



## The New ECR International

Boilers to stand the test of time 'once the dust settles.'

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The very first boiler I ever installed, over 30 years ago, was an OEM branded Dunkirk boiler. Of course, I did not actually install this boiler. I was just a green helper then, and I was there to help carry out the old boiler sections and help set the new boiler. From that point, my job consisted of handing tools to the old-timers and retrieving fittings and materials from the truck. I hardly knew what a boiler was and had no clue how to install one. My vivid recollection of that day was of my brand new white sneakers stained from the inky, black boiler water and from the soot released from the old cast iron sections as we broke them apart with a brick chisel and crow bar. This was my introduction and indoctrination to hydronic heating.

Since that time I have installed numerous ECR products: Dunkirk, Utica and ECR boilers, relays and electric boilers, and EMI split AC systems. As I was soon to learn, I had hardly scratched the surface of the products available from ECR.

My good friend, Joe Langlois, marketing manager for ECR International, gave me a call inviting me up to their headquarters and manufacturing facility located in Utica, New York. I am a “hands-on” guy, and I like to touch and see the products I install. Glossy brochures and web pages are nice, but I need to see the equipment first-hand before I make decisions on the products my company installs.

Joe did not have to ask me twice, so in late spring I flew up to Syracuse and made the one-hour drive to Utica. The first thing that caught my attention as I pulled into the parking lot was the building. The original building was a solid masonry manufacturing building a century and a half old (see photo). Over the years multiple interconnecting wings and additions have been added to this old building. You can trace the history of the company just by walking through all of the additions. Old pictures, plaques and manufactured components also served as a museum of the company’s manufacturing past.

I’m not one for idle chit-chat, and neither is Joe. After a brief introductory meeting, Joe led the plant tour. Our first stop was with the safety officer for earplugs and eye protection. He also reviewed the safety policy and their proud record of days without loss of work. He showed us one of the production lines and explained how any worker can stop the line at any point for safety or quality issues.

Next, we toured the condensing boiler facility. ECR is heavily invested in the condensing boiler market. They designed and manufacture their own patented, innovative stainless steel helical heat exchanger (see photo). It is different than any I have seen before. It is made out of 316L and 444 stainless steel. The large-bore fin tube heat exchanger minimizes pressure drop and the down-fire design helps keep the heat exchanger surface clean. A composite collector box eliminates the corrosive effects of acidic condensate puddling on the bottom.

The top-of-the line SSC model caught my attention. It is a modulating condensing high-efficiency gas boiler. Primary/secondary piping is built into the boiler, saving installation time and field piping. The controls are easy to program and operate, and the boiler features a 5:1 turndown modulation rate. An optional floor stand is available for those jobs where wall-mounting is not available. This boiler is available in six sizes from 50k BTU to 299k BTU input. They can be cascaded for larger commercial jobs. This is definitely a boiler we will work into our rotation.

On the day of my visit, combi (space heat & DHW) boilers were coming down the assembly line. Every condensing boiler is connected to a computer testing module and fire-tested and documented (see photo). There is no such thing as a DOA boiler. When it left the factory, it was operational. I had assumed that a sample from each manufacturing run was tested, but I would be wrong. EVERY boiler is fire tested.

We made a brief swing through the RetroAire manufacturing plant where they make PTACS and Thru-The-Wall package AC units for hotels, motels and other commercial facilities. They design

and manufacture these units in this facility. Finished product was stacked floor to ceiling ready to be shipped to a local hotel job. I had heard of RetroAire before, but I did not realize they were part of the ECR family of companies. ECR is truly a diversified company.

I got a chance to see some of the other products I have used that I had forgotten were under the ECR umbrella. We have used EMI split AC systems in the past. We have also used Argo base-board, relays and electric boilers. It is easy to forget all of the products ECR manufactures. Joe also showed me their test facilities with hot and cold rooms where their equipment is run through the paces, tested and certified.

After touring the manufacturing facility, we headed upstairs and checked out the training room. This is a first-rate facility with a classroom and live fire products. This hits home with me because I learn by doing, not by reading. I can read about programming a control or setting up a boiler, but it doesn't really settle into my memory until I put my hands on the machine and physically do it. This facility is set up to learn both ways.

Our next stop was the office of Scott Dam, technical support manager. His technical support staff has access to manuals and documentation for all of their products. They also have the actual boilers in their office so they can follow right along with you on those problem calls. I can't tell you how important tech support is to me. I have been there many times, trying to troubleshoot a problem job that I just can't figure out. The client has no heat or hot water, and they are quickly losing patience.

Our last resort is to call tech support. We have already tried everything at our disposal. We work on dozens of brands of heating, cooling and DHW equipment. It is not possible to know every detail of every model we work on. That is where tech support saves us when we run into a buzz saw. Good companies, like ECR, invest in their technical department to support their contractor partners and protect their brand. Along with technical support, field service reps that live in New England and the Mid-Atlantic markets help bring service to the point of use as well.

I mentioned that a common situation we run into is homeowners that purchase equipment online, botch the installation, blame the equipment manufacturer and then call us to salvage the job. In most cases, there is nothing to salvage. Equipment is misapplied or sized improperly. I have no issue with a skilled DIYer with the proper tools and instruments doing their own job. In my market, they would be required to get a permit and have the job inspected. My issue is when they buy equipment online to save a few nickels and then tie up tech support trying to get the equipment to work that has not been properly installed.

Scott mentioned that they track each call and confirm by serial number that the equipment was purchased through the proper channels by licensed trade. This is important to me, and I will continue to support manufacturers like ECR who support and partner with qualified contractors.

Next, we toured the design and R&D department. I expected to see a row of offices or closed cubicles. Instead I saw an open floor (see photo) or charrette where there are open lines of communication among the design team. Ideas can be freely communicated with other designers in this

open environment. I believe that this results in a higher quality end product.

I was shown a product that was still in the design stage. The designer showed me all of the drawings, documentation and certifications that go along with this new product. It was overwhelming! I only see the product in the field when I am installing it. It was enlightening to see everything that goes into the design, R&D and documentation long before that new boiler hits my loading dock.

Our last stop was a 30-minute conversation with Ron Passafaro, president and CEO of ECR International. Ron is candid, and some of our conversation was off the record. Two things he said got my attention. First, Ron emphasized ECR's commitment to innovation and industry leadership. They are not content to follow trends and sell what they sold yesterday. Rather, they are constantly changing and innovating new ideas and industry-leading products.

Ron also noted that there are 30+ manufacturers and brands of condensing boilers in North America. He questioned whether our market can sustain that many manufacturers. Or, he asked, will there be a market shake-up where the strong manufacturers and innovators survive and prosper and the others disappear? I did not realize there were that many players in the condensing boiler market.

In an industry where forced air HVAC rules by an overwhelming majority, I do not believe there is enough business for the large number of condensing boiler manufacturers doing business in North America. I wish I was wrong, as I love the hydronic heating industry. But I do not think I am. This is what I do know: If there is an industry shake-up, ECR will still be a market leader when the dust settles. They are here to stay.

I wanted to see ECR's cast iron facility, but that is located in Dunkirk, New York approximately four hours away. That would have to wait for another trip, another day. After a nice dinner at a local restaurant, it was back to Syracuse and a short flight home. I really enjoyed seeing my friends at ECR and making new ones. I always make time in my schedule for factory trips. The hands-on approach of seeing products firsthand is important. The contacts and friends I make along the way are invaluable.