

Forest City-based Winnebago Industries turns 60 (with photos)

By Mary Pieper

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FOREST CITY | Winnebago Industries started 60 years ago with a dozen workers building travel trailers in a facility shared with a hatchery.

Today, the Forest City-based company is a leading U.S. recreation vehicle manufacturer with 4,200 employees.

"There's this rich spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship that seems to have grown up here fostered by our location and the people who have worked here," said Chad Reece, director of marketing at Winnebago.

In late 1957, citizens of Forest City contributed to a fund drive to start the new industry. Residents could invest money in \$100 increments.

The fund drive raised \$50,000, with 208 residents contributing.

Reece said this speaks to the "grass-roots" background of Winnebago, which has made it such an iconic brand.

Marlen Hanson was one of the original 12 employees who started work on Jan. 28, 1958.

He was just 18 and it was his first full-time job.

At that time jobs in the Forest City area "were not easy to come by," he said.

Although Winnebago only paid him \$1 an hour, which was the minimum wage at the time, he considered himself lucky.

That first group of employees set up the plant for production.

The first Winnebago plant was at the intersection of Highways 9 and 69, where Forest City Ford is now located.

Work was slow at first, according to Hanson. He said half the building was occupied by a hatchery, so there wasn't a lot of room for building trailers.

The also didn't have many tools.

Hanson said there was tremendous excitement in the community about opening the plant.

As the company grew, "it put a lot of people to work," he said.

Hanson left Winnebago after six months to work for Forester Trailer, which had just started. He stayed with Forester until it closed 19 years later.

Hanson returned to Winnebago in 1983 and stayed until his retirement in 2002.

By 1961, the company had grown so much that the old canning factory in the west part of town was purchased and converted to production.

Harlan Rodberg started working at that new plant in February 1964. He was farming at the time and thought he would just work for a few months until the start of field work in the spring.

"Fifty springs later I was still there so I must have liked it," said Rodberg, who retired from the company in 2014.

In September 1964, a fire broke out at the plant. Rodberg remembers lots of local fire departments came to fight the blaze, but the wooden building was destroyed.

Work began that fall on what would become known as the north plant.

Rodberg said everyone worked together to make that happen because the community wanted to the company to succeed.

In the spring of 1965, Rodberg and the other employees went to work at the new building.

Winnebago built its first motor home the following year.

"It took us quite a while to build that first one," Rodberg said.

In a few years there wasn't enough room at the north plant, so work began on the new site, nicknamed "Big Bertha."

"It was the biggest building we had ever seen," Rodberg said.

The company then started building 600 motor homes a week, he said.

The first Winnebago motor homes were 19-foot long. The company now is manufacturing 45-foot-long motor homes.

It takes a lot of work to design one of those big motor homes, according to Rodberg.

He said he appreciated the pay and benefits at Winnebago.

"When you retired you didn't need to starve to death," he said.

Rodberg also appreciated his co-workers.

"I made a lot of good friends down there," he said.

Larry Kearney, maintenance supervisor at Winnebago, will celebrate his 50th anniversary with Winnebago in June. He's only the second employee to reach that milestone.

Of all the current employees, he's been there the longest.

Kearney started out on a glue machine making sidewalls, then moved into routing.

"And then Uncle Sam had my hand up and wanted me to join the Army," he said.

He was allowed to take a leave of absence so he could serve his tour in Vietnam. When he returned he was allowed to work in any department he wanted.

Kearney chose the warehouse and became a supervisor there in 1973. In 1985 he moved to the maintenance department.

Kearney supervises mowing and snow removal. He said he has a crew of 19 people who have to start work in the middle of the night when it snows so employees can get into the parking lots.

He said the company has changed tremendously since he started working there in 1968.

He estimates Winnebago had fewer than 600 employees at that time.

In the 1970s business really "blew up," according to Kearney.

"The buildings, they just kept popping up," he said.

Kearney said he's had good bosses over the years, including company founder John K. Hanson.

Although he was the CEO, "he was a common guy," according to Kearney.

He said once someone in management wanted to get Hanson "a fancy golf cart with all kinds of bells and whistles," but Hanson declined.

"He said, 'I want a golf cart like the rest of the guys,'" Kearney said.

Today Winnebago has locations in four states.

However, Reece said the vast majority of the employees work in North Iowa at the facilities in Lake Mills, Charles City and Forest City, which remains the biggest campus by far.

"The center of our universe is in Forest City," Reece said.

Even as Winnebago celebrates its 60th anniversary, company officials are looking toward the future, according to Reece.

"There are brighter days ahead of us," he said.