

HOBBY: Golf

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