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From pallets to packaging, Company uses GE to form solid base in Erie

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Chick Packaging Inc. isn't yet a household name in Erie.

The company's 42 employees don't offset the losses of larger companies that have disappeared from the local landscape, but Chick — along with a growing list of other, smaller companies — is having an impact all the same.

And Paul Frisch, general manager of the local plant, thinks that impact is only going to grow with time.

The task of packing replacement parts, engines and even whole locomotive kits at GE Transportation is only handled partially behind the gates of the Lawrence Park plant.

The rest of that work was moved last summer from a Chick Packaging facility in Schenectady, N.Y., to a new Chick facility housed in the former Skinner Engine Co. building at 337 W. 12th St.

"GE was our main reason for moving out here," Frisch said. "Right now, 99 percent of our work is for GE."

Chick employees don't make the Evolution locomotives that have become such a big seller for the Erie-based GE Transportation division. But the inventory of parts at the plant might suggest otherwise. Everything — from the smallest bolt to a drive train — found in a GE locomotive can also be found at the 80,000 square-foot Chick Packaging facility.

"We do from small right up to huge," Frisch said, explaining that the company has cranes that can heft up to 200,000 pounds and employees who can wrap the most delicate parts in plastic. The company even builds wooden boxes it uses for shipping.

"It's like the kits you get when you buy a bicycle. Every nut and bolt you need to build a locomotive, we pack it up and ship out as a kit," he said.



Paul Frisch, 31, of Millcreek Township, is the General Manager of Chick Packaging, Inc. in Erie. "We are already looking for space," Frisch says to describe the company's growth.

Although GE made 907 locomotives at its Erie plant in 2007, it has orders for hundreds more and contracts to sell unassembled locomotives, mostly to foreign buyers who prize the ability to have their own people assemble them.

Chick Packaging, like GE Transportation's own on-site shipping department, is part of that process. To make shipping as seamless as possible, Frisch said, "We receive parts in direct from the manufacturer and direct from their vendors. We have their warehouse management system on-site at our facility. We receive and work like we are GE."

This might not sit well with some GE employees who would like to keep all the work behind company gates. But it's hardly a new system, and Chick Packaging isn't exactly an untested concept.

Chick Packaging began life in the late 1800s as a lumber company in Silver Lake, N.H. By the 1970s, the company was selling wooden skids to GE Power Systems, when managers of the pallet maker decided they had more to offer than the skids on which the equipment was loaded.

They could offer solutions, packaging and even manufacturing for other companies, Frisch said.

The concept was first tested when Chick Packaging began shipping generator components for GE Power Systems.

Despite his company's long association with General Electric, Frisch said Chick services many other customers from its 11 locations across the United States. Frisch said Erie will be used as a base of operations for an expansion in the region.

By the end of the year, Frisch hopes to have 25 percent of the company's work come from customers other than GE. Within a few more years, he would like to increase that percentage to 50 percent. With those changes should come more jobs, he said. "We thought when we opened up that we would max out at 41 employees," Frisch said. "Right now I am working on getting around the 50 mark by the end of (February). Once we bring on other customers, I couldn't begin to imagine (how high that number might go). We are already looking for more space."

Jake Rouch, vice president of economic development for the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, sees Chick Packaging as a measure of GE Transportation's impact on the local economy.

"GE's impact absolutely extends beyond their employees. Their impact is massive," he said.

In Frisch's eyes, he's helping a successful company be more successful.

"We work on what we like to call the crust of manufacturing," he said. "We let the customer focus on their core competency. Our core competency is packaging and material management. They make their money by making locomotives. They don't make their money by packaging."



Tom Sargent, 48, of Harborcreek, packages materials for GE Transportation at Chick Packaging in Erie.