



• Photo courtesy of  
Robinson Fin Machines

# Fin Family

## Mother, daughter lead Robinson Fin into international marketplace



JOHN FIKE • The Lima News

Ruth Haushalter (seated) and her daughter Sheryl Haushalter recently won the 2003 Governor's Award for Women's Excellence in Enterprise for manufacturing. They are the majority stockholders of Robinson Fin Machines of Kenton.

By JOHN FIKE

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KENTON — Ruth Haushalter is a mom. She's also the president and majority stockholder of an international manufacturing company. But unlike many company presidents, Haushalter spends more time with her children at work than at home.

That's because since 1993, Ruth Haushalter and her children Sheryl, David and Mark have built the family business, Robinson Fin Machine Inc., into an international business that is on the cutting edge of heat transfer technology. That technology, the ability to fold metal thinner than newspaper up to 92 folds per inch, is used numerous places in the automobile, military, computer, medical and space industries to cool and heat things.

The family's business smarts and growth, along with Ruth Haushalter's majority ownership, recently earned them the Governor's Award for Women's Excellence in Enterprise in the category of manufacturing.

"I'm really proud of my mom," Sheryl Haushalter said. "She showed determination and persistence at a time when there weren't many women-owned businesses in manufacturing."

Ruth Haushalter gained sole control over the company when her husband, Fred, died in 1993.

"Fin is genderless, and I have been fortunate not to have run into too many issues being a woman in a mostly male-dominated field," Ruth Haushalter said.

Ruth and Sheryl Haushalter will receive the award Sept. 24 at a luncheon ceremony at the Statehouse Atrium in Columbus.

"It's another milestone that says, 'We're who you want to do business with,'" Sheryl Haushalter said.

### A family business

Ruth and Fred Haushalter bought Robinson Fin Machines and the patent for the machines in 1983 from the Robinson family after its founder and inventor

### FINTASTIC

#### WHAT IS A FIN?

• A fin is a folded piece of metal used for transferring heat to or from a liquid or gas that passes through the folds.

#### WHERE ARE ROBINSON FINS USED?

- International Space Station
- Space Shuttle
- Sea Wolf nuclear submarine
- F-14 Tomcat fighter jet
- F-15 Eagle fighter jet
- F-16 Falcon fighter jet
- F-18 Hornet fighter jet
- F-22 Joint Strike fighter jet
- A-10 Thunderbolt fighter jet
- A-6 Intruder attack plane
- V-22 Vertical lift capability turbo-prop plane
- Patriot missile
- Belle helicopters
- Sikorski helicopters
- Boeing 777, 767, 757, 747 passenger planes



- Dell computers
- Silicon Graphics computers
- Sun Microsystems computers
- Gateway computers
- IBM computers
- Optical surgical laser equipment
- Blood oxygenator equipment
- Industrial air compressors
- Decorative light fixtures

- Home clean air exchangers
- Medical lab testing equipment
- Pizza Hut pizza ovens
- Peavey guitar amplifiers
- Satellite telecommunication devices
- Land-based telecommunication switches
- Climate controlled seats for Lincoln, Lexus, BMW and Mercedes
- Honda transmission coolers
- Semi trucks' radiators, charge air coolers and oil coolers
- Diesel train oil coolers
- Fuel cells for electric and hybrid cars
- Recuperators of gas turbine power generators
- Purolator filters
- NASCAR race cars



- High-definition televisions
- Army missile launchers

James Robinson died in 1980. At the time, the company was housed in a 5,000-square-foot facility and had only five employees and one fin-folding machine.

Since the beginning, Ruth Haushalter has been the majority stockholder to give the company an edge in competing for government contracts, which often require a portion of the work to be done by women-owned or minority-owned businesses.

By 1993, Robinson Fin grew to have two fin machines in its facility and began building a 5,000-square-foot addition to make room for the increasing amount of work and number of employees. But Fred Haushalter died that year before the addition was complete, throwing Ruth Haushalter into full control of sales and operations.

"Fortunately, David was already here and partially familiar with our quoting policies and procedures," Ruth Haushalter recalled.

Mark Haushalter came on board in November, and Sheryl joined the team in 1994.

"Family is what has held this business together from the beginning," Ruth Haushalter said. Even James Robinson's son and son-in-law kept the business going from the time their father died until the Haushalter's bought it.

"Having all my children here is one of the greatest joys of every day," Ruth Haushalter said. "Our relationships are very strong — without the strength of the group as a whole, our individual jobs would be harder. We work well as a team, with each of us having primary responsibilities in separate areas but with all of us contributing ideas and solutions companywide."

Ruth Haushalter said that after her husband's death many of the company's vendors and customers thought she would sell or close the business. However, she said, those vendors and customers worked with

Robinson fin through the transition.

"It has been gratifying to be able to continue to meet and even surpass their expectations as we have moved into the future," Ruth Haushalter said. "To overcome the day-to-day challenges, we worked harder and longer. To be honest, we did make some mistakes. They were, fortunately, ones we could recover and learn from."

Together the Haushalter family grew Robinson Fin into \$8 million company located a 27,000-square-foot facility just south of Kenton on state Route 81, with nearly 40 employees and 26 fin machines. About 22 percent of Robinson Fin's business is with companies in Europe, Russia, Japan, Israel, Mexico, Brazil, Canada and other countries.

### Ocean depths and rocket science

Robinson Fin's success is the combination of a unique and necessary product and the Haushalters' commitment to meeting their customers' needs.

The Haushalters' company manufactures unique machines that fold thin sheets of metal into blocks of fins that are used for cooling and heating a wide variety of mechanical and electronic products.

While manufacture and sale of the machines was the company's primary business when the Haushalters bought it in 1983, they've since changed gears and only about 4 percent of Robinson Fin's business is related to selling, maintaining and repairing fin machines. The other 96 percent of the business comes from manufacturing fins for other companies.

Robinson fins are used on land, sea, air and space in products ranging from automobiles, light fixtures and medical equipment to nuclear submarines, fighter jets and the International Space Station.

"We actually keep the toilet (on the space station) from overheating when it is flushed," David Haushalter wrote in the company newsletter last year.

The space station also uses Robinson fins to cool computers and in the system that



Mark (left) and Dave Haushalter

keeps air breathable for cosmonauts. The fins are also used in four kinds of U.S. fighter jets, the space shuttle, Patriot missiles, computers made by five major computer companies, optical surgical laser equipment, telecommunication switches, guitar amplifiers and Pizza Hut pizza ovens. Robinson fins are even used to cool and heat blood for surgical procedures.

"It's nice to be part of a company that's on the cutting edge," Sheryl Haushalter said. "I get to watch the business rise to the challenge (of new applications)."

Robinson Fin is the only fin maker in the world able to make 4-inch tall fin or fold metal up to 92 fins per inch. Because Robinson Fin manufactures all its own machines and tooling for the machines in house, the company is capable of making just one piece of fin for a client working on a prototype, or millions of fins for clients in a production phase.

The company specializes in developing fin designs for unique heat transfer needs, such as the time Fred Haushalter developed fin with a curved base to sit on water pipes in a nuclear submarine. Sheryl Haushalter said the Navy needed to cool the atmosphere in the sub without taking on fresh water, so it wouldn't leave a heat signature in unfriendly waters, and they couldn't find anyone else that could make the necessary fin.

"People call so frustrated because they can't get done what they need done," Sheryl Haushalter said. "That's what we do — what other people can't."

### Priorities

Viewing their customers as more important than their bottom line, the Haushalters said

they go out of their way to meet customer specifications and unusual or changing time frames for production. The company doesn't keep an inventory of fin, but rather designs fin to the specific needs of each customer.

"We can make what they want, and they don't have to settle for something that's close," Sheryl Haushalter said.

Sheryl Haushalter said the family found that making the fin for clients is more cost-efficient for clients because they don't have to buy a new machine or tooling for each project and don't have to train staff to run the machine. Rather, Robinson Fin employees are trained to run the machines and develop expertise in running them over time, resulting in less downtime, fewer mistakes and better products.

"There's some art involved with the science," Sheryl Haushalter said. "You can't just come in off the street and run a fin machine."

For that reason, the Haushalters like to take care of their employees. With less turnover in employees, the machine operators and toolmakers learn and develop their craft. Sheryl Haushalter said the company won't hire a person if they can't guarantee there will be job for them in the foreseeable future. Last year, because of a slowdown in orders related to the economy, the company laid off people for the first time in 20 years. Eight people were laid off.

"That was very difficult for us," Sheryl Haushalter said. "We're just starting to see orders and things coming in again."

Another example of Robinson Fin's commitment to employees is its 401k plan. Sheryl Haushalter said the company added some benefits to the plan to improve it for employees even though it cost the company more money.

"Because if it was for us, that's how we'd do it," she said.

For the Haushalters, staying at the top of their game means being in touch with technology changes. To achieve that, the company looks to hire people with good problem-solving skills and partners with a research and development firm that specializes in heat transfer technology.

Sheryl Haushalter said that in working with clients, Robinson Fin tries goes beyond asking about fin specifications and tries to understand the total purpose and goal of the client's heat transfer needs. That allows Robinson Fin to best meet their needs using any new technology available, she said. Someday, she said, that might mean going beyond fins if researchers develop a better way to transfer heat.

"We want to remain on the edge of heat transfer technology," she said.