

# A Tribute to AMBA's Charter Members (Part 1)

Nearly four decades ago, several mold building companies had the foresight to unite with fellow mold building operations through membership in the American Mold Builders Association (AMBA). Conceived in 1973, the AMBA strived to bring together a talented group of skilled craftsman in an effort to provide them with not only a voice, but also a powerful tool in business management that would help to protect their investment. These companies were first to share the AMBA's vision and together, would work to grow the industry at large. In the first of a two-part series, the American Mold Builders Association pays tribute to four of its eight charter members in a historical overview of the road they traveled to success. Together, these four companies possess nearly two centuries of knowledge and expertise in the mold building industry.



Elba Tool was founded in Maywood, IL, in 1962 by Horst Elendt and Otto Barth in an old butcher shop with wooden floors. There they built plastic injection molds and machined various other items in an effort to keep the new company going.

They started the company with only a small lathe, a couple of grinders and some Bridgeports with cross slide turntables. Eventually, they bought a tube type Elox EDM and On-trace hydraulic duplicating unit on a Bridgeport mill. Those things were considered state-of-the-art equipment at the time. Details that needed to be sharpened out on cavity sets, such as lifters and some part geometries, were sometimes filed, chiseled or broached by hand. Eventually, the company migrated to paper-tape CNC machines and a larger electronic duplicating mill. "At the time, we tried to use what we had and upgrade as best we could," said Elba Tool President Erich Elendt. "Now we have 5-axis and 3-axis high-speed machining centers and EDMs that are centrally networked, with all our programs created offline."

"Our history is pretty interesting. When my dad, Horst, first started his apprenticeship in Germany, he was filing blocks square by hand. They had grinders, but were not allowed to use them until they mastered their basic skills," said Elendt. "The apprenticeship program he went through over there was very difficult simply because today's technology did not exist and the instructors they had were very hard on the students."

injection and die-cast molds. According to Elendt, "In the '80s, we saw an increasing amount of overseas competition from smaller countries in different parts of the world for plastic molds and decided to focus primarily on diecast molds because of that." It was then that Elba started buying larger equipment. Unfortunately, Barth passed away suddenly in 1995.

In 1999, the company moved into a new 20,000 sq. ft. facility in Bloomingdale, IL. Since that time, it has continually added equipment and people and now has the capability of building die-cast molds for presses up to and including 1,800 tons.

Originally, Elba Tool served the automotive, agricultural, lighting and outdoors markets, doing work for GM, John Deere, Caterpillar, Halo Lighting and Zebco. The company built molds for everything from the popular Snoopy kids fishing reels to Holley carburetors. In the late '80s, it prototyped castings and built tooling for the original Northstar induction housing system for Cadillac, which was cast out of magnesium.

Today, Elba Tool primarily serves the automotive market with a small percentage in various other consumer markets.

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technology we use and our in-process shop floor quality control measures allow us to build tools and components that are 100-percent interchangeable for our customers," said Elendt. "That is something we stake our reputation on."



In business for 51 years, Elba Tool's 20 employees enjoy a family-oriented atmosphere where everyone communicates and gets along well. "We all pay attention to details and deliveries and are proud of the work we do," said Elendt. "Our crew does what it takes to get the job done. We take a methodical and detailed approach towards every project and focus on each individual customer's needs, which is not always easy. It requires us to be flexible. I firmly believe that the high-profile projects we have done are directly related to customers realizing this and trusting us to do the job right the first time around. My father always said, 'If our customers make money, we will make money,' and our customers' loyalty has proven this to be true over the years."

Currently, Elba Tool is adding equipment and people to serve customer needs. A few of its customers are growing rapidly and the company wants to grow with them. "Also,

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some of our newer customers are requesting more machining capacity. "They like our product quality so much they have come to rely on us," Elendt explained. "As enticing as it may be to add capacity all at once, we are doing it in a conservative fashion, as we have always done, so as not to lose control of the product quality and delivery."

Looking back over the last half a century, Elendt feels the industry has not changed much except for the technology, as the industry is, and always will be, a highly competitive business. "The only difference with overseas competition now is that it has been coming from China and not Japan or Europe like it did back in the day," said Elendt. "It is nice to see that those of us that survived the competitive onslaught of China can now start to reap the rewards of re-shoring and a much improved manufacturing industry in general."

Elendt concluded by saying, "I truly believe manufacturing is on the upswing and is once again being recognized as an important part of the American economy. All I can say is for those economists and politicians that wrote off manufacturing here in the US, you were wrong about us... you haven't seen anything yet!"