

Wisconsin Plating Works Celebrates a Century of Toeppe Family Survivors



**Wisconsin
Plating Works**
A Family Company Since 1919



Michael G. Toeppe,
First Generation Owner



Robert J. Toeppe,
Second Generation Owner



Robert and Jeffery Toeppe,
Third Generation Owners



WISCONSIN PLATING WORKS A CENTURY OF SURVIVAL STORIES

By Maureen Bagg, Corporate Images



Wisconsin Plating Works is a “family company” offering quality, commercial and specification metal finishing in small to large quantities for over 100 years.



Jeffrey Toeppe,
current owner of
Wisconsin Plating
Works.

Any company celebrating its 100th anniversary has proven its ability to survive. Wisconsin Plating Works has done just that—from the first Toeppe family member’s involvement in 1919 through Jeffrey Toeppe, the current CEO. Combining a tough German work ethic, technical expertise and a bit of luck, three generations of Toeppe’s have guided the organization to its current success as a superior metal plating company.

A century ago, Michael Gebhardt Toeppe, a skilled metal polisher for Simmons Mattress in Kenosha, had already survived the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, escaping with just a tea set and the pajamas he was wearing. A strike at Simmons Mattress encouraged him to leverage his metal polishing skills elsewhere, so he joined the two founders of Wisconsin Polishing and Plating (later became Wisconsin Plating Works), ultimately polishing and plating bed frames for his previous employer. After three years, Michael bought out one owner and continued to plate parts for Racine companies that included: J.I. Case, Nash, Hamilton Beach and Oster Manufacturing— all mass producers of consumer goods, all flourishing after WWI.

But by the 1930’s things had changed. The Depression hit and Robert Joseph Toeppe, Michael’s

teen-age son, had to work part time in the family plating business to ensure it survived. He also sold toilet paper and household supplies door-to-door to save for college. By 1942, with the US one year into WWII and Robert two years into his college career, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps, trained as a pilot and navigator on B-24 Liberators, and survived 36 missions over Europe. A treasured diary, reclaimed years later from a dumpster, recounts (see photo) one mission when he leaned over to pick up a pen and narrowly escaped a shell that would have killed him but struck his parachute instead.

Honorably discharged in 1945, Robert returned to Racine with two Air Medals and the Distinguished Flying Cross. Eventually he joined his father Michael at Wisconsin Plating Works. Production had shifted from pre-war commercial goods to war materials support, then back to commercial goods. Recent advances in technology and organic additives produced plating with bright, smooth, fine grained deposits—spin-offs from the war effort that would enhance plating in the years to come.

When his father passed away in 1952, Robert assumed full ownership, moving Wisconsin Plating Products to 1405 16th Street then to 801 Silver Street a year later. By now InSinkErator, Jacobsen Manufacturing and A & E Manufacturing were major customers. This growth required relocation to the current Carroll Street plant with decorative chrome plating the mainstay, along with copper, nickel, chrome & zinc.



Robert Toeppe kneeling
beside aviator boot and
parachute that took
shells intended for him.



Silk map, Robert Toeppe diaries and Distinguished Flying Cross award from WWII.



*A teacup from the set
Michael Toeppe saved
from 1906 San Francisco
earthquake.*

When Robert died at 56, sons Robert and Jeffrey Toepe, the current owner, made sure the family business survived—incorporating in 1979, adding plant locations on Carroll St and Hamilton St, performing electroless Nickel and Electropolishing on stainless steel, and acquiring a portion of Shephard Plating Company in 1988.

In 2005 Wisconsin Plating Works quadrupled in size by purchasing the assets and equipment of Racine Plating Company. According to Jeffrey, “RCEDC really worked with us, providing us with a low interest loan. We were able to hire everyone (43 employees) and maintain their salary levels, benefits, and accrued vacation time.” With the addition of a second plant, which focused on large quantity runs while Wisconsin Plating handled smaller, specialty orders that required quick turnaround, lead times shortened. Within a year the acquisition was profitable and the Toeppes were poised to deal with challenges to come with the 2008 recession. “We’ve learned how to survive the economic hiccups,” says Jeffrey, who has seen his employees rise to the occasion, doing what’s needed to be done, no matter the challenge.

Following Robert’s retirement in 2014, Jeffrey Toepe assumed full ownership. His survivor skills (like his ancestor’s) have been tested by everything from recessions to a fall from a personal watercraft that resulted in knee surgery two years ago. “I believe how we respond when there is an issue is our opportunity for growth. Trusting in God, coupled with treating everyone with respect—the way you want to be treated—is pretty much what we value most at Wisconsin Plating Works.” Not a bad recipe for survival.

A RAMAC member since 2005.



Coated part used in fuse on 60, 81 and 120mm mortar shells.



Copper, nickel and chrome plated tubing adaptors.

Certifications/Awards

ISO 9001:2015

Industrial Environmental Achievement Award

Employee and Environmental Stewardship Award

Future 50 Award

A few customers over the years

- Oster Manufacturing
- Hamilton Beach
- J.I. Case; now CNH
- Nash
- InSinkErator
- R & B Grinding
- Barclay
- GE Industrial
- Cooper Power



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