

a view from the top

ERIEZ' REPRESENTATIVES AND STAFF POSE ATOP THE VIEWING PLATFORM OF THEIR AWARD-WINNING METAL SORTING MACHINES AT A SCRAP INDUSTRY SHOW IN LAS VEGAS.



# Eriez magnetic force

By John Chacona  
Photos courtesy of Eriez Magnetics

Eriez Magnetics in Erie, Pa., is a well-known employer that's had some record-breaking sales months. Keith Jones shared the company's 68-year history and philosophy.

The South Building of Chicago's McCormick Place contains more than 1 million square feet of exhibition space, and nearly all of it is filled when the Worldwide Food Expo, the world's largest food and beverage technology trade show, is in town.

But not in 2009, when Keith Jones, corporate communications director at Eriez attended the show, one of dozens he attends annually.

"There are so few exhibitors here, the show is squeezed into the center of the hall," he says. "It's creepy, but we continue to go to

shows even in this economy because most of our competitors are not here. The visitors who come are looking to buy something, and if you're the only one for them to talk to, that's not a bad thing."

Jones has been a part of the Eriez staff



for 32 years. He has seen good years and bad, and while the broader economy may be struggling, Eriez Magnetics has broken some records. August 2009 was a record month for the company, even in the midst of the worst recession in 20 years.

The reasons are simple: innovative products brought quickly to market, ferocious commitment to customer service and a flexible, committed labor force — factors that have contributed to the company's success in fat times and lean since O.F. Merwin sold his first permanent magnetic separator to a grain miller in 1942.

That first magnetic separator removed the random bits of “tramp iron” — nuts and bolts from farm equipment, pieces of fencing wire — that found their way into grain from field to mill. Since that time, Eriez has been known for equipment that removes unwanted metals in hundreds of industrial processes.

Food processing has been a bellwether since the company's earliest days, and magnets are critical to removing anything metal from potato chips, cereal or anything that moves along a conveyor belt on the way into a package. Eriez has also developed a strategy of supplying new magnetic



efforts of the employees at Eriez facilities on six continents, including the nearly 300 who work in Erie.

Working at Eriez is often a lifelong affair. It's common to find many second- and third-generation employees on staff, with the average tenure at 14 years.

The company has never had a work

financial measurements are discussed with all employees. “Perhaps not everybody understands every measurement, but it's important that everybody knows what we're doing and what we need to be more successful,” Jones says.

That success, he says, goes beyond the walls of the plant. “We feel our success is extremely

**“We've always considered ourselves a family where everybody works together to accomplish that goal, no matter what needs to get done.”**  
— *Keith Jones*

technologies to emerging industries in search of what Jones calls “some revolutionary idea.”

One such industry is recycling. “We've developed products that help auto recyclers to process the scrap that you get from a car, and sell it for a very high price,” he says.

Eriez has also found a niche in X-ray inspection systems, screeners and conveyor systems, as well as its traditional magnetic devices for lifting and separating materials. In industries like plastics and pharmaceuticals, X-rays can reveal problems early and allow time for correction.

“Part of our success has been our ability to turn on a dime and bring to bear the resources that Eriez comes up with new products for new markets,” Jones says.

None of this would be possible without the

stoppage. “We've always considered ourselves a family where everybody works together to accomplish that goal, no matter what needs to get done.”

Family is important at Eriez. The company is privately held under the major ownership of the Merwin family. The company is, quite literally, a basement project in which O.F. Merwin created that first separator. His son and daughter-in-law, the noted Erie philanthropists Bob and Betty Merwin, continued the family legacy, which now has a third generation, O.F. Merwin's grandson, Richard Merwin, as the company's chairman.

Management shares with workers many of the numbers that are critical to the company's operation in bimonthly company meetings where orders, sales and



community-based. We couldn't have done all we've done without the support of the entire community from which we draw our employees, the work ethic and skills that are a part of doing business in Erie.”

Years ago, on the occasion of a company anniversary, longtime Eriez President and CEO Chet Giermak wrote an ad headline that read — “54 years old and still living at home.”

Thirteen years later, while nearly everything has changed with the world economy, nothing has changed with the way Eriez Magnetics approaches that sentiment.

“I don't see anything we've been talking about going out of style,” Jones says. ■