

FROM THE FIELD

A visit to NTI

BY DAN FOLEY CONTRIBUTING WRITER

I first met Steve “Wheels” Wieland almost 20 years ago. I don’t remember exactly how or where we met but most likely it was at an RPA conference. You see, both Steve and I love radiant and hydronic heat. We have forged a friendship over the years at industry meetings and events. We always save time for a beer or dinner whenever our paths cross.

I have given many presentations at conferences, such as ACCA, ASHRAE, RPA, PHCC and others. If Steve happens to be there, he always does the introduction at my presentations. This started at a seminar I did at ISH-NA in Chicago about 10 years ago and has been a running theme ever since.

For my readers who know Steve, you know he has a loud booming voice and shy is not an accurate description of Steve. The first time he introduced me, he went on and on for almost fifteen minutes. I just handed him the microphone, laser pointer and wireless remote and told him to go ahead and finish up.

Over the years, Steve has seen this industry from various perspectives: contractor, wholesale and distribution, manufacturer, rep and now back on the manufacturing side. I ran into him at the ASHRAE show in Dallas a few years ago. He had recently taken a position with NTI (formerly NY Thermal) and asked me to take a look at their boiler line.

At the time, I was happy with my current line-up and I was not looking to make a change. But I always have

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time for a friend and suggested he contact me when we were both back at our respective offices.

We both keep a busy schedule and six months passed before we finally connected. I asked him to stop by my office early one morning with a few of his boilers. I wanted my techs to put their hands on his boilers and share their thoughts with me. I value the opinions of my techs as they are the ones who have to install and service the equipment in the field.

Several years ago, we installed two commercial boilers that gave us lots of problems right out of the box. The boilers would not light off cleanly and produced high CO, even with the boilers set up to manufacturer specifications. The manufacturer was zero help and suggested we installed them wrong. It is amazing the things that can be diagnosed over the phone without ever seeing the installation.

My lead tech, Brian Golden, re-built the gas train and burners using various parts and components and finally got them to light off and burn cleanly. Then he said to me, “You can sell whatever boilers you want, but I will never install one of these boilers again.”

Rather than get mad at his comment, I appreciated it. You see, Brian wears his heart on his sleeve and says and means what he thinks. I respected his opinion and never used that boiler line again.

Steve stopped by with three of his boilers early one morning about a year ago. My guys took them apart, put them back together, fired it off, checked the controls, discussed their concerns with Steve, and finally agreed that we would give it a try.

After installing three or four systems, the leadership in my company decided that we would like add NTI to our line-up. We had a chance to install and test their boilers over a cold DC winter. They were easy to install, quiet, efficient and reliable. Contingent upon that decision was the need of a good local rep and a stocking distributor. I know I can rely on Wheels for support but he is not always available due a busy travel schedule. I needed



Steve “Wheels” Wieland (L), NTI Mid-Atlantic Regional Manager, and Kevin Dennison (R), NTI President in front of one of their condensing gas boilers.

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NTI headquarters and manufacturing facility, Saint John, NB Canada.

reliable local support as well as local stock.

It is also extremely important to know who I do business with. I consider my vendors to be my business partners. I knew I could count on Steve but what was the story behind NTI? Steve suggested I take a trip to their international headquarters and find out.

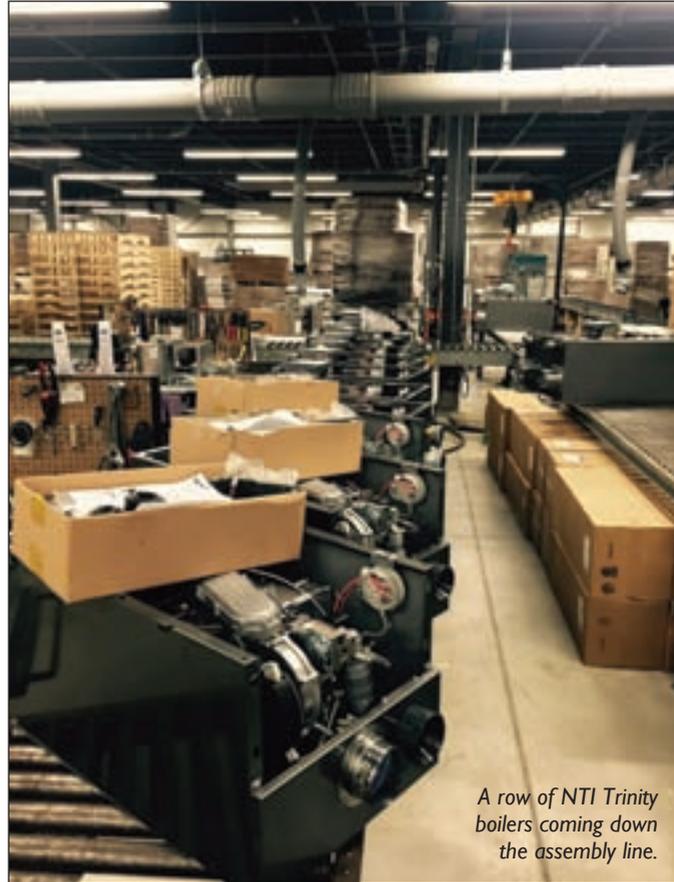
This past May, I flew up to Saint John, New Brunswick in Eastern Canada to find out. I was accompanied by Duane Withers, the local NTI rep, as well as Wheels. It was a hot humid 91°F when we left the D.C.-area but a cool 54°F when we arrived in Saint John a few hours later.

We went straight from the airport to the NTI building. The first thing that struck me about the six-year old building, located on the water on an inlet, was that it was in a residential area. Condo's and houses overlooking the inlet, selling for high six-figures were right next door. The 110,000 square foot headquarters did not look like any manufacturing facility I had ever visited (Photo #1). It looked like a low-rise office building and an addition was going up as we visited. The building contains all of the offices, business and technical support, training facility as well as manufacturing, on three levels, all under one roof.

We met the owner and president, Kevin Dennison (Photo #2). Kevin is the son of the founder of the company, Malcolm Dennison, who started the company in 1968. Kevin is very direct and to the point when talking about his company. He is also very passionate about delivering the best product to his customers. I like his commitment to the industry and his business philosophy.

In describing his business philosophy, Kevin says, "If you are not the best in the world at what you do, get out of the business or partner with someone who is the best. I believe that we are world leaders in boiler integration."

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A row of NTI Trinity boilers coming down the assembly line.

I let that sink in for a minute. I love it. This is the kind of person and company I want to do business with.

Kevin has the passion to be the best at what he does as well as the wisdom to realize when to create strategic partners rather than re-invent the wheel. For example, NTI does not manufacture the heat exchangers in their condensing gas boilers. They partner with two companies in Europe that design and manufacture their stainless steel heat exchangers. They also partner with a European manufacturer for their stainless steel indirect DHW tanks.

We then toured their offices, sales and support section of their facility which take up approximately 30,000 square feet. Kevin took us through engineering and design, and then through their tech support offices. This caught my attention. By the time I call tech support, I have run out of options and ideas. I noticed that they had a boiler in their tech support office as well as working control modules and displays. This allows their techs to walk through a solution right along with you as you are in a basement working on one of their boilers. I also liked the fact that tech support is available from 8:00am to 10:00pm EST.

We then toured the manufacturing and warehouse facilities, which comprise the remaining 80,000 square feet. I was amazed at how clean and organized the plant was. As the boilers travel down the assembly line, every single boiler is fired and tested (Photo #3). There is no such thing as a DOA boiler leaving this plant.

The fit and finish of their equipment is top shelf. Kevin told the story of how they arrived at this finish. He showed his production staff the finish on a Mercedes Benz automobile. First they said it could not be done. Then, several tries later, they achieved the color Kevin wanted. But then, Kevin took it one step further.

"I want a clear coat over the finish," he said.

"Can't be done," he was told.

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“Keep trying,” he said.

And they did, until he got what he is looking for.

Yes, it is just the paint on the boiler jacket. But it shows you how far Kevin goes in search of perfection on his products. When we spend several days to a week installing a boiler in our client’s basement, we want the quality of the appliance to match our piping and installation skills.

Two days flew by and soon it was time to head back to the airport for the flight home. I have been through many manufacturing facilities all over the world but I have never seen one quite like this.

Finally, we spent half a day in their live-fire training facility. About a dozen of their boilers are installed in a line, fully operational. We went through each of their products. We set up the controls and then fired them off. I grabbed a set of tools and took one apart to see how long it would take to service and repair their units. They are laid out with the service tech in mind. Wiring

harnesses with quick connects are easily removed and control boards slide out on trays or swing out of the way. Burners are easily accessible to allow for access to the heat exchanger. Cleaning and servicing these high efficiency boilers is a must but I can tell you from experience, if it is not easily accessible, it does not get done.

As lunch was being served, Wheels and I snuck out for a quick tour of the NTI R&D operation. They were hard at work on the prototype of a new boiler at the time. I can’t tell you what I saw but it looks to be an innovative product coming soon.

Two days flew by and soon it was time to head back to the airport for the flight home. I have been through many manufacturing facilities all over the world but I have never seen one quite like this. More important than the physical plant were the people behind the product. This is why I took time out of my schedule to travel to their facilities. It is so important for me to meet and connect with the people I will rely on when I install their boilers. From Kevin at the top to all of the NTI people I met on this trip, all were professional and first-class. ●

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