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Pittsburgh remains prominent in the global steel industry thanks to suppliers who found ways to evolve

When the going gets tough

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By Len Boselovic, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

When the M.E. Cunningham Co. was founded in 1889, one of the steel industry supplier's hottest-sellers was a hunk of hardened steel with a raised letter at one end and a spot to pound a hammer at the other. Muscular workers in Pittsburgh factories used the stamp to laboriously imprint an identification mark into steel.

Today, the company, known as Mecco Marking & Traceability, relies on lasers that slap a 3-millimeter square bar code, company logo and nine-digit ID number on metal in 1.5 seconds flat.

"We're a 118-year-old company that's brand new," boasts President and Chief Executive Officer Dean Frenz. "Our customer base right now is loaded with Fortune 100 companies."

The fact that there are no steelmakers in the Fortune 100 explains how Mecco, one of many firms whose fortunes were once tied to the region's steel producers, not only survived but grew. Suppliers whose business plans assumed there always would be Big Steel met their Darwinian demise, either when Mon Valley mills closed in the 1980s or when a tsunami of bankruptcies overwhelmed the industry this decade.

Mecco is by no means the only supplier still standing. A recent study by University of Pittsburgh documents a hardened core of suppliers who evolved and are making a significant contribution to the region's economy two decades after the furnaces fell silent in Duquesne, Homestead, McKeesport and other steel towns.

- story continues -

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