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SECOND GENERATION LEADER

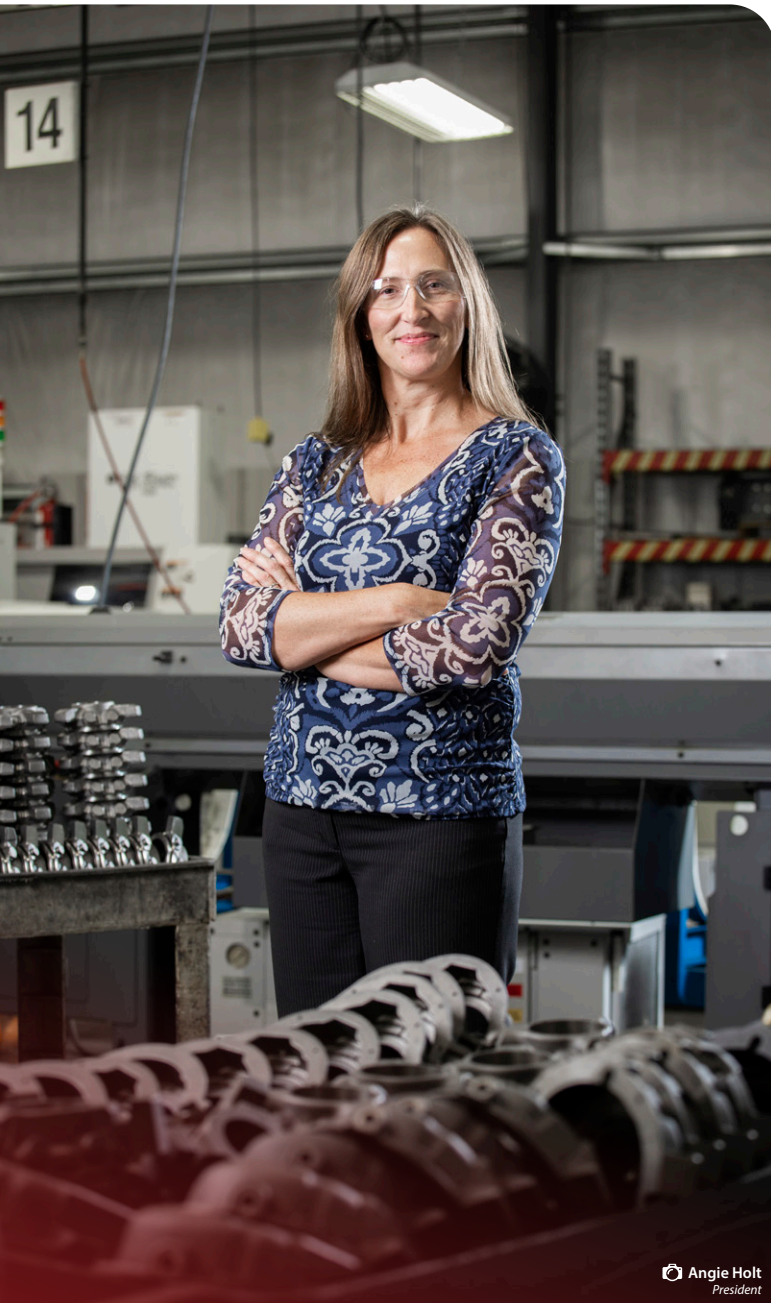
Helps Guide Family Machine Shop to New Levels

Written by Karen Hawthorne

In a marketplace that has been filled with uncertainty, global upheaval, supply chain issues, inflation, acts of nature and more, strong leadership is needed more than ever. And while that's true for any size company, it is certainly a necessary element for a second generation machine shop located in the rust belt of Indiana fighting for relevancy and growth.

So what's the magic making the difference? At Rathburn Tool & Manufacturing, that leadership is personified in CEO and visionary leader, Angie Holt.

Holt's father, Jerry Rathburn, founded the company in 1983 in Auburn, Indiana (a city known as a pioneer of the auto industry, home to the National Automotive and Truck Museum, and the Early Ford V-8 Foundation Museum). What started as two manual mills on wooden blocks on a gravel floor has steadily grown under Holt's leadership to include the latest in robotics and computer numerical control (CNC) machines, a 30-person team working multiple shifts, and an excellent mix of engineers and production specialists who pride themselves on producing everything from components for surgical instruments and paintball guns to commuter train and heavy-truck clutch-system parts. ▶▶



 Angie Holt
President

▶ Setting a new vision

Shortly after joining Rathburn Tool & Manufacturing in 2018, Holt, whose father had stepped away from daily operations, found the company had drifted into an unhealthy reliance on a handful of customers and set out to diversify the portfolio, strengthen the employee mix, and add new equipment to enable the shop to achieve the kind of growth she thought possible. She leveraged her engineering background and 25 years of experience in the construction industry to change Rathburn's trajectory.

As Holt describes it, Rathburn's magic isn't the equipment or the people. It's both. By upgrading and adding new equipment and production lines, the company created greater capacity to turn out parts for their customers. But the equipment doesn't run itself. For that, Holt and her management team focused on bringing in new talent while celebrating the contributions made by legacy employees. Every project takes skill and creativity—something Holt celebrates by recognizing her team members on LinkedIn to publicly applaud their commitment and ingenuity.

“As kids, we would come into the shop on the weekends and we'd get dirty. We'd carry things and push a wheelbarrow and whatever we needed to do.”

“I love being part of an organization that values its employees,” Holt notes. “From a technical perspective, I'm constantly amazed and excited by every new part that comes off our line. We take a chunk of metal and turn it into a really precise machined piece that helps drive a truck or a train—part of something bigger.”

The company offers a robust tuition reimbursement program for employee training, Holt says, “so we can take the great people who work here beyond the operator level, educate them, and give them opportunities to grow within the company. They can take positions of more authority and with greater earning power. That not only creates great careers for them, but it makes a difference for their families as well.”

Rathburn replaces aging machines with next-gen automation, including robots that handle more repetitive tasks and co-bots that work in tandem with employees. This both improves efficiency and helps overcome labor shortage issues.

It's all part of strategic planning and a vision that will see the company compete globally and thrive in future disruptions, a lesson that was learned during the pandemic.





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Making a case for women STEM leaders

"Being a female leader in the machine shop business does make me stand out a little," says Holt. "But I don't let any of that get in my way. My father raised three daughters and gender was never an issue," she continues.

"There is quite a bit of conversation happening now about the lack of skilled labor and tradespeople. That's incredibly important not only to Rathburn, but to our economy as a nation. Girls, or maybe I should say women, have excellent opportunities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) industries like never before."

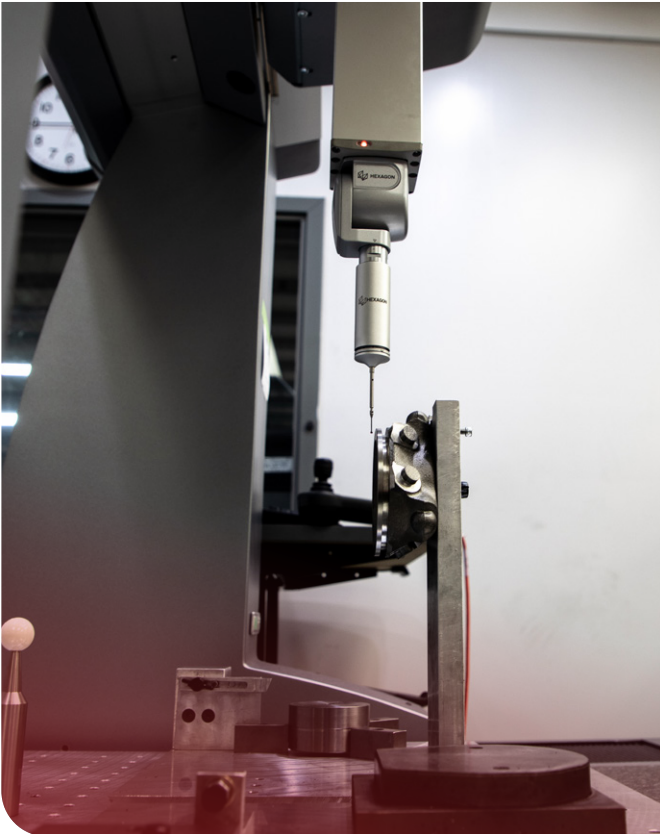
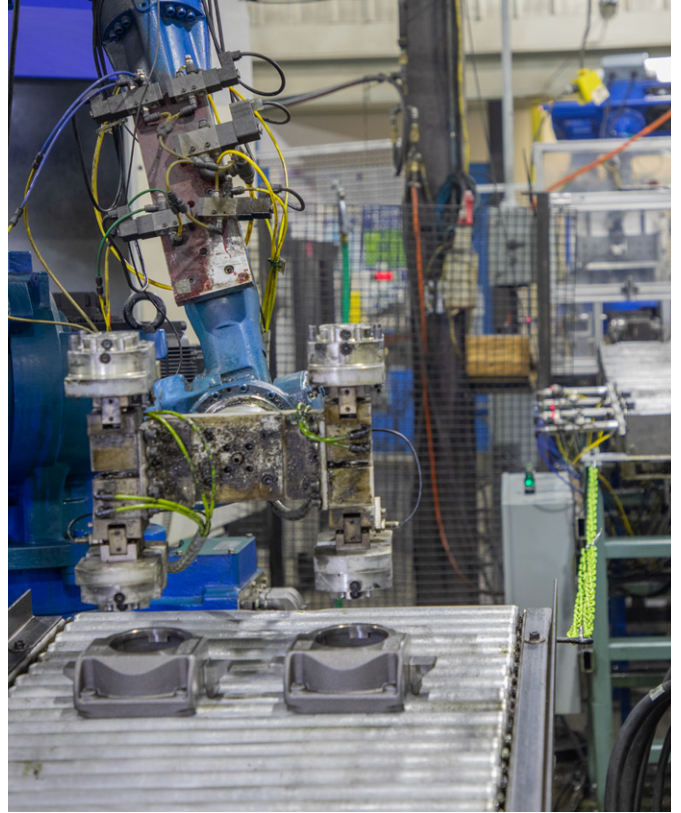
Does being a female leader in a STEM impact Holt's position as a leader? Some might say the historically male-dominated fields would intimidate female leadership. Holt doesn't see it that way. "Sure, there are some biases," Holt notes. "Some people underestimate me strategically, from a business perspective, so that gives me an edge. I view it as a positive," she says.

"As kids, we would come into the shop on weekends and we'd get dirty. We'd carry things, push a wheelbarrow... whatever

we needed to do. There were no girl jobs and boy jobs. You just needed to give it your best and you needed to work hard."

That's the attitude she still brings customers—who rely on Rathburn expertise to problem-solve and develop innovative solutions for both small and large production line jobs—and to her team. You can see it in the company values, which Holt helped update shortly after joining the company: proactively solve problems, communicate openly and honestly, deliver value, not product, never compromise on quality, and win together. ►►





“From the company’s 1983 founding, Rathburn Tool & Manufacturing has focused on building more than just a thriving business.”

► Living the company’s values

For Holt and Rathburn, living their core values every day is key to their business and their continued success. In one example Holt shared, a customer recently brought in a spray nozzle used to manufacture hot tub liners. For this customer, their existing nozzles were wearing out quickly and needed to be replaced far too often, which meant shutting down the lines to swap in new parts and creating costly inefficiencies.

“I think where we serve our customer best is in providing creative, engineered solutions for manufacturability,” Holt says.

In this case, the customer didn’t have the design specs detailing original materials and construction. Instead, the customer brought the part to Rathburn engineers to start with a soft prototype and work to create a better nozzle.

“We made changes, let them test it and give us feedback, and then changed the material to the hard final production material and let them test that,” recalls Holt. “We were able to make something much longer-lasting and create a print so we could improve the design as we went.”

Building a community, not just a business

From the company's 1983 founding, Rathburn Tool & Manufacturing has focused on building more than just a thriving business. In 2021, Rathburn founder, Jerry Rathburn, saw a need in the county to support local veterans and their families. It was a cause close to Jerry's heart and tied to his own personal service as a Vietnam War vet.

Working together, Holt and her father established the Veteran Endowment Fund of DeKalb County with a goal of assisting people with essential needs such as food, housing, utilities, transportation, medical services, educational training, and more.

"Our veterans have sacrificed in ways I can't imagine," Holt says. "I've heard plenty of father's stories as a combat soldier on the ground and in the jungles of Vietnam. We're indebted to them for our freedoms—and they need us to help lift them up once they return. The Veteran Endowment Fund is designed to do just that now and for years to come."

Leading the way for the future

Holt is quick to acknowledge that most family businesses don't live past the second generation. Some sources show that as many as 70 percent of second-generation businesses fail, while nearly 90 percent of third generation companies go under, are sold, or merge with others. She's been deliberate about securing the fundamentals of Rathburn Tool & Manufacturing and creating a valuable and lasting legacy for her successors.

"Just as I grew up mopping the floors, cleaning the machines and filling the vending machines when I was a kid, I really want to put those things in place for my children and my nieces and nephews. I want them to understand the value of hard work in driving success, the value of the employees, and the things we can do to make their lives better."

It won't come as a surprise to learn that her father is proud of what she's accomplished. "He says I do a better job than he ever did. In my eyes, my dad's my hero, and to have a compliment from him—from a fellow who doesn't give out compliments easily—that means something. It makes him very proud to be able to pass this company along to family." ■





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