

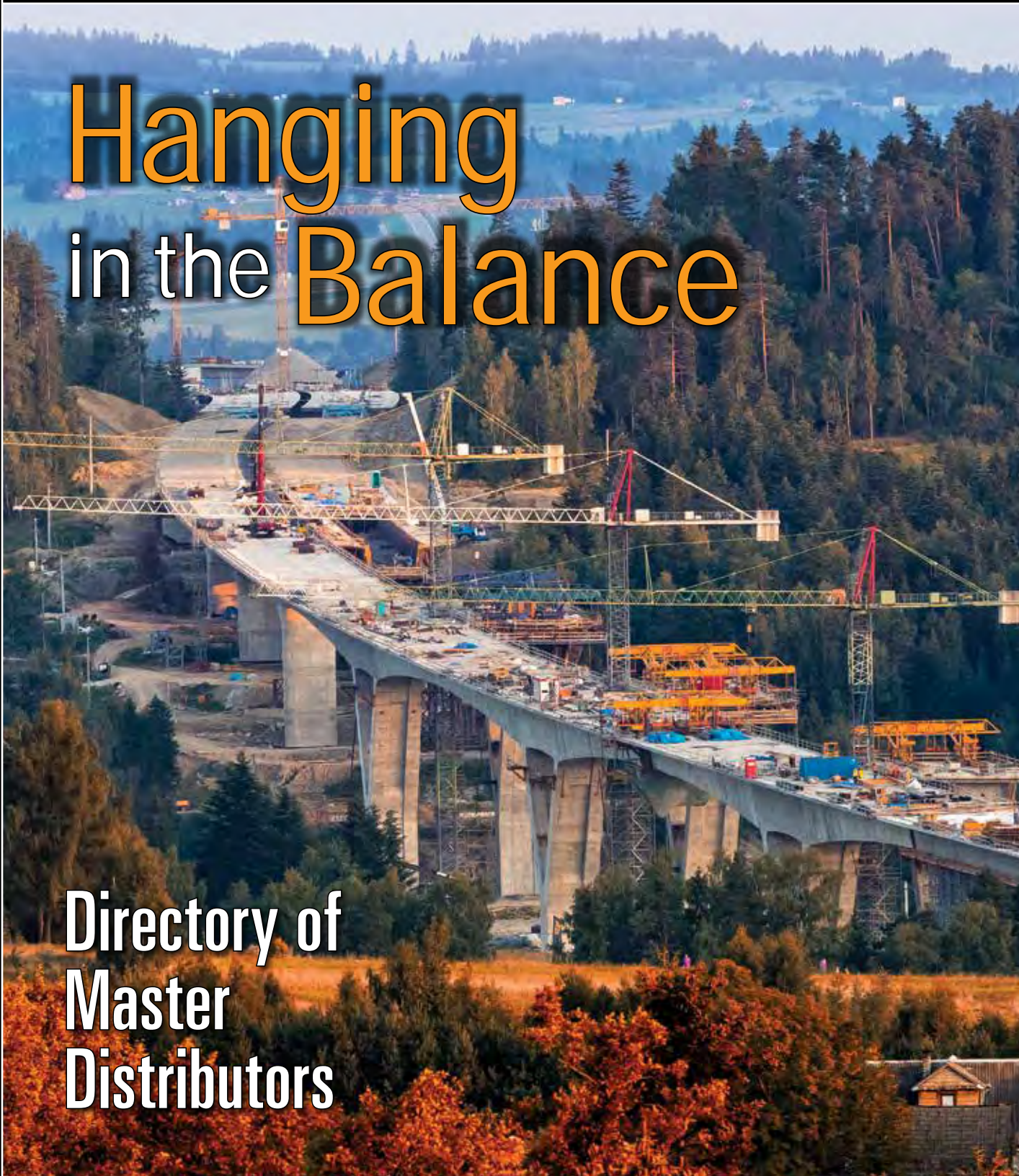
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Hanging in the Balance

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Partners in Production

Steel service center

Lapham-Hickey partners with Red Bud to enhance production.

In the heart of the Chicago area sits a steel service center that prides itself on diverse offerings and innovation. Bedford Park-Ill-based Lapham-Hickey Steel has had a long, rich history – thriving since 1926, thanks to its company philosophy and drive to continue improving business.

The fourth-generation, 10-facility family business serves many industries, but primarily focuses on automotive, consumer goods, industrial products, construction, agriculture and the military. Lapham-Hickey offers a variety of coil processing, long products and fabrication services.

“The diversity [in offerings and customers] has definitely helped our business, especially when times are challenging,” says President Brian Hickey. “Having that mix is certainly helpful. While certain industries are down right now, other industries are doing fine. Just having that overall mix and diversity, the highs are never maybe as high, and lows aren’t as low, so it’s a little more steady overall.”

The diverse offerings have certainly helped the company during the coronavirus pandemic. “Right now automotive is really slow, but there are certain industries such as the medical industry and military that are doing OK,” says Hickey. “So it really depends on what some of our OEMs are manufacturing. And that’s all relative, obviously, as we know our world has pretty much changed here in the last six to eight weeks, so it is difficult right now to determine what is the new normal. It’s something we’re all trying to figure out.”

In 2018, the company acquired Thompson Dayton Steel, which had four locations -- two in Ohio, one in South Carolina and one in Georgia. The deal expanded Lapham-Hickey’s footprint in the Southeast, and served as a good fit with the rest of the company’s operations. The company is still incorporating



Thomson Dayton into the fold, with integrating the operating software to have one system serving the entire business.

Hickey says the company has an operating philosophy it lives by, whether serving internal or external customers. “Our values are the RITE way: Respect, Integrity, Teamwork, and Excellence,” says Hickey. “We try to weave that into all facets of our business, whether it’s day-to-day, or dealing with co-workers, customers, and suppliers.”

He adds that Lapham-Hickey has developed such strong relationships with its customer base and suppliers, that the company lives by its tagline “Your partner in production.”

A New Step in Innovation

Maintaining its hard-won position means keeping its equipment at the forefront of technology. Lapham-Hickey knew it needed to improve its slitting line automation. It had 12 slitting lines at its main facility in Chicago, but it was time to add a more technologically advanced one. The company had been contemplating an upgrade to its capabilities at the facility, Lapham-Hickey’s largest, for about five years.

Having outgrown its slitting capability, Lapham-Hickey



In 2019, Lapham-Hickey added a new slitting line to its Chicago facility to increase efficiency. (Photo courtesy Lapham-Hickey Steel.)

first expanded the building itself, then brought in the new line to improve coil inventory, production capacity and finished goods.

The company looked to its long-time relationship with Red Bud Industries in Red Bud, Ill. for a quarter-inch slitting line that met a variety of complex needs. “Lapham-Hickey’s No. 1 focus is on providing quality steel coming off their equipment,” says Michael Karr, sales engineer at Red Bud. “It started out as more of a basic-style slitting line, and it turned into probably one of the most automated, and it has almost every bell and whistle that we offer on a slitting line.”

Lapham-Hickey worked diligently to evaluate the most efficient slitting line for the company. “We hadn’t bought a new slitting line here at this facility for quite some time. Our last production line was installed in 1998,” says Hickey. “So, it had been 20 years, and of course, in 20 years, a lot changes

technologically. So, that was definitely the driving factor in the technological advancements and automation on this line. What really drove us was the automated features.”

Karr concurs. “The company went for everything automated that they could. They went for three different sets of slitting harbors, so it’s not only designed for super high quality but it covers a pretty large thickness of material, and it is also designed for production,” he says of the installation, which took place in 2019. “It was a very nice,

very clean installation. When a customer talks about wanting to increase production on their line – on a slitting line in particular – that’s typically one of the suggestions we throw out there. It does come with some cost, but Lapham-Hickey went for it.”

The slitter features a dual-mandrel recoiler, exit turnstile, automatic banding head, automatic crane, eight-position

“ Lapham-Hickey has been great to work with, and they continue to be a great partner of ours. ”

Michael Karr, Red Bud Industries

The automatic packaging line slits, bands and stages the material on skids, in preparation for shipment.

(Photo courtesy Lapham-Hickey Steel.)

sortation table, coil upender, automatic coil loading and hands-free threading, three slitting heads, scrap choppers and a double roll tensioning system.

“We have over 20 slitting lines throughout our company, and this is the only line that we have that has a dual recoiler, which we had never seen before,” says Hickey. “When the steel is recoiling off the slitting line, we can rotate the coil that was just finished 180 degrees, so it’s like a turret head, and there’s a second recoiler. You can quickly hook it up and restart again.

That contrasts with the company’s older, more traditional lines, where the operator had to stop the line, band the material, get the coils off the recoiler and re-feed, a time-consuming process.

This piece of equipment also has a Time Tracker feature, which is the efficiency-monitoring system. The Time Tracker has a system of sensors and different monitoring devices that help personnel tell at all points of time where the steel is on the line.

“In our previous line, being older, they don’t have built-in computer systems that are measuring time and measuring different aspects of each run -- this is how long it took to thread it, this is how long it took to run, the feet per minute it ran at, this is the total time to run... And it’s all built into this system with the Time Tracker, so we can track essentially every order and every stage of every order in real time, and also through reporting,” says Hickey.

Banding can be labor intensive, and the slitting line has automated this process. “Having a fully automated packaging line has been just incredible – it’s been eye opening for us,” says Hickey. “You get a lot more done and a lot more throughput on the banding and the packaging with fewer people than we had before. With our other slitting lines here, packaging and banding is a very manual and labor-intensive process. This new line has solved that problem for us.”

With the system, the banded material is automatically



cycled down to a lazy Susan sortation table that can either move the material to be stretch-wrapped with an automated wrapper or can be taken off without banding. That feature truly increases production on the line, Karr says.

Of course, safety is a top concern as well, and this slitting line has built-in safety features. “Some of the automation is making us more efficient, and there are spacing features and safety features – there are light curtains, there’s a lot of fencing around the line,” says Hickey, “so it’s very hands off for our operators, which we like from a safety aspect.”

“Lapham-Hickey has been great to work with, and they continue to be a great partner of ours,” says Karr. “We’re real proud to have it up there at Lapham-Hickey; it’s a showcase item for us, pretty much any operator or slitting house would like to have this type of line on their floor.”

Lapham-Hickey is, indeed, proud, not only about its new slitting line, but because of the company’s teamwork to advance the company’s efficiency. “At the end of the day, we have a great team of people here,” says Hickey. “What separates us, and what makes us a really strong company is our people at all of our locations, whether it’s our employees in the office in sales, purchasing, all the way down through the production end, to the operators on the shop floor... it’s a team mentality, and I think it makes us who we are.” ■