



MAZE NAILS CELEBRATES 170 YEARS OF MANUFACTURING

When it comes to running not just a family business, but a family-oriented business, Maze Nails in Peru, Illinois is second to none – and it’s been that way for 170 years now.

Founded in 1848 by Irish immigrant Samuel Nesbitt Maze, Maze Nails began out of a need for a better solution.

“My great-great-grandfather came to America and started working as a masonry contractor,” said Roelif Loveland, President of Maze Nails. “When the Illinois and Michigan Canal opened up and gave a direct route to Chicago from Peru, he opened Maze Lumber right along the river so that he could sell brick and lumber to local residents.”

Samuel had a small barge (named “The Elk”) built for the lumberyard – and used it to take the 100-mile long trip to and from Chicago. The trip up was with his barge full of local farmers’ grain for the commodity markets – and the backhaul was a bargeload of white pine lumber for his little yard.

In the late 1800’s, Maze Lumber was selling market-standard nails with their lumber. But when customers came back complaining that the nails were rusting and the cedar shingle roofs of their homes were blowing off, Samuel’s son Walter purchased a single nail machine and the yard began making their own. Instead of making them out of steel, which quickly rusted, Walter used pure zinc for the nails. The LaSalle Peru area was a huge smelter of zinc at the time (since they had lots of coal needed for the process) so accessing the raw zinc for the nails was easy. The result was rust-proof nails that dependably kept Maze Lumber’s cedar shingles on the roofs of their customers’ homes.

It wasn’t long before the nails made at Maze Lumber became

known to other local lumberyards – and they asked Maze to sell them some of their production. And so the small, used nail machine purchased for a part-time solution started running full-time. And soon, more machines were added.

There was a small problem, though. Because Maze Lumber was situated so close to the Illinois River, any time the river rose and water came into the plant, production of nails had to be shut down. So, in 1922, the third-generation Maze boys – Hamilton and James – purchased an empty plot of land on higher ground, and Maze Nails was born.

“We started very small and built from there,” Roelif said. “We had just a handful of employees at the time, and made only one or two types of nails.”

Things have changed since then – the company now employs over 80 people and makes over 2,800 types of nails, claiming the title of America’s Premier Specialty Nail Maker.

“We are basically the last man standing in the specialty nail business,” Roelif said. “Many other companies thought they could compete by matching the import prices, which was their downfall. You have to drive your business with the quality of your products, speedy delivery times, and with a good variety.”

And though much has changed in the scope of nail making, the business has stayed within the community and in the family. Roelif works alongside his two brothers, Pete and Jim, two of his three sons, and four of his nephews. He is the fifth generation to own and operate the Maze operation – and the sixth generation is soon to take over.

Roelif didn’t always expect to become the president of his family’s company, but is happy that he did.



Roger Wasik stands in front of Maze Nails' 100% recycled boxes, remembering the days when the packaging line was not automated.



Cindy Diaz packages nails into convenient 5-lb. boxes.



Doug Jost prepares to paint a 200-lb batch of nails.



Maze Nails President Roelif Loveland shows off a bundle of copper, which will be made into solid copper slating and flashing nails.



Bobby Lance fine tunes a nail machine that manufactures hundreds of nails every minute.

"It really tickled my Dad to have all three boys in our family end up working with him. I think it was a lot of fun for him, and I now know how he felt. Two of my sons work in this family business with me. I'm proud of their strong interest and their abilities, and how they are learning about the business and are enthusiastic about their work," Roelif said.

While much of the family is still in the business, Roelif makes sure all employees are treated like family. During the tour of the facility, he made sure to stop and chat with each and every one of his employees – from the sales department all the way to packaging.

"We really are a family here," Roelif said. "I think what makes this business work is that we try hard to put everyone in a position that they belong in and where they want to be. It's about finding the right place where someone fits in, making sure they're happy, and that they are productive in that spot."

One of the many ways Roelif keeps his employees happy is through the relaxed and open office setting he provides. His desk sits in the sales department right next to everyone else's and he works just as hard as everyone he employs. He even allows employees to wear casual clothes to work in exchange for donations.

"I really love how community-oriented we are," said June Holdcraft, an employee of Maze Nails. "We always have donations that we give to various charities. Right now, we get to wear jeans on Wednesdays as long as we put some money in the jar, which is going to our local homeless shelter this month. Around this time of the year, customers always send us gift baskets. We just had a raffle for

them and donated the proceeds to the homeless shelter and the food pantry."

The level of community involvement at Maze Nails is more than just charming – it's for a reason. Maze Nails is also a part of the Certified Production Technician Program at Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC) in Peru, which provides skills to students coming out of high school who are looking for a technical degree.

"If a student takes classes at IVCC and comes to work for us for at least a year, we will reimburse them the full cost for that course," Roelif said. "We have been involved in the program for about three years."

Roelif believes that if the skills gap in manufacturing is going to close, it will have to be with the help of manufacturers investing their time and resources into younger generations.

"Manufacturers need to make it happen. We can't operate without people who know what they're doing. One way or another, we're going to make our nails in the state of Illinois," Roelif said.

It's this kind of attitude that has kept Maze Nails around for so long. That, and Roelif's genuine excitement about the products Maze Nails produces and the people he hires to help make them.

Please join the IMA in congratulating Maze Nails for 170 years of manufacturing in Illinois, and a bright future ahead. ♦