

A labor of love

Oswald Supply is the true definition of a family business.

By Dan Holohan



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H.C. Oswald Supply is in an old brick building sitting swat on a street in the Bronx less than three miles from Yankee Stadium.

Oswald started its business in 1923 just a decade after the New York Yankees showed up, and they, too, have a grand history.

Robert Oswald Jr. is of the fourth generation and I like him a lot because he is passionate about this business. He understands that it is about more than just answering phones and moving shelf goods. He knows that there is a sweet history here. You pick up a piece of old iron and it tells a tale.

“It is incredible working in the business that your great-grandfather built almost 100 years ago,” Robert tells me. “Walking through the warehouse as a child and seeing my name, ‘OSWALD SUPPLY,’ forever cast into a



Bronx, N.Y.-based Oswald Supply President Bob Oswald (right) and his son, Robert Jr., have helped navigate the company to its 100th anniversary in 2013. Photo courtesy of Oswald Supply.

diamond-shaped cast-iron plate, which itself may be 100 years old, both inspired and humbled me.”

As he told me this, my childhood memories of my father’s days at the supply house, Glauber, Inc., which was in Manhattan, came flooding back to me. My name was on nothing but my father back then, but I was proud of his size and his strength and how he laughed with the contractors on the loading dock. I remember how those strong men would pat me on the head during the long summer days when that place was my playground. This is a generational business.

Harold Oswald, who was the president before Robert’s dad, typed some thoughts at his desk in the fall of 1992. “I have typed this, just going along as I recall what has all happened and how our business has grown, existed and prospered over these past 50 or 60 years. Don’t forget, Bill and I both started very young in life, working for Oswald Co. We have many good memories. It took a lot, a very lot of work to build up to what we now have, but as I look back I can say I enjoyed every minute of it and I believe Bill feels the same way. Now the business has turned over to the third generation. I wish they have as much enjoyment making it continue as we retirees have had. Good luck.”

Robert told me how these guys worked through the nights and the weekends in those days, staying in boarding houses in the city to be close to the needs of their customers. “People don’t seem to have the same work ethic they had then,” he said. “But now it’s my turn to do something. I’m the fourth generation.”

Lasting impression

And this is what Robert has done: The Dead Men of Oswald Supply recorded notes on every phone call they got for a replacement boiler part. To this day, there is an information card in their office for every boiler manufacturer you can imagine. There are two main categories: boiler sections and repair parts, and handhole plates and manhole plates. Each time they found an unrecognized handhole plate on a boiler in the field, they recorded it on the appropriate card. They did the same with manufacturers’ dimensions and specs along with their own dimensions and specs, which were usually more accurate. They included the vendors and pricing, replacements if the part had been discontinued, casting numbers, die numbers and any other note that would be useful if they someday got a call for that odd part.

Their card collection dates to 1923. Imagine that. And they still use them every day. You will not find this information anywhere else. It’s a generational thing. The father tells the son. I get that. I think you do too.

“My father says a good boiler should last you 100 years,” Robert relates. “My father laughs when he says it, but it’s true! Handhole plates don’t go bad. We aren’t running a grocery store here. Handhole plates don’t spoil like milk. If an old Ames Iron Works boiler or a Fitzgibbons boiler needs a plate? We have it. And if we are out of stock, we can make it because we have the original patterns. If you need it today, I

can cross-reference the original plate specs to match a different plate we stock with the same dimensions. The only information I need is whatever you have. I learned this trade from the Dead Men of Oswald's and from my father. This trade is priceless and it is unique.”

The only information I need is whatever you have. Beautiful.

History lesson

Like me, Robert is a sucker for the Dead Men and for the history of this industry. He enjoys picking up a yellowed reference card while trying to identify a handhole plate and seeing “Use in a pinch” written in pencil, maybe 80 years ago, and in Harold Oswald's hand. The Dead Men live on in us.

“We get calls from customers all over the nation, looking for the one handhole plate they need to keep their 100-year-old boiler running. They call because they see no reason to replace a good boiler if all you need is a plate,” Robert says. “I love being the one to dig around in the old bins and find that part, which is probably the last one in existence. Then I get back on the phone and tell the customer that their boiler will be able to run for another 60 years if they choose to keep it running.”

Robert has spent the past year or so documenting all these cards with most, but not all the information. Hey, there are always some trade secrets kept between fathers and sons. He's created a unique online catalog with this information and it's easy to use because Robert cleaned up one of every plate, photographed each and put the whole works into a searchable database. This exists nowhere else in the world, and without these guys it would all be lost forever. I appreciate them.

Want to see some boiler history? Want to solve immediate boiler problems that others say can't be solved? Go to www.oswaldsupply.com and click on the Handhole/Manhole button. Then search for a plate by Category, Flat or Curved, Axis of Curve, Radius of Curve, Plate Size, Bolt Type, Handhole Shape or by Compatible Boiler. In the middle of the Handhole/Manhole plate page, the Boiler Manufacturer button will bring you to a list of boiler manufacturers. Click on any name and you'll see information taken right from the Dead Men themselves.

Robert did much of the research for current applications himself and the only thing missing are the yellowed cards, but someday I'll bet the sixth or seventh generation will remember Robert just as fondly as he remembers those who came before and worked so hard building an American business. It's been a labor of love, and boilers, when loved this much, will last for many generations.

As will a strong family.

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Dan is the hydronics contributing editor for Supply House Times. He founded the popular [www.HeatingHelp.com](#) web site where you'll find just that - Heating Help. Post your technical challenges on The Wall bulletin board and get input from some of the best in the business. You can reach him at dan@heatinghelp.com. He loves hearing from you!

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