A Brief History of Kerner Tool & Die Company

Provided by the Harborcreek Historical Society and written by guest author Phil Kerner

The Harborcreek Historical Society seeks guest writers for both The Harbor View quarterly newsletter and "YourHarborcreek" magazine on an ongoing basis. The following article was submitted to the Society in October 2020 by Phil Kerner, whose family has been involved in manufacturing in the Erie area for over 100 years. Mr. Kerner owned Kerner Tool & Die Company from 1991 to 2004, and he is presently a toolmaker with Specialty Machinist Industrial Sales & Manufacturing. Mr. Kerner has extensive experience in the tool and die industry, and, through his website TheToolandDieGuy.com, he connects current and future generations of journeymen tool and die makers with tools, mentors, and educational resources. He is also his family's historian.

As a lover of history and of biographies, I can assure you of two things; first, the best "recollections" of history are told by the families who actually experienced it. Secondly, it takes just one family member who has a passion to dig deep enough to put the story together.

In the case of my family, that would be me. And it's an honor and privilege to do so.

Most folks in the Erie, Pennsylvania area are familiar with the Gospel Hill Golf Club, which closed several years ago. Situated in Harborcreek, Pennsylvania, Gospel Hill was a terrific place to learn the game of golf. With a short "front nine" and a longer "back nine," there was something there for everyone. A nice layout that was suitable for walking and all in all, not too much trouble lurking on any hole.

As the late and great Paul Harvey would say, here's the rest of the story.

At the pinnacle of Gospel Hill, there once stood a place that was known as Gospel Hill Farms. From my research, and based on old photographs that I can find, Gospel Hill Farms was mainly a dairy farm. I say that based on the central barn, which was definitely more ornate than the average working farm. It was surrounded by many orchards that produced apples and pears, along with other crops that might be grown and sold in the area.

In 1944, Edward Kerner started his own tool and die company on Eastlawn Parkway in the City of Erie. The legend, which I cannot confirm, is that he connected two neighborhood garages together at the beginning. The result was that his neighbors experienced severe power shortages every time the machines were fired up. It was time to find a suitable and proper place for his new enterprise.

Sometime in the mid to late 1940's, Edward Kerner purchased the entire Gospel Hill Farms complex, which encompassed some 300 acres of property, along with the dairy barn, a stately Spanish-revival farmhouse, and several outbuildings.

Thus far, I have written as an objective historian. From here and going forward, it's about my beloved Uncle Eddie.

Eddie was fortunate to have some very close friends who just happened to need some tool and die work done - the Parker brothers, who owned and operated the Parker White Metal Company, located in Fairview, Pennsylvania.

Thus began a small but very successful company with its roots based in, of all things, a dairy barn. By the late 1950's, the Kerner Tool & Die Company was one of the premier tool and die shops in the tri-state area.



Image provided by Phil Kerner

In 1959, Eddie built the A-frame home, which still stands today, on a hill overlooking the property. I have been told that it was built from the design of a local Behrend College student's thesis for his architectural design degree.

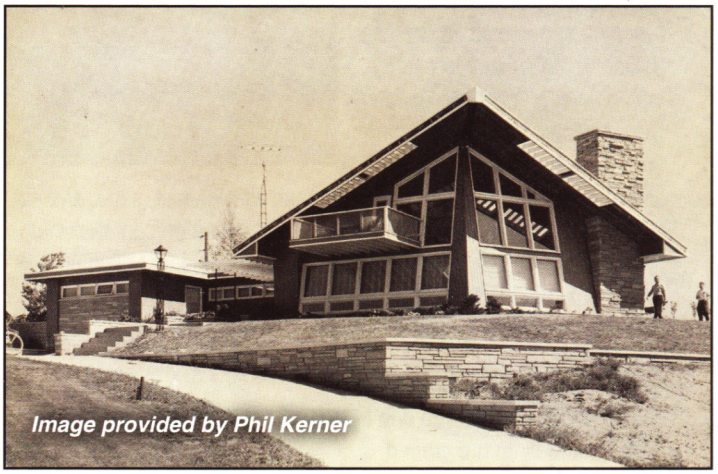


Image provided by Phil Kerner

The home featured a towering glass A-frame sunken living room, which included a free-standing copper fireplace with grooves machined in its entire length by the tool and die shop. All of the hardwood floors were furnished from black walnut trees located on the property.

As the shop continued to prosper and grow, many additions were added. It is of particular note that the barn was always the center of the enterprise, with several brick-and-mortar additions added around it.

Quite frankly, this may have been one of the most unique manufacturing facilities in the history of Erie county.

The Kerner Tool & Die Company would go on to produce a legacy of craftsmen and shop owners that would influence the Erie tool and die industry for another generation. Bill Hilbert, president of PHB Industries, apprenticed there and eventually became a co-foreman. Joe Duska, founder of Engineered Plastics, apprenticed there and also became a co-foreman. Amos Newman, founder of Tetra Tool Company, worked as a toolmaker there.

Sometime in the early 1960's, Eddie decided to clear the land behind the shop and build an 18-hole golf course, which would become Gospel Hill Golf Club.

Of personal note, most people would never know that the beautiful dairy barn also had an amazing second floor. We always referred to it as the "dance hall," and it was a spectacular second-story complete with hardwood floors and knotty-pine walls. All of the family wedding receptions were held there, along with many other shop Christmas parties and family events. As of this writing, it is heartbreaking that no photos exist of the dance hall. But I am still searching.

My father, Fritz Kerner, had served as the shop foreman and General Manager since the company's inception. Fritz passed away in May of 1969, followed by the death of Eddie Kerner in December of the same year.

The company was eventually sold and the name changed to Kathmann Die & Tool for a few years.

Wooden dairy barns and high-voltage machinery don't always co-exist so well. In September of 1974, a fire erupted in the barn, destroying much of the complex. While many of the concrete additions still stood, the decision was made to raze the remaining structures several months later.

In closing, I have recently interviewed some of last remaining toolmakers who actually worked at Kerner Tool & Die back in the 50's and 60's. Without a doubt, they were all very appreciative of the training they received there, that served them very well for many decades afterwards.

It should also be noted that everyone who I have ever met that worked there said it was the coolest place on earth. A factory in a dairy barn overlooking a golf course... can't get much better than that.

The Harborcreek Historical Society's Gifford-Blanchfield House is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Saturday 10:00 am – 2:00 pm. Visitors are required to wear masks and adhere to physical distancing guidelines. For additional information, contact us at (814) 899-4447 or harborcreekhistory@gmail.com, or visit our website at www.harborcreekhistory.org.

