

From bakery to Bekum

PMM



MARTIN STARK

MARTIN STARK was miserable. New to America, and with limited English, he started working the overnight shift in a Chicago-area bakery when a newspaper advice columnist recommended he contact Battenfeld Corp. of America because it might be hiring.

Unbeknownst to Stark, his wife had written Frau Isabella, the advice columnist at a German-language newspaper in Chicago. Frau Isabella's advice set Martin Stark on the path to a distinguished 48-year career in the plastics industry. He is currently chairman of the board for Bekum America Corp., which he joined in 1981 after 12 years at Battenfeld.

Stark discussed his career with *PMM* Editor Ron Shinn during an interview in his office at Bekum America's headquarters in Williamston, Mich.

Just the facts

WHO IS HE: Martin Stark, chairman of the board for Bekum America Corp.

AGE: 76

YEARS AT BEKUM: 36

HEADQUARTERS: Williamston, Mich.

EMPLOYEES: 116

What was it like growing up just after World War II?

Stark: I was 5 years old when the war ended. While my father was in the war, my mother ran a bakery and a small grocery store. I had five brothers and one sister and the older ones were gone from home to apprenticeship programs or jobs. At age 13, I had to clean the bakery every Saturday. It took 7-8 hours

to clean the equipment, ovens and the floor. Everything had to be spotless. I learned about responsibility from doing that.

We lived in a small town of about 400 people. There were limited opportunities in small towns. Education was not a high priority. The school in my town was one room for all eight grades. Fortunately, after that school, my

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parents sent me to business school. We learned everything about business, from calculations to sales to inventory management to business writing to accounting.

Did that prepare you for your first job?

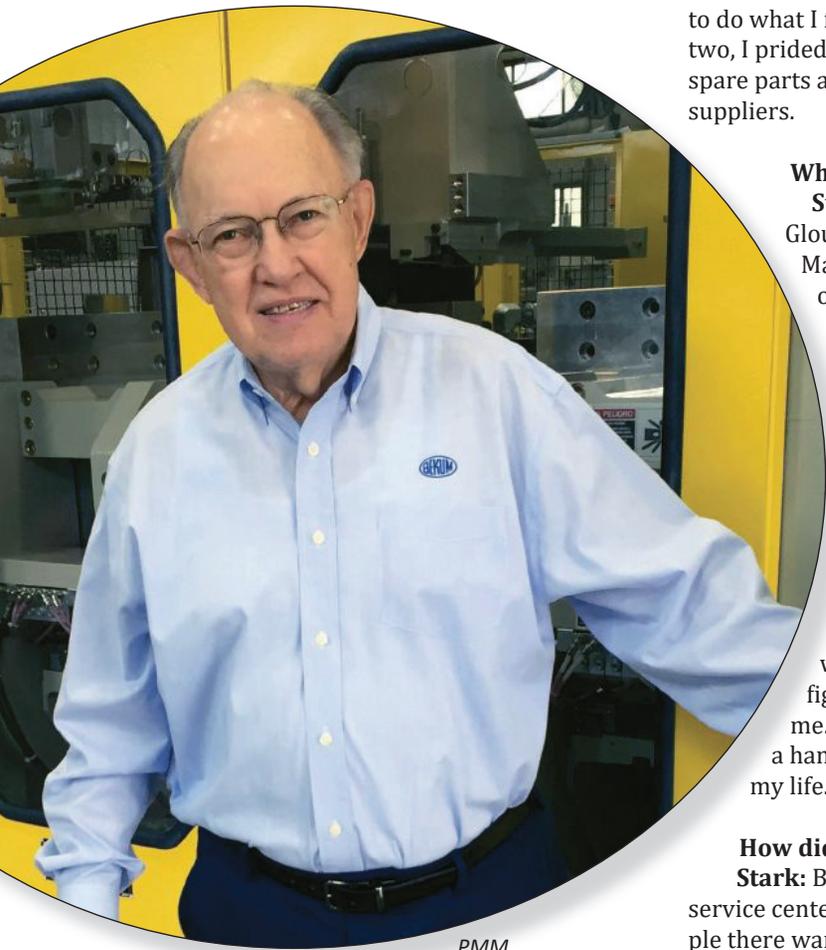
Stark: Yes. I went into an apprentice program at a company that made agricultural machinery. The apprenticeship program was for three years, with one day each week in school. At the company, the apprentices rotated through all the departments. I started in machine shipments, then spare parts, payroll, accounting, sales and purchasing. It was an awesome experience.

Where did you go for your first real job?

Stark: Bosch, to a factory with about 4,000 employees making home appliances, such as refrigerators and washing machines. It was the best thing that had ever happened to me. They had a terrific development program for young people. If you did your job right, you were noticed. Every eight to 10 months, the personnel manager would ask where I wanted to go next. One of the final jobs I had was assistant to the president.

Why did you leave Bosch after 12 years?

Stark: I liked Bosch and will be forever grateful that I went there because I learned so much. But it was a very structured company, and I wanted to work in a smaller company where my contribution would have a greater impact.



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Is that when you came to the U.S.?

Stark: Two of my brothers were bakers who had immigrated to the U.S. in 1951 and 1953. One was on vacation in Germany in 1968 and talked me into coming to America. Both said they would help me out, but I still was not sure what I wanted to do. We had two children, ages 1½ and 2½ years old. So our plan was to go to America for four years and come back to Germany when they started school.

What were the early days in the U.S. like?

Stark: We came to the U.S. in April 1969. I was working in the bakery overnight and going to English classes during the afternoons. It was difficult to sleep during the day with two small children in the apartment, and the English class instruction moved very slowly.

What did you do at Battenfeld?

Stark: My first job was to be responsible for spare parts, but with my education and experience, I could help with other departments as well. They promoted me within the first couple of months to plant superintendent. Later, I became VP of operations.

Being responsible for spare parts and inventory taught me valuable lessons. Battenfeld imported injection molding machines, and we faced big competition from the domestic manufacturers like HPM, Reed-Prentice, Farrel, Van Dorn and Milacron. My own philosophy, which I developed there, was that the quality of the machines and what they could do was pretty similar, so we had to be good in spare parts and service to compete successfully with the American companies. I had a free hand from the Battenfeld organization to do what I felt had to be done. Within a year or two, I prided myself on Battenfeld being better in spare parts and service than the domestic machine suppliers.

Why did you leave Battenfeld?

Stark: In 1979, Battenfeld purchased Gloucester Engineering in Gloucester, Mass. They later decided to close our office in Skokie, Ill., and move the operation to Providence, R.I., where Battenfeld would begin manufacturing their injection molding machines for the U.S. market. Personally, I did not want to move that far away from Chicago, where we had made some friends.

At the same time, Bekum, which I knew by name, purchased the facility in Williamston to manufacture machines in the U.S. Bekum was looking for some people and I figured they could use somebody like me. I met the owner and was hired with a handshake in 1981. It was a lucky day in my life.

How did you start at Bekum?

Stark: Bekum had just closed its sales and service center in New Jersey and none of the people there wanted to move to Michigan, so a lot of

knowledge was lost. Things were pretty rough and disorganized in Michigan. My first responsibility was for inventory, purchasing and spare parts.

What was the situation when you became VP and GM?

Stark: We were losing money and everyone on the team here knew that. I told them we have to tighten our belt, watch every penny and work together. We turned it around in one year.

What is the worst business decision you made?

Stark: At one time, we thought we could venture into downstream equipment such as take-out systems and some automation. But we got busy with our extrusion blow molding machines, and we decided to stick with what we do best.

What is the best decision you made?

Stark: We started a German-style apprenticeship program. We currently have 10 apprentices and will hire four more this summer. It is an accredited, 8,000-hour program.

Another good decision was, in 1989, I convinced the owner of the company to let us start a profit-sharing program. Over the course of time, the company has contributed millions into the profit-sharing plan. My personal philosophy is that "people make the difference." What can you do if you don't have a good, happy employment force?

What has changed with extrusion blow molding machinery?

Stark: Bekum's core engineering technology has always come from our headquarters in Berlin. Here at BAC, we more or less Americanize those machines. It was an important decision to do that. Bekum had a model H-151 that we re-engineered for the American market. Our model is the H-155, and it has become the workhorse of the industry. We changed it from a toggle machine to a hydraulic clamp with different calibration, more cavitation, and switched to a Maco control system in 1982, which is still in use today.

What has changed with the North American market for Bekum's machines?

Stark: We once had 138 customers buying extrusion blow molding machinery. Through mergers, acquisitions and consolidations, the number of companies is now at 34. The customer base has certainly changed. At one time, there were a lot more tinkerers who were willing to try something different. I loved those customers.

How would you like to be remembered?

Stark: I will be happy if they remember me as the guy who put together one hell of a team for extrusion blow molding. We never let a customer down. I am so proud of the team I have here. They are proud of what they do.

Also, my time when I was very active in the plastics industry. I hope I contributed a little bit to the industry. With my team, we worked very hard and fought at times to maintain manufacturing in the United States and even expand it. 