

Coastal Industries has occupied several places in 35 years. Pictured below are past and present facilities:


Enjoying the Ride

After 35 Years, Coastal Industries Stays Focused on What it Does Best

by Ellen Rogers




Atlantic Blvd. facility,
February 1972 - July 1975




Theresa Rd. facility,
May 1984 - September 1989



St John's Industrial facility,
September 1989 - present.



Baymeadows facility,
July 1975 - May 1984



Bill Cobb, founder and owner of Coastal Industries, raises a glass in his office.

Bill Cobb, chief executive officer of Coastal Industries in Jacksonville, Fla., is a big fan of the Clemson University Tigers—and he's got the recreational vehicle (RV) in orange and black school colors to prove it. You might even say Cobb, his wife, Gail, and their RV are famous within the tailgating circuit. They've been featured in *Winebago's Traveling Times* magazine and also on ESPN's *Ultimate Tailgating*. Today "RVing" is Cobb's pastime and pleasure, but at one time it was his livelihood. When Coastal Industries was founded in 1972 the company faced many hurdles. No money, no customers and, at times, no roof overhead. But thanks to motor homes (and plenty of prayers) Cobb and Coastal pushed through the hardest of times to become what they are today.

Humble Beginnings

The residential housing market may amount for 60 percent of Coastal's total business today, but this was not always so. In the early days its main market areas were manufactured housing and RVs, followed by boating and lastly residential. Cobb says 35 years ago shower doors in homes were a new concept. Before the launch of Coastal, Cobb was working for a window screen manufacturer and living in a mobile home. "Every time I took a shower the curtain would wrap around me. That was a tough way to take a shower because you were fighting the curtain off," he says. "So I figured, if I could take a screen frame and have shower curtain material roll-formed into the frame, and then put a W-track at the top and bottom, a couple of U-jambes on each side, I could have an enclosure made out of a screen frame for shower curtain material. And it worked."

That was the technology Cobb had in mind when he decided to start his own business a few years later. But, before any new business can be launched, a few necessities are required—namely, money. In 1972 when Cobb set out to start Coastal he had a mere \$15,000 loan, 9,000 square feet and three people, in addition to himself.

"We had no customers, no income, no guarantees of any kind," Cobb says. "We had suppliers that looked at us with a lot of skepticism because we had no money. After about three months I began to realize that it takes a certain level of sales to break even. We were a prime example of how you don't start a business because we did not have enough capital. Everybody I talked to at the time told me it was impossible to do what we started out to do. And guess what? It was ... but we still did it."

Today, though, the company's 250,000-square-foot facility, nearly 200 employees and production capacity of 5,000 shower doors a day (a figure Cobb says they've yet to reach. On average the company produces 1,500 to 1,800 finished doors each day), stand as examples of how a little perseverance, hard work and faithful, dedicated employees can make the impossible possible.

Then and Now

Getting a new business off the ground is not an easy task, as there are often many obstacles along the way. The recession of 1973, for example, brought tight times for Coastal.

"We fell into a negative net worth; in coming out of the recession, we had run out of capital. At one time I went to my sales manager and told him to sell everything he possibly could and I would work the vendors for terms as much as I could," says Cobb. "At the same time we went out to a bunch of manufacturers supplying the RV and manufactured housing industries and talked them into consigning inventory to us. We became a massive distributor for those industries in the southeastern United States. We didn't actually buy the products; we just sold them and were paid a commission on those items. We did that [for several years] and that's how we survived during that period. But at one time, yes, I felt like it might be in my best interest to try and find a job somewhere else."



In their free time, Cobb and his wife, Gail, enjoy tailgating at Clemson games in their RV, nicknamed the Cathouse.

If lack of money wasn't challenge enough, there were other struggles, too. By 1975 the company was doing well enough to relocate to a 40,000-square-foot row warehouse. Cobb recalls one particular afternoon, when the distribution operations had been moved into the new plant with the production equipment still to go, when at 5:15 p.m. it began to rain.

"At 5:30 the roof was on the floor," says Cobb. "That wasn't the worst news. When I called my insurance agent he told me that we had fire and extended coverage, but what we needed was a policy called all risk. Today we have all risk."

Cobb credits the employees of Coastal as the main reason the company was able to persevere through difficult situations.

"We got all of our people together and I told them we could either fight through it or we could just quit. They all elected to fight through it—most of those folks are with me today," says Cobb. "You'd be amazed, each year when I recognize the people who work for this company and I give the tenures—five-year, ten-year, 20, 25, 30, 35—that we have people who have been here for 35 years. I get hoarse talking about it mentioning all the people just when I get to the 15-year tenure."

All in the People

Bill Furr, quality control supervisor, is one of those employees who has been with Coastal for nearly 35 years, starting January 22, 1975. In almost 33 years, Furr has worked in many jobs, from managing a warehouse in Charlotte, N.C., to regional and international sales. He gives credit to Cobb and his leadership style as one of the main reasons he's stayed with the company for so long.

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Coastal's plant has production capacity to create 5,000 shower doors a day.

"I've been approached by competitors as well as other aluminum companies, not necessarily in the shower door market, and offered positions of equivalence to the positions I had as a sales manager," says Furr. "I weighed the offers and I weighed the fact that here I know where I am. I've watched Mr. Cobb decide what's necessary to keep a company profitable and I've seen what's happened with other companies that have gone out of business because of bad upper management procedures. I want to be sure that in the next five, ten years or whatever it is for me, that the company I'm at will still be in existence and profitable."

Company president Ray Adams joined the company in August 2000, with previous experience in the shower door industry. He says Cobb had been friends with his dad, so he had known him for many years prior to joining the company.

"Bill has a dynamic personality; he's a self-made man," says Adams. "I think as a manager he's one who tries to get the right people at the right place. You always know where he stands."

Furr agrees. "When Mr. Cobb says he's going to do something, he does

it—whether you like it or not."

"One of the things I've always tried to do is hire people who are compatible with the people we have here," says Cobb. "I think compatibility with the rest of the group is important and I think that's one of the reasons that we have the longevity that we do. It's a big family atmosphere here."

Forward Thinking

A lot has happened in the shower door and residential markets over the past 35 years, including periods of big business and slow periods. Despite the slow periods of residential construction, Coastal has always managed to thrive. How so?

"Remodeling always goes up when new construction goes down," says Cobb. "And we also have seen in the past, manufactured housing picks up, but that hasn't really happened this time. The RV business has been good and some of the other segments stayed strong [multi-family, high-rise and hospitality] as well."

During slow periods, some companies stay busy by diversifying; Coastal has not chosen this path.

"We try to concentrate on what we do best and shower doors is the business we do best," says Cobb. "A lot of our competitors have gone into tempering glass and we've stayed away from that because it's not our niche."

Competitive Measures

Cobb admits that the shower door business is extremely competitive—even with building products other than shower doors. The key, though, is to differentiate, and bring something to customers that no one else has. For Coastal, that one asset is a specially-developed software program, created by Cobb, which takes general input and converts it to specific information about building a shower door.

"I had the choice of learning a program language and designing and developing a software program myself, or I could hire a programmer and sit with him for several years to develop it and I chose to learn the program," says Cobb. "Over a period of almost 30 years I have written this program, and it is a major asset because it gives you everything you need to know about building a shower door."

The program was developed inter-

nally for Coastal employees to use, but in the last ten years it's been made available to all of the company's fabricators.

"We don't give it away, we sell it. My theory is if you give something away it has zero value," says Cobb.

Customer Satisfaction

Having long-term customers is another example of a successful business. Some of Coastal's customers have been supporting the business since the very beginning. One of those early customers still working with them today is Raleigh Glass & Mirror, in Raleigh, N.C., which has been a customer for 34 years.

"They have one of the best products on the market," says the company's residential general manager, Gerald Humphries. "I've dealt with shower doors for 50 years and they have some of the best service; if there's a problem they fix it right away."

Mark Hill, president of United Mirror and Glass, which has operations in the Dallas/Fort Worth and Austin areas of Texas, is a more recent customer, having worked with Coastal for about two years.

"The previous manufacturer we had been working with could not handle the amount of work we had," says Hill. "So we researched suppliers for six or eight months and Coastal was one of the top three we looked at. It was in the service and the quality [they had], and they won with flying colors."

Hill continues, "I've dealt with all of the top shower door suppliers in the United States; I'm second generation in this business and I've been in it for 30 years. My experience with Coastal is old school—good service and quality. You can call them and talk to the owner and everybody there is willing to do that, and that's so important. They strive hard. There's a problem and a solution and they get the solution. The whole company is that way, top to bottom."



Coastal buys and sells its shower door products on a worldwide basis.

Building Relationships

Many business owners will tell you that without good suppliers it's difficult, if not impossible, to survive. In the early days, Coastal was not without its own supplier challenges. In fact, they lost one vendor when a competitor gave huge material contracts to that company, provided they would not sell to Coastal. Today, though, it's a different situation, and suppliers are happy to work with Coastal. Katie Williams, who works in inside sales for Guardian Industries in Richburg, S.C., has been working with Coastal for five years.

"Everyone there is so friendly and easy to deal with," she says. "Their orders are always timely; they are a very low-maintenance customer."

"We work with a supplier as a partner. We treat them as an equal," says Cobb. "We realize that they have to make money and we try to work with our suppliers and that has worked over the years. Our suppliers have been very, very, good to us and us to them—it's not always price. Price is important, but it's not always price."

Coastal also operates on a global basis, having sold products all around the world from South America to Russia, the UAE and South Korea. Cobb says they also buy on a worldwide basis.

"We import [some products] from China, and where a lot of the competition

may have chosen the route of going through brokers, we chose to establish relationships with the plants in China," Cobb says.

Coastal buys some of its patterned glass from China, but primarily lineal materials. Cobb adds that one of his biggest industry concerns is the ever-increasing amount of extruded aluminum being imported from China.

"My background was in the extrusion business and I have a lot of friends who have been hit hard by the price cutting that's happened with the Chinese coming into the market," says Cobb. He adds that his company does not buy processed materials from Chinese manufacturers. "We have tried in the past and were not successful because [the products] don't seem to be able to hold the tolerances we require," Cobb says.

Maintaining Success

In order to be competitive and to stay prosperous, many U.S. manufacturing companies have relocated their production facilities to China, where labor costs are considerably lower than in the United States. While Cobb admits he has considered moving production offshore, he decided it was not the right move.

"Certain items will lend themselves to being produced offshore. Those items have to be extremely high volume where there's no change or no

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chance of change,” says Cobb. “But this business, especially on the residential side, is a five-day-turn business, which means the Chinese supply chain does not work. There may be some instances where we could utilize that, but it would have to be low-end, high-volume stuff. The systems that we produce here, which now seem to be such a big part of our business, I don’t think they are compatible with that [type of production].”

Looking Ahead

Shower doors themselves have changed greatly in 35 years. Heavy glass doors are the big trend, along with creating a spa-like environment in the bathroom. This includes everything from aromatherapy showers to multiple shower heads.

“When I started out installing years ago it was rare to ever see a custom enclosure,” says Adams. “Now it’s rare not to see one. The industry has become less cookie cutter.”

And Coastal is continuing to keep up with the changes. In fact, in working with its advertising and marketing agency, Kleber & Associates, they are developing plans for what they are call-

Today the company has a 250,000-square-foot facility, but Cobb aims to keep growing.



Cobb says 35 years ago shower doors in homes were a new concept. These samples show how many varieties are available today.

ing “the shower of the future.” Areas they are considering include different types of glass such as “self-cleaning” and antimicrobial to products other than glass that could possibly be used.

“I don’t know where this will lead us,” says Steve Kleber, president of Kleber & Associates, “but it speaks highly of this company that they would engage in that type of thought leadership.”

And what’s in store for Coastal itself?

“If you’re not growing you’re dying,” Cobb says. “I’ve always been growth-oriented. I want the company to grow. I

have sons involved in the business, Ray’s like a son to me. My intention is for the company to grow. I have no plans to sell.”

As far as retirement, Cobb says he has no plans to do that either. In fact, he’s fond of saying, “I have the best job in the world, so why quit?”

Employees agree, Cobb is the type of leader whose influence carries throughout the company.

“To me, he’s fun. He’s got a great sense of humor,” says Adams. “He’s always looking for the humor and I think you need that in business. He’s also very even-keeled and he’s been a good mentor to me.”

Cobb has also influenced Furr’s outlook. “He’s the type of leader who’s constantly looking to the future for what’s on the other side of the hill or around the corner,” says Furr, “and as long as you have a positive attitude and are not adverse to change the company will grow.” ■



the author



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