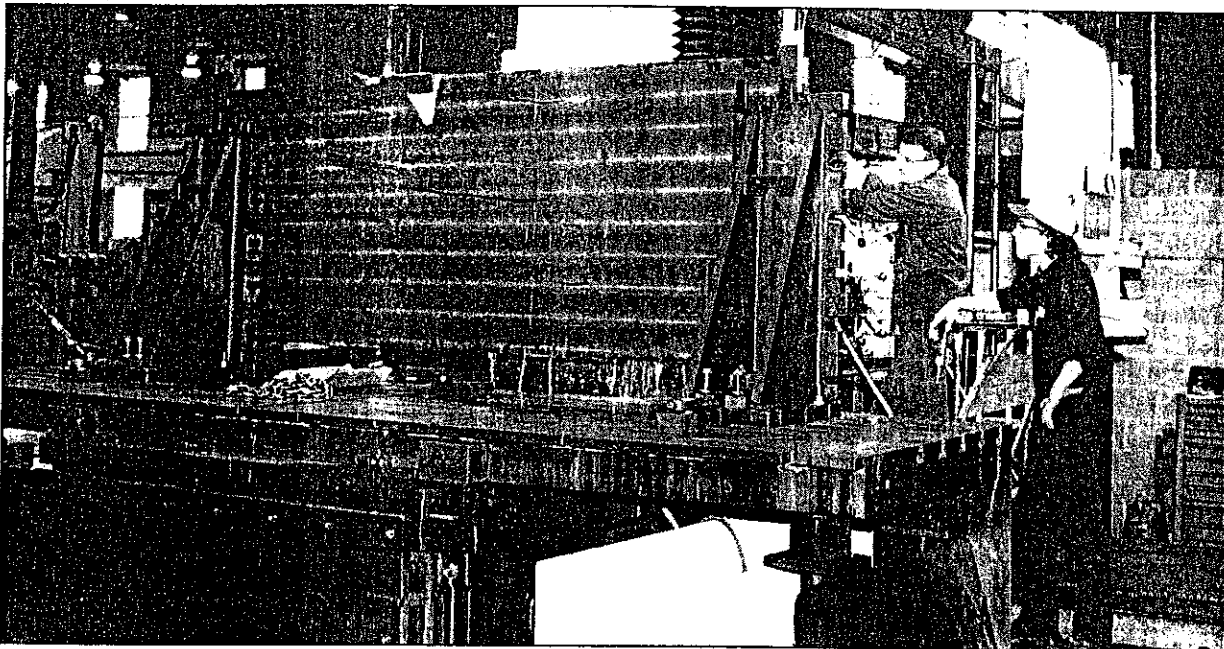


**BUSINESS**



Machinist Bill Wilt, left, and mechanic John Schroter work on a horizontal bar mill at Custom Engineering in Erie

ERIE DAILY TIMES PHOTO BY JACK HANRAHAN

# Platen and fabrication businesses prove successful for Erie's Custom Engineering

By PAM ECKERT  
Contributing writer

An Erie company has a hand in the manufacturing processes of everything from golf balls to furniture and Formica.

Custom Engineering, 2800 McClelland Ave., manufactures platens that are used in hydraulic presses to manufacture a wide variety of household items, according to company president and chief executive officer David M. Tullio.

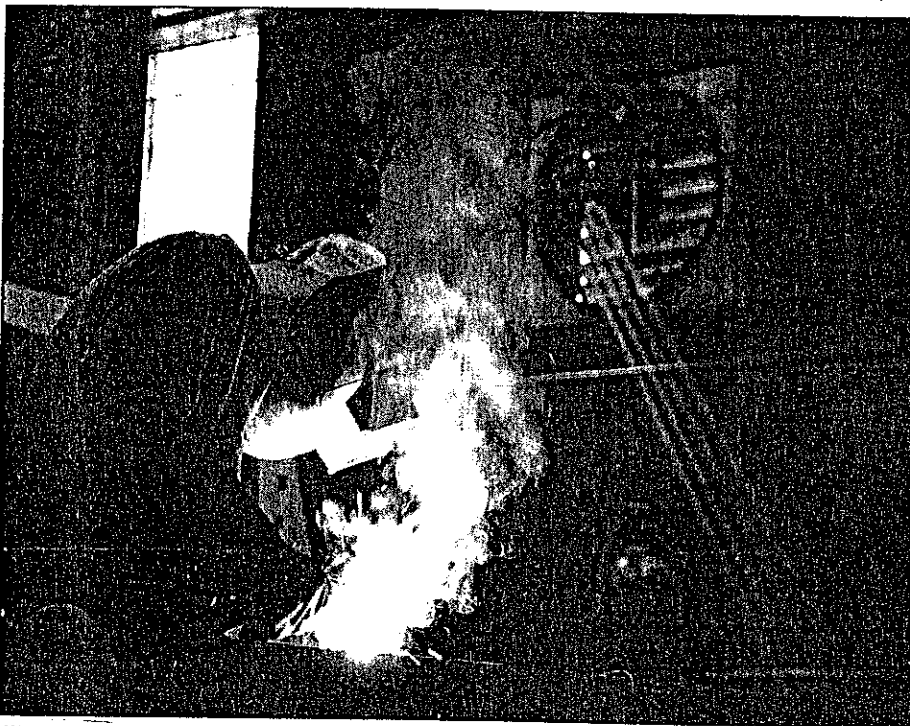
"We've done a lot of local and international work," he said.

Tullio explained that one-third of the Erie company's business is devoted to manufacturing platens — flat, steel pieces used in hydraulic presses for compression molding of industrial rubber belts, titanium helicopter parts, and kitchen countertops and furniture, among other things.

A platen houses a complicated network of pipes and tunnels that circulate heat, steam, vapor, oil or hot water during manufacturing processes.

They have been used to fabricate top quality golf balls, according to platens sales manager Andrew Tompkins. "Our platens are used in the three-piece wound golf balls with the rubber bands inside," he said. "These are the very expensive golf balls that the pros use — it's only about 5 percent of the market."

The platen business is housed in a 38,000-square-foot building. A neighboring 67,000-square-foot building encompasses a fabrication and contract machining business which accounts for two-thirds of all sales.



Welder Bert Sines at work at Custom Engineering in Erie.

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Custom Engineering has fabricated pressure vessels and a variety of products for local companies, and power generation and petrochemical companies. On the local level, the firm has refurbished guns on the U.S. Brig Niagara and is finishing sewage tanks for the Erie ship.

The company also has the ability to handle special projects that many manufacturers can't handle. With a 15-foot-wide planer mill and the ability to manufacture its own presses as needed, the company has multiple capabilities. It has assembled tree debarkers, 15-foot-high tunnels and large GE locomotive oil pans.

Tullio said the 155-employee company has experienced a 60 percent sales growth since 1994. He attributes the increase to excellent machinists and employees, and businesses who rely on Custom Engineering for a variety of services.

"Our fabrication work has grown as a result of other companies downsizing and outsourcing," he said.

Custom Engineering has been locally owned since 1954, when it was founded by Bud Hanley. At the time, the McKinley Avenue manufacturer made platens for the rubber industry concentrated in Akron, Ohio. The company later moved to its current location. In 1972, Theodore Flower and Peter Traphagen purchased Custom Engineering and then sold it to current owner Thomas B. Hagen in August 1997.

Hagen, formerly Gov. Tom Ridge's administration secretary, was former chief executive officer of Erie Insurance.

"Tom (Hagen) wanted to keep jobs in Erie, and he's willing to put money into the company," Tullio said.

He added that the fiscal year ending March 31 showed record sales, and he anticipates more growth this year. The ISO 9002-certified Custom Engineering has already added 10 employees since Hagen bought it.

Physical plant expansion could be in the future, as well. Tullio said the plants would ideally be joined together and cosmetically enhanced.

**Editor's Note:** Today's story is one in a series of weekly features in the