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Port company officials hope 75-ton delivery is sign of economic rebound

It took some major effort to maneuver a 75-ton, tilting aluminum-melting furnace aboard a 13-axle reticulating trailer at Modern Equipment Co. in Port Washington last week.

A 13-AXEL RETICULATING trailer was used to haul a 75-ton tilting aluminum-melting furnace from Modern Equipment Co. in Port Washington to a customer in Canada last week.
Photos by Sam Arendt and Modern Equipment

In fact, everything about the project was big — both in the amount of work involved to design and fabricate the furnace and in what the order from an unnamed Canadian manufacturer represents.

“We were hit pretty hard by the downturn in the economy. Nobody was replacing equipment or expanding operations in manufacturing for the past couple of years,” said Larry Market, who has been the company’s operations and plant manager for 30 years.

Since Modern Equipment depends on a growing economy to fuel the demand for industrial furnaces and molten-metal handling equipment, lean times cast a shadow over the company.

“Slowly, things have begun to bounce back. We are finally at the point where we have been able to bring back all of the people we laid off and even added a couple more,” Market said.

Today, the company’s workforce stands at about 45 employees, he said.

“We specialize in aluminum melting furnaces capable of producing loads as small as 500 pounds an hour to the huge furnace we just shipped,” Market said.

The company’s furnaces are marketed under the Jet Melter brand. The firm also produces molten metal handling systems, inert gas generators and custom pressure vessels.

Modern Equipment melters are used in the production of everything from frying pans to electrical components, Market said.

The company spent the past six months designing and fabricating the custom tilting furnace, which had to be capable of generating temperatures 1,300 degrees.

With so much time devoted to the project, who could blame Market for being reluctant to let the hulking furnace leave his watch?

“From here, I followed the trailer to Manitowoc, where it took 40 minutes to load it into the cargo hold of the USS Badger to be taken over to Michigan. It was quite a production,” he said.

The company serves customers throughout the United States, with a few additional orders coming from Mexico and Canada.

“It is a pretty competitive industry, with two or three companies seen as our primary competition,” Market said.

He stopped short of saying the Canadian order is proof that the effects of the nation’s prolonged recession are over.

“You hope the worst is behind us, but with everything going on in Washington, you have to wonder whether there is anything to the double-dip drop people are talking about. We have contingency plans in place, but are hoping for the best,” Market said.

It was nearly four years ago that Modern Equipment consolidated its offices and manufacturing operations in the former Trak International building at 369 W. Western Ave., a move that Market said improved efficiency.

He praised the relocation to the 165,000-square-foot quarters, even though the economy — and demand for metal-melting furnaces — softened considerably shortly after the move.

“It is so nice to have everything under one roof and to have the additional storage capacity where we no longer have to dig through a snowbank to get to some steel stock. It improves the quality of the product,” Market said.

Modern Equipment traces its roots to 1919. It is a subsidiary of ALCO Industries.