



Mike Ryterski

Iron Mike Still Working at 90

Talk about loyalty.

Mike Ryterski, 90, has been working at Schaeffer Manufacturing Co. in south St. Louis for longer than many people have been alive. Celebrating his 70th year of working there, the master grease maker has been selected as the St. Louis region's oldest worker in the 20th annual Missouri Older Worker of the Year contest sponsored by MERS/Goodwill.

Ryterski hired nearly everybody at the plant, including his boss, Rich Niedbalski, in 1984 and his boss' father, Thomas, in the early 1960s.

He "retired" as a vice president in 1990 but continues to work three or four days a week, imparting his decades of knowledge about engine oil and equipment lubricants, offering life lessons and helping the plant grow from three employees to 29 today. Schaeffer Manufacturing also has 60 office workers and another 400 sales reps nationwide.

Niedbalski said he often goes to Ryterski to bounce ideas off him.

"I want to zap every bit of knowledge I can from him," he said.

Ryterski is the only resident of St. Louis Altenheim, a senior community not far from the plant, who still has a job.

"I've worked here for 21 years and he's the only person who has gone to work on a regular basis," said Kathy Clark, Altenheim's administrator. "I think a lot of older people lose contact with the community because they withdraw but here is a really good example of a person who has continued to contribute."

After his wife, Barbara, died about a decade ago, Ryterski said he didn't want to stay home.

"Some people think I'm crazy for working," he said. "But I'm healthy and I get exercise running all over the plant. There are people who walk with walkers and are younger than I am."

Born in 1920, Ryterski grew up on his family's farm in Tamaroa in rural Illinois. He helped his father grow beans, wheat and corn, raise cattle, and milk cows. He quit school at 14 and started raising horses to help his dad pay off the farm. He started working for Schaeffer in 1940 making candles and medical soaps for the Army. He served in the Army Air Corps during World War II for two years and then came back to the plant. The wider availability of electricity forced the plant to switch to lubricants and greases for equipment and trucking. Ryterski developed a gear grease formula used on draglines, shovels and mills for the mining and steel industries that, today, is sold by major oil companies, including Shell.

As the head of research and development, Ryterski does not have a desk or an office, instead working on his feet, creating and mixing batches of lubricants. Recently, he was selected as one of 100 semifinalists considered as a 2010 inductee for the Energizer Keep Going Hall of Fame.

Founded in 1839, Schaeffer began business as a producer of soap, candles, engine oil for steamboats and axle grease for Conestoga wagons. Today, Schaeffer manufactures specialized synthetic oils, fuel additives and other products for the construction, trucking, agriculture, marine, mining and high-performance racing industries.

Led by Chairman John Shields, CEO Tom Herrmann and President Jay Schaeffer Shields, Schaeffer reported about \$90 million in sales last year and expects to reach \$100 million this year. The Shields and Herrmann families own the company.