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Steel the Show

By *Catherine Sinclair* | Staff Writer on September 17, 2015



WINTER GARDEN — The retro typeface of Florida Metal Craft’s name on the building’s brick wall is a reminder that the company has occupied 47 S. Dillard Street for three generations. Although technology and the typical projects completed there have changed over the years, some things haven’t — such as the struggles of welding and cutting in what co-owner Tom Burnett calls a “10,000-square foot oven.”

Tom Burnett and his brother, Rob, inherited the business from their father and grandfather. Florida Metal Craft has always been “No. 1” in the community — ever since the advent of the telephone, when the business’s phone number was simply “1.” That was the number that founder Louis Iserman requested.

Whether Grandpa needs help with his lawnmower deck or Grandma’s favorite cast iron pot needs repair, Florida Metal Works prides itself on being able and willing to help the community with small, everyday projects. But the bigger contracts with municipalities and corporations are what sustain the company.

“People bring in blueprints and we tell them, ‘Yes we can’ or ‘No we can’t,’” Tom Burnett said. “But I think we’ve got a pretty good reputation in the area and in the industry for thinking outside the box.”

OLD DAYS

The Burnetts’ grandfather, Lawrence Iserman, started Iserman and Company in 1933, across the street from Florida Metal Craft’s modern-day location. He moved to the current building in 1955 and changed the name to Florida Metal Craft in 1960.



Much of the work at Florida Metal Craft is done by hand with small machines.

In those days, most of Florida Metal Craft’s projects served the citrus industry. Iserman was known for developing a machine that could grade the oranges according to diameter, as well as a specialized edger to trim overgrown aisles of orange trees.

“He came down here at the right time,” Tom Burnett said about Iserman. “The harvesting equipment and the processing was becoming increasingly (common).”

Around the time of World War II, there was a U.S. Army base at Johns Lake. Iserman was offered an extra gas ration if he took soldiers out on the lake for leave. That’s how he met a soldier named Louis Burnett, who ended up marrying Iserman’s daughter, Helen. Louis and Helen became the parents of Tom and Rob.

Tom and Rob went to Lakeview High School. Rob graduated from the University of South Florida as an engineer and started working at the family business in 1972. Tom followed a few years later, after graduating with a business degree from the University of Florida.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

In the 1980s, the hard citrus freezes forced Florida Metal Craft to find a new niche in the community.

“We were able to weather that and turn our direction more toward the theme parks,” Tom said.

The company had been on Disney’s radar since the parks were in their early construction phases, but Louis Burnett had turned down an offer for a contract with Disney because he didn’t think he could balance that type of project with his booming citrus service business.

Disney approached Florida Metal Craft again after the freezes, and Tom and Rob agreed to create pieces for the theme parks. They have finished a number of projects for Disney since then, including a kiosk at the China Pavilion in Epcot and the pineapple leaves at Bongos Cuban Cafe in Downtown Disney.

Another project of which the Burnetts are particularly proud is the control module for a nuclear submarine simulator for the U.S. Navy. It had to smoothly yaw, pitch and roll — mimicking the motions of the sea.

“It almost brought tears to my eyes watching that thing because ... for as much as that thing weighed, it was the most fluid, perfect motion,” Rob said. “It was amazing that it did what it was supposed to.”

Currently, Florida Metal Craft is working on a project at Orlando International Airport, and the company commonly does work for water-treatment plants. But Florida Metal Craft always will be glad to serve its clients just down the street.

“The city of Winter Garden is one of our best customers,” Tom said.