

# Keen celebrates centenary

By Molly Burgess

In 1919, when Stanley Keen started out his small business in Wilmington, Delaware he probably never envisioned it growing into the establishment it is today.

A hundred years on and Keen Compressed Gas, the small family run business, is now in its third generation and runs 15 branch locations throughout Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland.

But the Keen business has not always been an industrial gas company. When Stanley founded the business it originally ran as an auto part supply store under the name Keen Auto Parts.

In 1928, Stanley introduced gas into the company when he began selling acetylene and oxygen cylinders. Since then the company's involvement in the industrial gas market has continued to grow. Now the Mid-Atlantic-based company has established itself as a dominant player in the supply of welding equipment, welding supplies, and industrial, medical, specialty and cryogenic gases across its 15 facilities.

To gain an insight into the family company and what it has achieved in its 100 years, *gasworld* spoke to the current President of Keen, Bryan Keen – one of nine family members who work within the business today.

Discussing what the family business was like in its early days and his experience growing up in Keen, Bryan said, “My grandparents had 13 kids, so my dad and his siblings were put to work early and often. We had one location in Wilmington. Stanley never liked to borrow money, so our growth was limited to what we had the cash for. We were a small Mom and Pop operation for most of the time that Stanley ran the business. We had a few employees and few delivery trucks.”

“I started working at Keen in the summer of my high school years. I started full time in 1989 right out of Furman

University. For the first ten years of my career I worked in our propane division. By the mid to late 1990s my dad was ready to retire, and we needed a succession plan. I became the fourth President of Keen in December 2000.”

## Capabilities

Throughout its 100 years in business Keen has seen major developments, and the company now stands as a diversified, full line supplier of welding and industrial supplies. The company now offers services in a variety of CO<sub>2</sub> needs including cylinders, microbulk and bulk.

Commenting on the company's involvement within the CO<sub>2</sub> Bryan said, “The growing beverage industry has been a huge growth area for us in recent years. We have a complete cryogenic department featuring a salesman, two cryogenic mechanics and the resources of our gas partner, Messer behind us. Restaurants, bars, pools, microbreweries, medical applications and concrete are all within the scope we can serve.”

Keen has also just opened a new fully automated filling plant further expanding its capabilities. The new filling plant will allow Keen to meet the more advanced needs of its customers without having to rely on third party vendors.

## Milestones

Looking back on a century of business, Keen has had its fair share of struggles and successes which has shaped the business into what it is today.

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Bryan added, “In 1952 we had a fire that burnt down our only location. Stanley and a few key employees worked tirelessly to keep the business running. They were able to temporarily relocate and keep supplying customers.”


“In 1965, Merrill Keen, my father, became the third President of the company. Dad took a more aggressive approach and was responsible for our growth in the 70s, 80s and 90s.”

“In 1969, Dad bought Anchor Welding Supply, a local competitor and it tripled our sales overnight. It aligned us with Airco, a relationship that has survived the test of time as we are now a Messer distributor.”

“In the 1980s, my sister Kim, my brother Jon and I joined the company. With that, we know we are here to stay through at least one more generation.”

## Future

The company's development and experiences throughout the years has now led it to be represented by a network of knowledgeable and customer focused employees but still heavily ingrains its family values.

Looking to the future of Keen, Bryan said, “We will keep doing what we are good at. We will keep hiring the best people we can find. We will keep in touch with customers to make sure we are addressing their needs, and we will keep investing in the company to make sure we are keeping up with the needs of the market.” 

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