Written by Bob Williamson, Contributing Editor
Wednesday, 09 June 2010 14:25

To me, the term or label "Made in America" represents quality, variety and domestic production for domestic jobs. You name it: We make it, we use it, we export a lot of it for other countries to use.

That's why it's always refreshing to meet someone who is proud and loud, in no uncertain terms, about America's manufacturing base and the people working in it. I had a great opportunity to do just that at the recent MARTS Conference in Chicago, where actor, director, author and unabashed supporter of America's working men and women John Ratzenberger was a Keynote speaker.

Ratzenberger had, of course, first captured America's attention as the know-it-all postman Cliff Clavin on TV's long-running *Cheers*, then as a featured voice in all nine Pixar animated films to date. His television series *John Ratzenberger's Made in America*, though, went in a different direction. Airing for five seasons (2004 through 2008) on the Travel Channel, it explored how American workers drive an often-overlooked share of our nation's economic well-being.

As described in his 2006 book, *We've Got It Made In America* (co-authored with Joel Engel), during nearly 100 *Made in America* episodes, Ratzenberger took deep, behind-the-scenes looks at over 240 businesses across the country. (If you missed the series, selected episodes are available on DVD and online. Check them out.) This work led him to establish the "Nuts, Bolts & Thingamajigs Foundation" (NBT), an organization dedicated to introducing young people to the joy of tinkering and the pride gained through working with their hands. His passion for American manufacturing and the unsung choruses of the American workforce—*past, current and future*—should inspire all of us. Here are some points he raised at MARTS.

Parts of the problem

According to Ratzenberger, part of the problem for manufacturing jobs going unfilled due to shortages of skilled workers lies with "Hollywood" and the "media." In his opinion, these

influential entities frequently portray manufacturing in a poor light, and, in the process, denigrate those who work with their hands. For example:

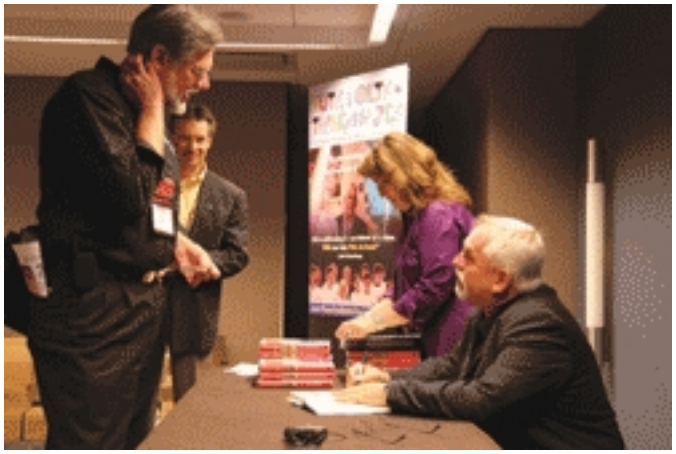
- "Hollywood" movies frequently depict manufacturing facilities as dark, dirty, hot, humid places. Workers in these films are usually scruffy-looking characters with rags in their pockets and/or tool-belts around their waists. This is NOT American manufacturing.
- The "media," often in a feeding frenzy for news, seems to concentrate on horror stories about a worker who was wronged or a catastrophic accident that maimed or killed workers. If that's all people see and read in the news, they start believing THAT is what's going on in ALL American industry. That's WRONG!

As Ratzenberger sees it, though, the media and Hollywood are not solely to blame.

- "Politicians" play into the problem when trumpeting about "manufacturing job loss" and/or promising to restore long-lost jobs. While facts do point to SOME historical job losses to foreign countries, the lion's share of job losses from the 1950s through 2009 are "productivity improvements" that replace labor with advanced manufacturing technologies. These same technologies often require more highly skilled— *and higher-paid*—employees to maintain and repair the new equipment. This is where our "skills gaps" and "skills shortages" rise to the surface: Our schools, graduates and younger workers are NOT educated and trained in what it now takes to work in modern manufacturing plants. That's the REAL loss!
- "Statistics" can exacerbate the situation. Our country seems to be run on data and statistics. I learned long ago that "data" alone does not tell the whole story. I also learned that "statistics" can be contrived to make just about any point sound true and factual. For example, the historical "manufacturing job loss" statistics paint an INACCURATE picture of the manufacturing powerhouse that we are! Consider this: Productivity improvement through advanced manufacturing technologies have eliminated quite a number of unskilled and semiskilled workers (labor) of past decades. As unfortunate as lost jobs are, training and up-skilling these workers often fails to grow the needed jobs. Also, consider this: Domestic outsourced "non-production jobs" from manufacturing businesses often end up in the "services" industrial sector. As companies trim back their operations, they often contract out "indirect" manufacturing jobs, including engineering, accounting, IT, marketing, warehousing, grounds-keeping and maintenance. As tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor and the government's North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), these jobs leave the "manufacturing" sector and end up in other "non-manufacturing" and "service" sectors. Manufacturing companies, though, are still utilizing these services. That's not real "job loss."

When you put these four pieces together (Hollywood, the media, politicians and statistics) you

can't help but come up with a picture of us in a world of hurt—*a picture that bears little resemblance to our actual manufacturing reality*
. In reality, things are NOT that bad. Furthermore, if there were a problem with American manufacturing, we more than likely created it (and should be able to solve it).



Bob Williamson talks "shop" with John Ratzenberger during the actor/director/author's book-signing at MARTS 2010.

26 from the heart

In his book, Ratzenberger spends significant time discussing the making of his Made in America series, punctuating the chapters with stories of his own life experiences. He recalls what it was like growing up in a family of factory workers in the industrial town of Bridgeport, CT. *"If Dad didn't know how to fix something, a neighbor would come over to do it. Everybody had a useful hobby—like welding or boat building or radio tinkering...In school we said the Pledge of Allegiance, and in summer we marched in parades on streets festooned with American flags."* He goes on to lament, however, that the America he grew up in hardly seems to exist anymore in some places.

The 26 chapters in *We've Got It Made in America* tell quite a story. Some are hilarious. Some make you hang your head as an American. All make you think. Here are three chapter highlights that struck a particularly strong chord with me:

"Seven Six Lessons I've Learned (So Far)"...This chapter reflects on three seasons of factory visits. His fourth "lesson" notes that *"the more the company brass knows about their employees, the happier the factory floor is going to be."* In these operations, he saw people who were proud of what they were making. The not-so-happy factories seemed to be the *"least congenial"* and to have had the *"least productive"* employees. The summary of lesson four is this:

"It's plain common sense that workers are happier when they're acknowledged and valued as human beings who have real lives; and that a happy workforce is a productive workforce; and a productive workforce brings greater profits to the company."

"Thinking Outside the Big Box"...This chapter obviously targets the mega-chain stores, but also hits on the "Made in China" part of our economy. *"Our appetite for low prices is what keeps those Chinese factories humming"* couldn't be further from the truth. But then Ratzenberger links the "big box" trends to the *"decline in our educational system"* here in America:
"Over the past twenty years, but particularly in the last ten, control of the curriculum has shifted toward Washington in almost exactly the same way that the local retailing has been replaced by mass merchants...Our public schools and public educators aren't making the grade—and that's not just measured by what our kids don't know about reading and math. Improved test scores may make a good headline...but it's a shortsighted and ultimately futile gesture if our children can't think for themselves."
Our kids do NOT have shop classes or relevant career education any more. They are not prepared for the skilled jobs and careers that have been going begging in America for two generations so far, especially in manufacturing and widespread maintenance jobs.

"One Nation"... In his final chapter, Ratzenberger reminds the reader just how important our children's self-esteem is and how much "fear" gets in the way of life. His last paragraph hits close to home as he reflects on September 11, 2001: *"I remembered how, in the midst of all that grief and anger, we had come together as one...Because underneath it all, we really are one country. Sure, in the best of times—uneventful times—maybe we act like siblings who can barely tolerate each other...But when something happens, the blood thickens real fast. And that's what counts. And that's what will always, always, always bridge all the great divides between us."*
Why, I ask, can't we come together to make American manufacturing strong? Where's the anger?

A reawakening
Reading Ratzenberger's book gets me fired up (again!). Our skills, our jobs, our productivity and our position as the top economy in the world are being seriously undermined by greed, ignorance and half-truths. Read below for an example.

You've heard about how the world's economic and political leaders have "bailed out" the country of Greece that has fallen on desperate economic times. Look at the gross domestic product

(GDP) facts: Greece is 26th in the world with $355,876,000 (U.S. dollars equivalent); that's comparable to the state of Massachusetts (with $351,514,000) that ranks 13th among U.S. states in GDP. By comparison, Saudi Arabia is 23rd, with a GDP of $468,800,000, just behind the state of Ohio that has a GDP of $471,508,000. If California were a country, its GDP of $1,846,757,000 would rank 8th in the world just ahead of the Russian Federation at $1,679,484,000 GDP. What are we doing to address our own problems—*and our opportunities here in America* ?
Manufacturing generates real wealth!

Wake up, America! Our manufacturing sectors and our capital-intensive infrastructure is in dire need of a skilled workforce headed by entrepreneurial, forward-thinking business leaders. Let's do our part in telling our success stories to our communities, our schools, our media and our politicians. **MT**

RobertMW2@cs.com

Resources:
We've Got it Made in America: A Common Man's Salute to an Uncommon Country, Center Street; (2006) ISBN-10: 1931722846

http://www.ratzenberger.com/

http://www.nutsandboltsfoundation.org