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Robin Buckson / The Detroit News

Joe Berry, head of TRC Tool Industries Inc., stands next to an optical comparitor screen that workers use to check the accuracy of a part at the Melvindale company. The comparitor features 50-1 magnification.

## Tool-and-die visionary fights threat of imports

By James V. Higgins / The Detroit News



**MELVINDALE** -- In his junior year at Dearborn's Fordson High School in 1978, Joseph A. Berry dreamed of piloting a U.S. Navy jet fighter. But his destiny was with high-tech equipment of another sort.

A teenaged machine prodigy, Berry and members of his family created a \$5 million a year enterprise -- TRC Tool Industries Inc. -- from the tired dregs of a tiny tool repair firm.

Michigan's industrial economy historically was built on such acts of determined entrepreneurship. People with a certain temperament and talent want to make things, regardless of the difficulties and complexities, and make money doing it.

Now, some believe that spirit is threatened.

On Tuesday in East Lansing, members of Michigan's tool and die industries will meet with lawmakers to discuss a growing crisis.

Hosted by the Coalition for the Advancement of Michigan Tooling Industries (CAMTI), the gathering will focus on problems besetting the companies that make the tools used to make consumer products.

The meeting is intended to give a voice to an industry fragmented into hundreds of mostly small shops that the general public tends to ignore.

The industry isn't entirely anonymous. For instance, it's hard to miss Berry's gleaming new company headquarters on a neat industrial byway in this Downriver community.

Inside, its 20,000 square feet of manufacturing space is filled with cutting and measuring

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tools, ranging from traditional lathes set up by hand to the most advanced computer-controlled cutting and grinding rigs.

How all this came about is one of those stories that you shake your head over. But, among the 1,600-odd tool, die and molding companies in Michigan, it isn't unusual.

Berry began learning the tooling trade at about 13. His father, Al, supervised a machine shop in Dearborn Heights. He would invite the son in for odd jobs, first of all simple stuff like sorting parts but progressing to the point where young Joe got to know his way around machines.

Meanwhile, the owner of a two-man tool reconditioning shop named Tool Repair Inc. was looking to sell out. He approached Al, who didn't want to make the change. But young Joe decided to work there during his senior year under Fordson's industrial co-op program.

When he graduated in 1979 the shop was still up for sale. Al told the owner to consider his eager young son.

Dreams of aviation notwithstanding, Berry borrowed money and became the proprietor of Tool Repair Inc. at 18. In 1979, it pulled in about \$100,000 in sales. That year, the auto industry went into its worst tailspin since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The only thing that saved him, Berry said, was that he was too inexperienced to realize he was supposed to be terrified. He worked hard, made contacts and grew.

Along the way, he gradually realized that he needed to build a company with diverse revenues and broad capabilities. Originally engaged in tool repairs, he branched out into marketing by signing on as a distributor of standard catalogue cutting tools.

But he didn't ignore manufacturing -- quite the contrary. In the mid-1980s, he bought another Dearborn-based cutting tool manufacturer, and set about making it as agile as possible.

While most tool manufacturers concentrate on a few products, Berry wanted the capability to make virtually an infinite variety of custom cutting tools. Thus, his business evolved three important legs: tool repair, distribution and flexible manufacturing.

"It became obvious to me that the more we could bring to the table as an organization, the more valuable we would be," Berry said. "There are very few shops. In fact, I don't know of any that have the capability that we do."

Customer service, of course, is all-important, he said. Finding and nurturing talented people also is crucial. Family helps. Berry's father, brother Mike and wife Candy are among the firm's 40 employees. The firm now posts \$5 million a year in sales.

The 1991 auto downturn was barely a blip in the company's growth curve. But early in 2000, when the Big Three Detroit automakers began cutting future product programs and shifting orders for tools, dies and molds to foreign companies, TRC felt the sting.

Berry's solution was to become even more "lean and mean" as an enterprise and to push aggressive marketing to a far higher level.

He feels good about the company's future, but is distressed by the growing list of failures among American tool and die companies.

"I'm watching a lot of good, old companies that have been around for 30, 40, 50 years close up shop," he said. "And you just ask yourself, what is this industry turning into?"

Others are asking the same question. The U.S. International Trade Commission has been investigating damage being done to the U.S. tool and die industry by imports, and is expected to report to President Bush in October.

According to government statistics, Michigan has about 31,000 tool, die and mold workers, a large chunk of the 129,000 such jobs nationwide.

Most of those companies are trying to figure out what they have to do to survive. It could be that TRC Tool Industries, with its broad base and all-out dedication to customers, provides a clue.

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