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Firm flying high with fins

Heat transfer devices have many uses

By DAN ROBINSON

Times staff writer

"We just fold metal," said David Haushalter, vice president of Robinson Fin Machines.

Folding metal may not sound impressive, until it becomes obvious the Kenton manufacturer may fold metal better than anyone in the world. Its metal fin products are found in medical machines that help during heart transplants and in computers, but they can also be found in the Sea Wolf Nuclear Submarine and the International Space Station.

"Our product goes as high above the earth as man can go, and as deep below the surface as man can go," said vice president Sheryl Haushalter Herron.

Robinson Fin folds sheets of metal into waves, or fins, which help in the conduction of heat. The machine developed by the co-founders of the company is the secret behind their success. It allows them to make the metal fins in such a wide variety and quality that the Kenton plant has established a reputation as the leader in the fin field.

"If you want heat transferred from one place to another, we're the people you need to talk to," said vice president Mark Haushalter.

The Robinson fin machine was first developed by James Robinson and Fred Haushalter in the 1970s. Robinson had invented a similar metal-folding unit

earlier, but turned to engineer Haushalter to make improvements to the machine.

The results of their effort were displayed at the World's Fair in 1976, when Robinson took the fin machine for demonstrations. The following year, he established Robinson Fin Machines Inc. and sold the metal folding machines until his death in 1980.

His widow, afraid her husband's company would not survive his absence, offered to sell it to his former partner, Fred Haushalter left his job at United Aircraft Products in Forest, and along with his wife, Ruth, took over control of the Robinson business.

There would be several changes in the company, but the Haushalters agreed the Robinson name would remain. The business was moved from its home in Florida, to Kenton, at the former North Electric Plant.

But the biggest shift came in what Robinson Fin Machines produced. When Robinson was in charge of the company, he sold only the machine that made the fins. Fred Haushalter decided to continue to sell the machine, but to also sell the products they made.

The fins produced at the plant now make up 98 percent of the company's revenue. Refining the original machine along the way, they found it could fold a wider

variety of metal in many unique ways. Their products were being used in televisions, computers and aircraft. The demand for the fins continued to grow.

By 1987, Robinson Fin needed to expand. They moved to their current location on the southern edge of Kenton on U.S. 68, and expanded again at that site within two years.

The number of employees grew from six at the North Electric Plant, to currently nearly 50. The number of fin-producing machines increased from one to eighteen.

Helping Fred steer the success of the company was a family effort, but it was to become even more so when he died in 1993. Son David had been with the company since high school and continued with the sales and marketing of the product. His brother, Mark, took over control of engineering and manufacturing, while their sister, Sheryl, joined to oversee the administration of the company.

Ruth continues to serve as Robinson Fin's president. The company ships out an average of 70,000 fins a week, with a maximum capacity of 250,000. The product and the machines are sent to buyers all over the world. The company estimates 24 percent of its business is from its international market.

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Times photo

Fins for aircraft

Robinson Fin vice president David Haushalter watches as one of the Robinson Fin machines turns a roll of metal into fins for heat exchange in Naval aircraft. The machine is capable of producing as many as 92 folds per inch of metal.

Fins uses amaze Kenton firm

(Continued from page one) business, the Haushalters have watched in amazement at the ways their fins have been used. The military uses the fins in most of its planes and helicopters. The heat transferring devices can also be found in computers made by Gateway, Dell and IBM. The Robinson fin machine makes parts for the radiators in all NASCAR racers. They provide comfort for luxury car owners as they heat and cool seats of some new Lincolns.

The fins can also be found in machines used for laser surgery

and heart transplants. A blood oxygenator helps heat the blood during open heart operations.

"The fins we make increase the chances of survival during open heart surgery by eight percent," said Sheryl. "That doesn't sound like much unless you are getting the operation."

The company currently holds 11 patents on its fins. The owners have been told of their fins being used in such unusual ways as decorative lights and in windows of high-rise buildings. But perhaps the most novel use for the Robinson fins is in the

International Space Station. When the vacuum toilet is flushed, explained David, it causes friction. Robinson fins are used to avoid overheating in the restroom.

The diversity and quality of the fins sells themselves, said David, who is the only salesperson on the company's payroll.

The fins they make can be folded as small as 92 fins per inch, he said. The closest competition can only fold 35 per inch. As a result, their closest competitors in the fin business are also good customers of Robinson. There is literally nowhere else in the world to buy some of the fins produced in Kenton.

"You can't go to Kmart and buy what we make here," said Sheryl. "But if you buy a Dell computer there, you are buying a product we helped to make."

"We don't make the computer, we make the computer cooler," said Mark.

The future of the company also looks promising, said David. The recent energy shortages in California have drawn attention to a national problem. Energy generating fuel cells are next on the "fin map" of the company. The units would use hydrogen and meet the energy needs of individual homes with no adverse environmental impact.

"Instead of a propane tank in their yard, people would have these fuel cells," explained Sheryl.

The technology is underway, said David, and could be on the market in another 15 years. The Haushalters are confident when the units are available, Robinson fins will be part of the plans. They estimate the fuel cells could eventually be 30 percent of their work.

"As that demand grows, Robinson Fin will grow to make that happen," said David.

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Times photo

Leaders of fin production

Ruth Haushalter, president of Robinson Fin Machines, Inc., is surrounded by her children, who are also officers in the company. They are Sheryl

Haushalter Herron, and Mark and David Haushalter. Robinson Fin produces products found in computers, medical equipment, race cars and the international space station.



Times photo

Variety of products

The fins, produced at Robinson Fin in Kenton, are sections of folded metal. They are used in a wide range of items to control heat disbursement. Company vice president Sheryl Haushalter Herron holds two sizes of fins representing the diversity of the product.