

# CARRYING ON A LEGACY

BY MARY JO MARTIN  
Editorial Director

The legacy of today's AB&I Foundry is wrapped in a quilt that includes the entrepreneurship of a young Joseph Boscacci pursuing his dreams, a devastating earthquake, World War II and unstable economic conditions. All that, and much more, are at the heart of AB&I Foundry.

At 108 years old, and with its current operations literally just around the corner from where it all began, AB&I Foundry is a true example of living the American Dream. Boscacci's success in taking AB&I from that little backyard business to what is now one of the most well-respected cast iron soil pipe manufacturers in the country

Brothers Foundry, and expanded their capabilities with some new products like cast iron sash weights and stove tops for wood burning stoves – that's how people cooked back in that era. Then, at the onset of World War II, they developed several products to assist in the war effort — most notably submarine net weights that would help protect California bays and harbors.

In the 1940s during the rebuilding efforts following WWII, visionary and risk-taker Arnold realized it was time to shift direction in anticipation of a massive housing construction boom. The Boscacci Brothers was rebranded American Brass & Iron (AB&I) and cast iron soil pipe and fittings were put into focus. It was in this timeframe that AB&I recognized that establish-

the company. That team proved their mettle in the aftermath of two major fires at the foundry, one in the 1950s and the other two decades later. Both times, the insurance company said the plant couldn't be repaired — but the AB&I team pulled together and set out to prove them wrong. Working together day and night, they even exceeded the expectations of the handful of optimists in their corner, by fully restoring the plant.

AB&I has survived during difficult times in the marketplace. When they began manufacturing pipe there were 39 American soil pipe and fitting manufacturers and now there are only



who worked in the foundry began to be known as "team members," and they were actively solicited for their ideas to improve operations. It was based on Allan's belief that the team members on the floor knew what it would take to streamline operations and improve quality. And he was right. AB&I's core business principles are what set them apart. Based on the team's suggestions, new equipment was purchased that improved the pace and quality of pipe and fittings pro-

## AB&I Foundry

**An American manufacturer committed to doing business with integrity, producing quality products and being environmentally responsible**

is a story of grit, hard work and overcoming adversity.

Joseph Boscacci of Swiss/Italian descent moved to the United States shortly before the massive 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire. He brought with him an artisan craft and used his skills initially working in the foundry business in San Francisco making bronze statuary, brass street lamps and ornate iron work at the same time he ran his own foundry business on the weekends in the backyard of his home on 85th Street in Oakland, Calif. His five sons helped out learning the business literally from the ground up.

In the 1920s, Joseph's sons, Arnold and brother Eugene formed Boscacci

relationships was fundamental to the company's future. The company sustained close supply chain engagement with distribution that has lasted for decades — the legacy of those early relationships with wholesalers and contractors still exist today. AB&I truly believes that integrity is paramount to the company's success and that you must "do what you say you will do" — it's this reputation management culture that AB&I embraces wholeheartedly. They believe that best practices in business starts with the basics; common sense, developing good relationships, and attention to detail.

One of my favorite stories AB&I shared illustrated Arnold Boscacci's belief that the "team" was the heart of

three foundries left. Their corporate values and foresight allows them to stay ahead of trends. With continuous reinvestment in manufacturing processes, rigorous environmental safety practices and willingness to exceed government regulations has afforded AB&I the edge needed to be a premier U.S. manufacturer. They are committed to putting out the best quality products possible, doing business with integrity and reinvesting in both the people and the facility. It goes back to the basic principles of doing what they say they'll do — the company culture is very family oriented and that tone is set by the leadership. They are truly proud of their U.S. workforce and the legacy they are creating for generations.

Today, AB&I is a leading producer of no-hub and SV Hub and Spigot cast iron soil pipe and fittings. While AB&I led the West Coast as the largest producer of cast iron pipe for decades, they've only recently expanded across the nation. AB&I's manufacturing facility is headquartered in Oakland, Calif., in the San Francisco Bay Area and also has strategically located regional distribution centers in Northern/Southern California, East Texas and Eastern Pennsylvania, which enables them to quickly deliver product to customers on a nationwide scale.

In the 1970s, Arnold's son Allan Boscacci took over the leadership and brought fresh ideas that modernized every aspect of the company. People

duction — and significantly increased the company's capacity to produce custom castings for the OEM market. Allan's vision also encompassed environmental standards. It was his goal to make AB&I a leader — not only in quality product, but also in their use of clean air and water technologies. This continues to be a primary focus of the company's leadership.

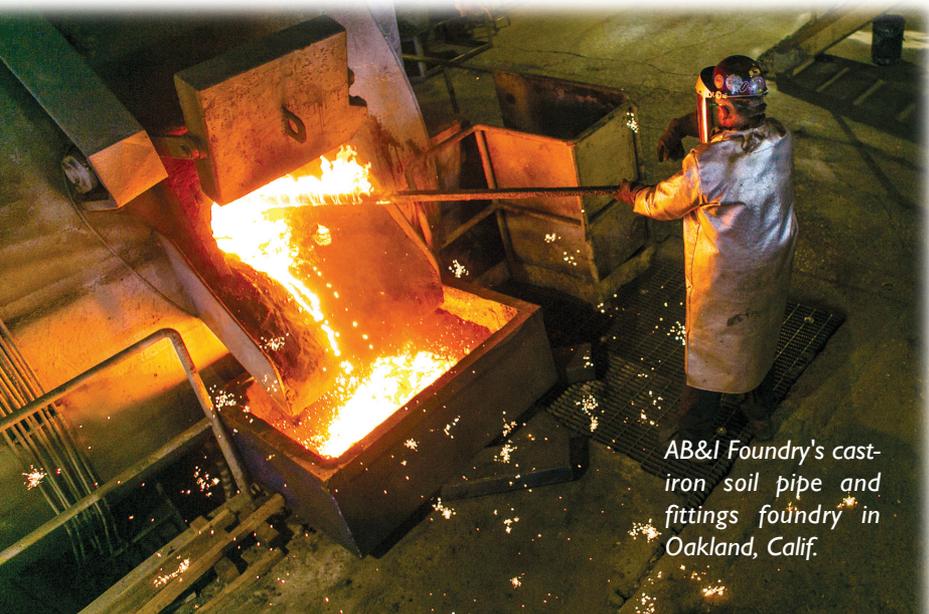
I recently had a chance to tour the AB&I headquarters in Oakland and talk with key members of their team, as well as one of their customers who happened to be there for a foundry tour. Following are highlights from my conversations with GM Kurt Winter, Vice President-Sales & Marketing Michael Lowe, Regional Managers Ethan Shull and Brian Lee, and customer Kevin Lowe of Central Oklahoma Winnelson.

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**MJM:** Kurt, you've grown up here, so to speak, and have learned the business from the ground level. Give our readers a little insight into your career?

**Winter:** I started in the plant doing various jobs. Then I graduated to scheduling production. That led me to the opportunity of becoming plant superintendent, a role I held for 10 years. I was then promoted and assumed day-to-day operations of the company. For the past 10 years, I have served as the General Manager.

**MJM:** Would you please give us a



AB&I Foundry's cast-iron soil pipe and fittings foundry in Oakland, Calif.

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thumbnail view of today's AB&I?

**Winter:** AB&I is now 108 years old, and we sit on 15 acres in Oakland, Calif., just across the expressway from the Oakland Coliseum nestled between that and the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART). We manufacture thousands of tons of product every year, recycle 50,000 gallons of water every hour, and run high-efficiency motors (85%) that significantly reduce our energy usage. We are very environmentally conscience as a U.S. manufacturer. We also keep about six months of inventory on hand at any given time. We make this investment because we want to make sure we have product on hand as our customers need the inventory. And for commercial jobs — which are our specialty — they are typically large orders, so having a larger inventory on hand is extraordinarily helpful.

**MJM:** Wow! Those are impressive statistics. You definitely have much to be proud of here. But I know there is so much more at the heart of AB&I. Michael, how would you define that?

**Low:** The average tenure of our people is 18 years, and over 30% of our team has been with us at least 25 years. Even more of a true test is that we have numerous multi-generational family team members who consider us their extended family. At one point, we actually had five brothers working here!

Foundry work is not an easy job. But it's good, honest work, and our team takes true pride in what they produce. They know that we will stand by them and help them provide for their families while they're working here. We reinvest in our people and want them

to grow. So, we assist them in furthering their education at AB&I. There is a great deal of promoting from within.

**Winter:** Another thing we are extremely proud of is the significant investment we make in our safety program. It adds up to hundreds of thousands of dollars each year. All of

members of the AB&I team, and all of whom had obvious pride in the product they put their hands on. How do you generate that loyalty?

**Winter:** What we've done in essence is create stakeholders here at AB&I. And many of those are members of the GMP — Glass, Molders &

Pottery International Union. We have a great relationship with the leaders of that union, and they applaud our efforts to improve the lives of team members and their families. In addition to further education, we offer full family medical, a pension and competitive hourly wages. We have a great profit sharing plan here that engages people in the business. They understand the numbers. Our profit sharing is done through merit; high achievers earn more. This creates a culture of people behaving as owners, which means they look at things differently. They become more focused on the bottom line, because they know we all benefit from that. So they start thinking of ways to improve. Many of the new ideas that we implement come from our people in our plant. They know the processes inside and out, and suggest to us new ways of doing things better and more efficiently.

**MJM:** I have to say that it was very obvious today that you really walk the talk, so to speak. Tell us a bit more about things you do behind the scenes?

**Winter:** We have a unique, off-beat culture here. As cliché as this might sound, AB&I really is one big family. We host all kinds of special events for the team throughout the year, celebrating milestones and achievements, having BBQs in the parking lot and more.

It really all does start at the bottom here, something that began with our founder, my wife's great-grandfather, Joseph Boscacci. It was continued through his son Arnold, and then through Allan. I am now the caretaker of this legacy and tradition.

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In the yard with a wall of freshly-cast soil pipe.

our equipment, including our overhead trolleys, are on scheduled in-house maintenance programs. I mean, literally every nut and bolt. It's of the utmost importance to us, and our people in that department take great pride in our safety record. These are their brethren, and they are committed to keeping this foundry a safe place to work.

**MJM:** It was really enlightening to walk around and talk with many of your team members on the floor today, one of whom had been here 42 years, several of whom were second-generation



Kurt Winter, AB&I General Manager

## Public art honors AB&I

Anyone driving up to the AB&I headquarters in Oakland can't help but be mesmerized by the incredibly poignant wall that runs along the block in front of it. In the middle of a blue-collar, industrial area, this wall is a piece of art that captures the history and faces behind such a uniquely American company. And in the process, it has helped beautify and transform San Leandro Street.

The custom 2,026-square-foot mural is eight feet tall and was created by Bay Area artist Jean Bidwell. One of the first scenes depicts AB&I's roots in helping the Bay area recover from one of the most devastating

earthquakes in modern history at the turn of the century. There are also depictions of World War II, The Oakland Zoo, Fox Theater, Oakland Raiders and AB&I's manufacturing processes.

And it also pays tribute to a number of key people who have been instrumental in AB&I's history, including founder Joseph Boscacci as well as Ignacio De La Fuente, who has served as the leader of Union Local 164B and the City Council for Oakland — and who has been a very good friend to the AB&I union team members for many years. De La Fuente commented, "With great optimism,

we are looking forward to this mural becoming a community treasure and some of Oakland's best contemporary art in the public sphere. We hope to see other companies in this neighborhood also consider contracting their own murals in anticipation of improving the overall beauty of our community."

The respect for this artwork — and AB&I — in the community is undeniable. Despite the fact that many public spaces across our country have been marred by graffiti, and that this mural is in such an industrial area, the wall has never been defaced. 🌍



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It has always revolved around the Golden Rule. And it's obviously worked. We're now a 108-year-old US manufacturing company, operating in a strict manufacturing and economic climate. For a manufacturer, that in itself is impressive. Every year it gets harder to do manufacture in the U.S. But we are dedicated to continuing that tradition. And we are proud that we also export our high-quality products to the Pacific Rim and Central and South America.

As you can see here, our offices are wide open. There are no walls, no private offices. The management/operations/sales teams are in one large area on the second floor, with executives around the perimeter in desks that are open and visible. There are some cubicle walls in the center for members of the sales team in particular. We share all financial data with our entire team. They know how much we're making and occasionally losing. The watchword for our culture is absolutely transparent communication. There is zero tolerance here for water-cooler talk. It brings down the rest of the team.

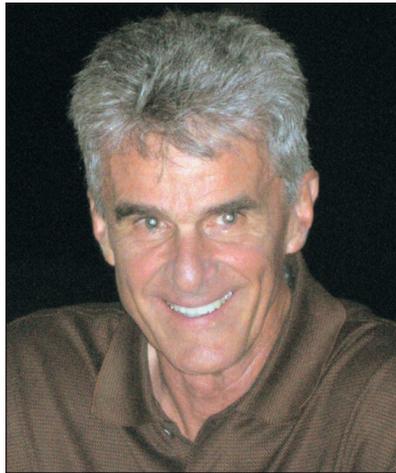
**MJM:** And your operations are in a state that takes environmental regulations seriously.

**Winter:** Yes, we are located in Northern California – a gold standard for green and a region that does not tolerate sloppy environmental practices. While we implement these pro-

cesses because it is the right thing to do, we also are under a greater scrutiny than many manufacturers simply because of our location. We've invested millions of dollars in our environmental programs, which involve air, land and water. We strive to be good stewards of our environment for future generations. Our water treatment system is a good example

where we've invested heavily. Every drop of water that hits our roof as a result of a rain event is captured and then run through our system and recycled. About four years ago, we made an \$8-million investment in our air-handling systems.

Our control systems are state-of-the-art. In fact, many foreign foundries visit our site to see these modern



Allan Boscacci took the company reins in the 1970s and modernized every aspect of AB&I's operations.

technologies installed and out-performing existing technologies found in most other foundries worldwide. We've also looked closely at what is sent to the landfill. All the wood and metal used in our foundry is recycled. We're even looking at recycling the tremendous amount of sand that results from our molding process. We want to close the loop. What it all comes down to is garbage in, garbage

International to meet the requirements of the Cast Iron Soil Pipe Institute's 301 Standard. This ensures that only the highest-quality products carry the AB&I brand. These products proudly display the NSF and CISPI stamps. We keep all our metallurgical records for seven years. So when we sell our product, we know exactly what we're sending out. We take very seriously our reputation with the various code bodies. We time and date stamp every piece of our product. What's interesting is that cast iron, if treated properly, can last hundreds of years. That's a whole lot longer life expectancy than many of today's buildings.

What many don't know is that cast iron pipe is a sustainable building product made from 95% post-consumer scrap metal and it is 100% recyclable at the end of its life. We see value in providing a service that makes it easy for people to recycle. Our Recyclable Materials department provides drop boxes that can be filled easily and then it just takes a phone call to schedule a pick up. Once it arrives, it's sorted, weighed and tagged, and then a check

fact that we are in a rather industrial area, that wall has never been defaced — which unfortunately often happens in our world today. That just shows you the type of respect we have in the community. People see the good we've done through our commitment of educating generations of families in Oakland, and providing for their families. We are working on Phase II of the mural that will span several other decades. (See sidebar for more on this very special wall.)

**Lowe:** I've been told by many of our people that when they're out around town and happen to be wearing an AB&I shirt, they often get stopped by people who will tell them a story of how they are connected to someone who has benefited from our company. We do a lot of things both as a company and individually to benefit the community. Our team members have worked at the local food bank, participated in breast cancer walks, adopted local schools painting their schools, providing books and school supplies. Two of our team members travel to Mexico annually to



The AB&I team is filled with veteran and multi-generation employees including (left) Kent Johnson, whose father also worked for the company; and (right) Enrique Ramirez and Paul Garavatti, who have been with AB&I since 1993 and 1986, respectively.

is cut to compensate them for their metal at the fair market rate. Also, most of our scrap metal is sourced within a 500-mile radius of the plant. This is just part of what we do to be environmentally responsible in our community.

**MJM:** Can we take this a step further and talk further about your commitment to the community?

**Winter:** When you drove in, I'm sure you saw the big mural that runs a whole city block on the wall outside our company. It is 2,026 square feet, 8 feet high and 253 feet long — it's just the first phase of our company history. It shows the history of our company through various milestones and people. Interestingly, despite the

build loft housing for those less fortunate. It's such a rewarding feeling, and we know we're doing the right thing.

AB&I also gives back to the community by working with local law enforcement. On average, a gun a day is seized by the Oakland Police Department — weapons that were used in unlawful ways from home invasions to murders. As a free service, AB&I then melts the confiscated guns into molten iron that is then into cast iron soil pipe and fittings. Over the years since starting this program, tens of thousands of guns have been melted down and turned into products.

**MJM:** We've used the word "team" often today. It's obviously so important



## Raiders, A's gain from AB&I support

**A**B&I supplied the cast iron pipe and fittings used in the Oakland Coliseum Stadium — the home of NFL Franchise the Oakland Raiders and major league baseball team the Oakland A's. The founding members of AB&I were initial investors in the Raiders franchise and that investment is now held by descendants of the Boscacci family. 🌐

For all of California's quiriness, it's pushed us to think outside of the box.

**MJM:** All of that is so important to everyone at AB&I, but beyond that is simply the high-quality product you produce day in and day out. Tell us what makes your product so special?

**Winter:** All AB&I products are third-party tested and certified by NSF

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to this company, not only to create this environment, but also to produce quality product.

**Winter:** Everyone has an internal customer here. If you're not doing the right pre-production work, it's going to affect people further down the line. The guys at the end of the line refuse to accept anything less than perfect. They are very good at policing each other and holding themselves accountable. There are high standards to be met here. Because we have all these internal customers, we have a remarkably low level of re-work. That means there are very few quality control issues — not only internally, but for our customers. The philosophy of our team is "don't work harder, work smarter."

**MJM:** Kevin, you're a customer here from Central Oklahoma Win-nelson touring AB&I today. Tell me about your partnership with AB&I, and why you like doing business with them?

**Kevin Lowe:** I've had a long career in the plumbing industry, and have been on the wholesale side of the business for the past six years. My primary focus is commercial sales. We've done business with AB&I for about three years. That decision was initially driven by the great relationship we have with their rep (H&K Specification Sales). Most of the engineers in our area require us to use CISPI-certified product for projects like hospitals, R&D facilities, high-rise buildings, and schools. We've found AB&I to produce an excellent quality product. That's important because if we have a failure, it reflects poorly on us. Also, we can get a full truckload of product in two to three days, which helps us get products into customers' hands quickly.

**MJM:** Ethan, as a Regional Manager, what are some of the things you do differently that makes AB&I a more responsive company?

**Shull:** We work together with our customers seamlessly. Our goal is to be respected business partners with distribution. We welcome their feed-

back, and keep the channels of communication open. There's no ego here when it comes to the chain of communication. If customers want to talk with people above us about something, we have no problem with that.

**MJM:** Brian, what are some of the things you're doing to boost AB&I's visibility?

**Lee:** In the past, a lot of people East of the Rockies really didn't know much about us. We're trying to change that by aggressively marketing to those regions that were previously uncharted. So in reality, we're introducing a whole new brand to people. It's also challenging because cast iron is a very emotional product line for a lot of distribution people, and they don't switch vendors easily. We're offering another choice to customers on the East. And by the East, I mean pretty much East of Colorado. This expansion has been a focus of ours since 2010 we've really been able to expand. We have set up distribution points across the country for our product that we didn't have before, so we can now get product into customers' hands much quicker.

We look carefully at which wholesalers we want to build a business



Michael Lowe, Vice President-Sales & Marketing, and Regional Managers Ethan Shull and Brian Lee.

relationship. It's important for us to find partners who have a similar business philosophy as we do. We've had a lot of success with independents. We also looked very



At left, AB&I's front office during the 1960s. Below, the Boscacci family gathers for a group portrait during the 1920s.



carefully at reps with which we wanted to align. I went out on my own and talked with distributors to get their opinions on local reps and who they'd recommend. As a result, we have selected 12 very strong reps in our Eastern territory.

**MJM:** But it really all comes down to you, right?

**Shull:** The first thing you have to sell is yourself. Customers have to get to know you and like you. We are a

you're trying to accomplish with those visits?

**Lee:** One of the ways to do that is to bring our wholesaler customers and some of their customers out here to tour our facility and see what we're all about. We emphasize our quality and the commitment of our people on the floor. We have created a family atmosphere at AB&I, and everyone is working together on the same page to do what's right for the company. Plus it gives customers an opportunity to meet the leadership of our company and have a personal connection.

We try to make these days with them a combination of business and entertainment. It's fun to be tourists together and explore the Bay Area. This is a beautiful part of the country that is unique, and we take vans and visit a lot of the local landmarks together like the Golden Gate Bridge, Lombard Street and Fisherman's Wharf. We also often take in either a professional football or baseball game, which is always a big hit. We've found that just spending that kind of time, away-from-business together changes the dynamic of our relationships."

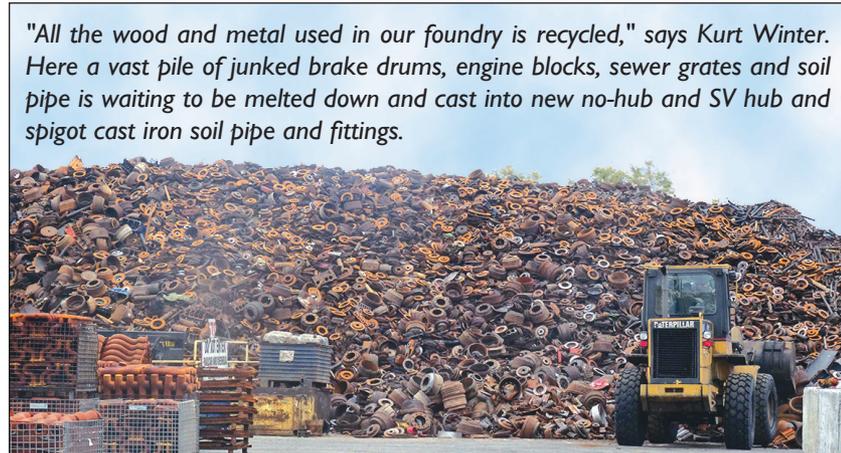
**Shull:** Foundry tours like these are a great way to create pull-through demand from contractors. We don't do anything without our wholesaler partners, but by educating contractors at events like this, we can build that loyalty so that they are asking wholesalers to carry our line. Cast iron is a crucial part of any project because it's one of the first things that goes on any job. So the thought is often that if you can get the cast iron specified on the ground floor, you can then get more of the overall job. It also tends to get higher-level executives involved beyond the purchasing department. For that reason, these personal relationships are even more important. 🌐



relationship based organization that believes that a hand shake means something. So it really comes down to selling who we are as a company, and the value we add.

To have a partner you have to be a partner. We pinpoint customers who want to grow, because that's our goal as well. By doing that, they know we're just as invested in them as they are. We can all succeed together. This is a long-term relationship; we're building something brick by brick. This foundry is running on idle. It's like a sports car in neutral — we're ready to ramp it up.

**MJM:** It's been great to be here today as you have a group of customers touring the facility. Talk about what



"All the wood and metal used in our foundry is recycled," says Kurt Winter. Here a vast pile of junked brake drums, engine blocks, sewer grates and soil pipe is waiting to be melted down and cast into new no-hub and SV hub and spigot cast iron soil pipe and fittings.

Visit [www.abifoundry.com](http://www.abifoundry.com)