

Franklin Industries forges new identity

By **MARISSA DECHANT**
Staff writer

(Editor's Note: This article was first published Dec. 28 in *The Derrick* and *The News-Herald*.)

In the wake of local business closures like the Joy Global plant, one Franklin company is forging a new identity while maintaining its ties to tradition.

Franklin Industries, located in the well-worn buildings across the railroad tracks on Atlantic Avenue in Franklin's Third Ward, has experienced a "galvanizing" year, according to the company's vice president of sales Ben Choffel.

The steel rail rerolling mill has broken five production records, made the move to E-commerce on websites like Amazon and Walmart.com and pushed into global markets, all while growing steadily at around 10 percent in the past several years.

"We're not yesterday's Franklin... We're looking to do things in a way that is more efficient and better," said Choffel.

As part of the wave of change sweeping over the 116-year-old business, Choffel came into his position in early January of 2017. Two days later, one of the cranes used inside the mill broke down and operations were closed for the entire month.

"I asked, 'Does this usually happen?' and was told, 'No, this is bad,'" Choffel said. "It was one of those times we had to dig deep early on, and by

Quick glance

- Franklin Industries is owned by the Kovalchick family.
- The steel rolling mill employs 140 workers.
- The company is targeting 25 percent growth in 2018 through organic methods, new markets and new product development.

the end of the third quarter, we caught up and were ahead of the game," he said.

By April, mill workers were breaking production records that included the most rail processed in a single day (broken two days in a row), highest level of production in a single shift on a single day and most fence post produced in a single shift.

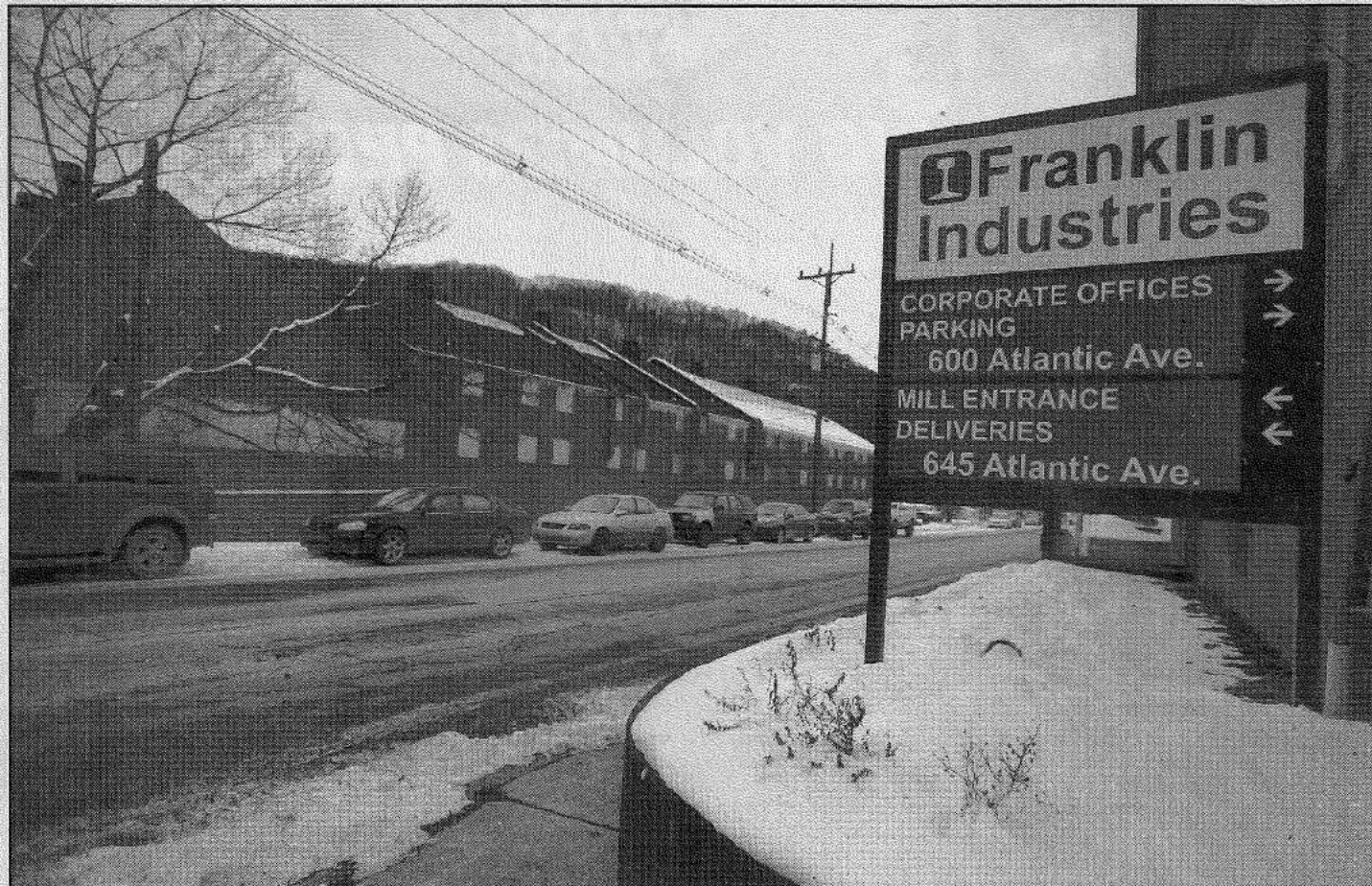
During the week of Dec. 17, Franklin Industries broke a 14-year record for most tons shipped in a single year since the mill stopped operating on two shifts.

"This will be the biggest single year we've had since we went from two shifts to one shift in order to stabilize the company," Choffel said.

Business background

Franklin Rolling Mill & Foundry Co. was founded in 1901, as a rail rerolling mill, which repurposes railroad rails into a variety of products that include posts for signage, vineyards and fencing and erosion control.

For the past 15 years, Franklin Industries has been



Photos by Richard Sayer

Franklin Industries, at 645 Atlantic Ave., broke five production records in 2017, according to Ben Choffel, the company's vice president of sales. He said the mill is doing business in a new, more efficient way that has resulted in a 10 percent growth over the past several years.

under the ownership of the Kovalchick family, who also own a scrap metal business that supplies product to the rail rerolling mill.

The strength of rail steel compared with intermediate and structural grades of carbon steel allow it to be designed in lighter sections without sacrificing performance and durability, accord-

ing to the Franklin Industries website.

The mill produces signage posts for PennDOT and numerous municipalities, in addition to selling vineyard posts in Canada and posts for shade houses in Mexico, Choffel said. Franklin Industries even quadrupled its business in Canada with help from the Northwest Commission, he added.

Franklin Industries covers between 30 to 40 percent of the country and starts to lose a competitive edge in the Midwest due to high shipping costs, Choffel explained.

But the business is looking to explore new markets across the United States, further into Mexico and into South America, Australia and New Zealand.

"It's all about understanding the market and customers. If you focus on customers, the sales take care of themselves," said Choffel.

Employment

Employment numbers saw an uptick in 2017, going from 130 to 140 individuals.

Choffel said Franklin Industries is always hiring for positions in production work, sales administration and customer service. An internship program through Clarion University is also making way for students in majors such as business, marketing and the sciences.

The climate of the business is as such that Franklin Industries sees many relatives from different generations working side by side, and a number of employees have made a career there.

The longest working employee has 56 years with the company, Choffel said.

"Family is the driver to everything we do," said Choffel. "We're focused heav-

ily on building a community from within, keeping morale high and moving together as a team."

As proof, bulletin boards are dotted throughout the mill with production record awards and photos of varying crews.

"They're really proud of those," said Mike Henderson, media specialist for Franklin Industries.

Choffel discussed the advantages of Franklin Industries being located in a rural area, citing a tight-knit community, lower cost of living and small volume of traffic.

"Everybody knows each other. We're all connected, and that's a wonderful aspect of a small community," he said.

Even with the focus on local community, Choffel said Franklin Industries wants its employees to feel part of something larger.

"It's extremely important to me to have people feel that they're doing something nationally while being in Franklin. We're looking for people who want to take it and make it something better. We want to make this a place people want to come to and make a career here," he said.

E-commerce and rebranding

A large push into online stores is happening this year, said Choffel, with an E-commerce launch on platforms including Amazon and Walmart.com. Individual customers will be able to purchase smaller quantities of posts, and Franklin Industries will ship directly to the consumer.

"We're the first manufacturer of the product doing this. It's a new frontier," said Henderson.

Customers can still purchase products from an online catalog on the Franklin Indus-

tries website, Choffel said.

Franklin Industries is also going through a rebranding campaign, with a focus on its employees and the community rather than the product.

"Our goal is to focus on tradition rather than the product... We're changing the conversation," said Choffel.

Other changes to the business this year included repainting the facility and upgrading various pieces of equipment.

"(Repainting) was a sign to the community that something was changing, and that was a pivotal moment for us," Choffel said.

Franklin Industries has a team of engineers, photographers and research and development consultants on site to continue improvements, he said.

"We're constantly doing research and development on everything. Our ownership has the outlook of breaking barriers," said Choffel.

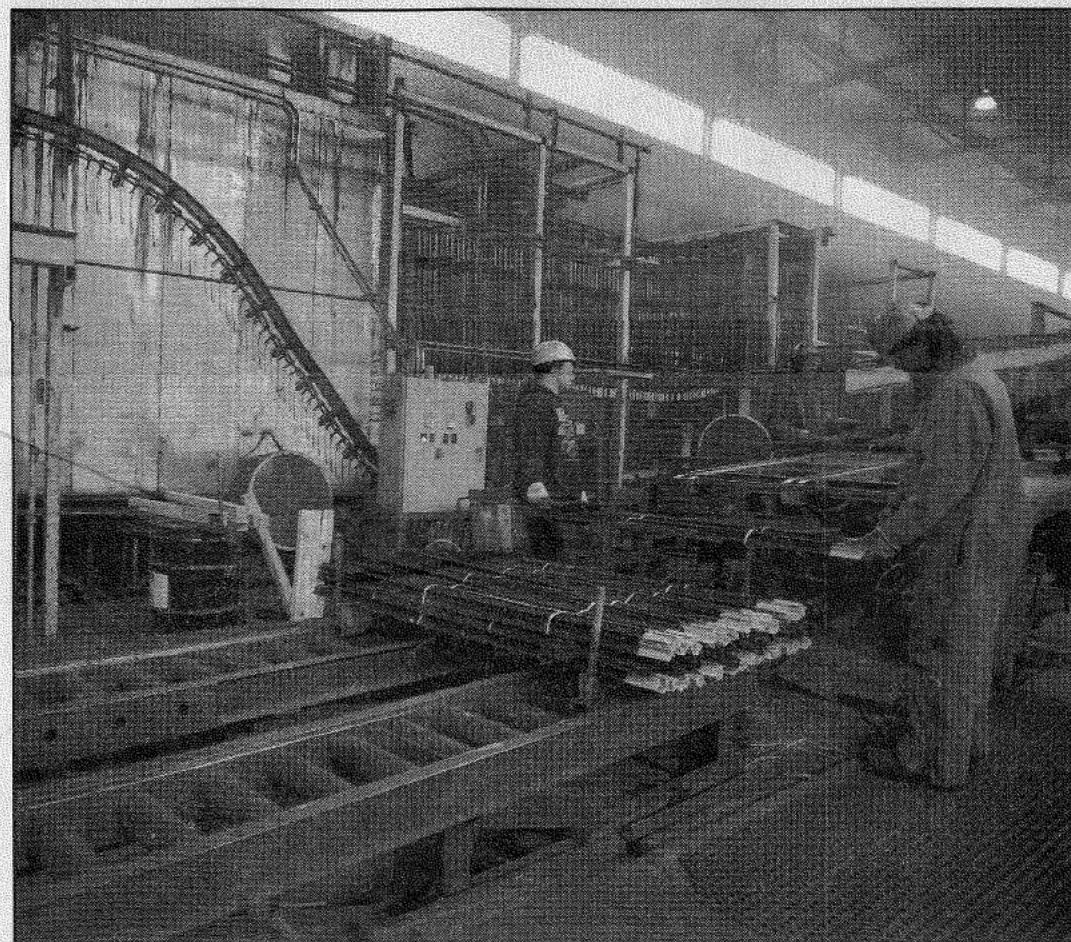
Moving forward

Looking to 2018, Choffel said the focus will be on straight retention through solid customer relationships and researching emerging markets, both in terms of product and where Franklin Industries provides service.

There may also be a switch back from one shift to two as the business caters to a larger customer base, he said.

"2018 is obviously a big deal, but so is 2019 and 2020. All options are on the table," said Choffel.

"In 2018, we want to focus on the history of the company and the area. It matters to a lot of people out there. In this age of mass consumption, nobody knows where their stuff is made. Well, we want them to know," Choffel said.



One of Franklin Industries' biggest product lines is U-shaped sign posts used by PennDOT and municipalities. Assembly lines at the Franklin plant push through thousands of pieces a day to keep up with demand.