

# MINE II

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Pictured, from left, are Industrial Lubricant President Gary Oja, co-owner Andy Haarklau, employee Steve Chandler, co-owners Kathy and Jim Hoolihan, and employee Jim Young

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Story by Britta Arendt

From the mining work of the Iron Range, Jerry Hoolihan and his wife, Alice, established a family business that has grown and diversified for more than 70 years.

It was 1942 and an era that was pre-taconite with natural iron ore mines all over northeastern Minnesota. The Iron Range was busy with mining activity from Grand Rapids at Tioga Pit on Pokegama Lake all the way to Ely. And Jerry saw an opportunity to become an important vendor to those mines, selling grease.



Jerry Hoolihan, of Grand Rapids, started Industrial Lubricant in 1942. The original location was downtown Grand Rapids. Offices were moved west of town in 2004. The company is located on Highway 2 West

“The first office was in my sister’s bedroom,” said Jerry’s son Jim who with his wife Kathy are the second generation to take on the business.

Jim explained that his father was an International truck and tractor machinist prior to starting his business.

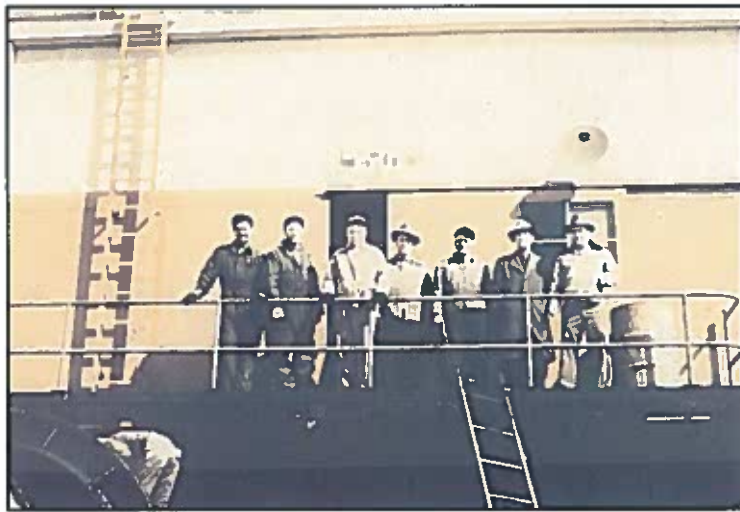
“Because he was in the equipment business, he knew the needs.”

The business, Industrial Lubricant, was launched as a full-service lubrication system installation and service company serving the large equipment operators along the Iron Range.

Then Jerry’s brother Dan returned to Grand Rapids after serving in World War II. Seeking election as Itasca County Sheriff, Dan lost his run and

instead joined his brother's company as a full-time salesman.

The owner of a 1947 Stinson airplane, Dan put his skills to use as a pilot to hop from mine to mine and beyond.



Jerry Hoolihan (middle) is pictured providing service on a drag line on the Iron Range in the 1940s.


“During World War II, the country had a real need for steel and ore, so the folks selling to the mines were developing solutions with applicability country-wide,” said Jim. “So Jerry and Dan started selling nationwide, laying the groundwork for the future.”

The Hoolihan brothers didn't sit back and simply pick up

the phone to make sales calls, Dan actually landed his airplane on the haul roads at various mining sites. And because other mining operations like copper and coal used large-scale equipment similar to what was moving iron ore from the Northland, Industrial Lubricant became a national and international business.

“We had a world class industry on the Iron Range so suppliers to the mines developed world class solutions,” added Jim, who moved back to Grand Rapids to work for his father at the age of 28.

Jim may have been young and eager to help his father's business grow but the state of the mining industry was not what it was when his father started out.



“It was the early 80s and the industry was down,” explained Kathy, also a native of Grand Rapids who has become a big part of the company. “Scanning the situation back then and saying OK this is what we have to deal with, Jim went traveling to Canada and Texas.”

The junior Hoolihan found success pitching his father’s business out-of-state and started developing warehouses in other places beyond Minnesota. Still, the main office and service center remained in Grand Rapids.

In 1984, Jim, Kathy and their oldest daughter moved to Wyoming for a year to open an Industrial Lubrication outlet there. It was during this year that Kathy really learned all about the business, as she was involved in just about everything from driving fork lifts to answering the phones. Back on the Iron Range, the mining industry continued to decline.

But backed by world-class mining solutions they learned through relationships developed with Iron Range operations, “your challenges become your strength,” said Jim as he explained how they applied their knowledge and experience to other industries.

Soon Industrial Lubricants became involved with rail road companies. Warehouses were opened in North Dakota, Texas, and Saskatchewan, Canada.

“When we started off, we had one and two-men shops,” Kathy explained. “Now shops have 20-plus employees at some locations.”

Today, the company has more than 90 employees based at offices and warehouses throughout the country.

“We’ve made purposeful, deliberate expansion over time as we gained customers,” said Jim.





At first, their new customers were mostly coal mines and rail roads. Then others were sold on the convenience of contract lubrication services and the on-site personnel the company provides for large equipment that requires routine maintenance.

An extensive data base helps Industrial Lubricant monitor the customer's needs and respond accordingly with service and supplies.

"We're very knowledge-driven," Jim said.

While some customers are able to do this themselves, they still contract with Industrial Lubricant because "they know we're about more than a pound of grease - and that's a good thing."

Currently the company is seeing an uptick in business contracts with new types of customers.

"And that is exciting," smiled Kathy.

When the couple moved back home as college graduates in 1979, "we saw area mining going down so now to see


projects like Essar, Keetac and others is heartening," Jim explained.

"Mining was the engine for our company, then the Range went from 50 open pit mines to 8 taconite mines. So it is very heartening to see the



Jim and Kathy Hoolihan, co-owners of Industrial Lubricant are pictured with portraits of the company's founders, Jim's father Jerry (left) and uncle Dan Hoolihan (right)

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evolution of the mines come full circle with good jobs. To see trucks come back with red dust on their tires is good.”

Thinking about the red dirt being tracked through the office and staining their white trucks, Kathy smirked as said she has realized she can't complain.

Most Industrial Lubricant service employees stay in the field all day, inspecting equipment for lubrication points and checking on filters. If they are not in the field, they are at the repair facilities. Jim explained that some properties want service once a week or more, depending on the amount of equipment and the weather.


“On the Iron Range, we developed a lot of cold weather solutions that have also worked in Canada, North Dakota and Wyoming,” said Jim. “The Range had a wealth of knowledge and a wealth of experience. So we partly listened to our customers and followed our customers.”


By gaining broad experience in working across mining industries, Industrial Lubricant employees have learned mining best practices which allows the company to transfer this knowledge to other mining operations.

“And that is a real benefit to our mining customers,” continued Jim.

Some of Industrial Lubricant's current Minnesota customers include U.S. Steel, Cliffs, Arcelor, Magnetation, Northland Constructors, Hammerlund Construction and Hawkinson Construction. Outside Minnesota they work with North American Coal, Sherritt, Luminant (Texas Utilities), BNSF, UP and CN railroads.

Jim says their competition is “great nationwide,” with companies such as Castrol and Exxon. What sets themselves apart from others, Jim believes is Industrial Lubricant's focus on service.





“It’s service that is intensional,” he explained. “Being independent and privately-held gives us the ability to be focused on our customers.”

With fluctuation in all mining industries, Industrial Lubricant has had to be nimble.

Kathy and Jim were pleasantly surprised when the natural gas fracking operations in North Dakota became a target for their services. While Kathy says “it fell into our laps,” Jim playfully corrected her. “No, it was high-level strategic planning.”


But jokes aside, “the lubrication needs here are the same as in North Dakota,” said Jim.

In their 30-plus years with the company, Kathy and Jim have become familiar with all aspects of mining. Although she was trained in nursing, Kathy describes herself as a “high proponent of learning different things.”

“It fascinates me to see the mines - they’re huge operations,” explained Kathy as she described the miles and miles of land involved in the coal reclamation process with large drag lines and Industrial Lubricant’s role in that process.

“The drag lines are expensive so they are willing to spend money to keep them up,” she said.

While Kathy and Jim are co-owners of the company, Gary Oja has served as president of Industrial Lubricant since 2004. The Hoolihans describe Oja as integral to the company’s success. It was because of Oja’s leadership and Kathy’s role in the company that Jim was able to take a leave of absence when he was chosen to lead the Blandin Foundation as president/ CEO, from 2004 to 2011.



Today, back in the office, Jim says he still enjoys making sales calls but is now focusing on planning for the future of Industrial Lubricant.

“We have been purposeful in transitioning the company for the next 70-plus years for the next generation of leaders,” he said.

“So we have family coming in behind us who are committed to seeing this business continue,” added Kathy of their daughter Mary-Helen and son-in-law Andy Haarklau who have become co-owners and moved back to Grand Rapids with their young family.

The youth and energy of the new generation of Industrial Lubricant excites Jim and Kathy. And it’s obvious that they feel confident in the company’s future success because “we saw how necessary it is to develop a culture with our employees.”

The Hoolihans envision a continued fit between the Iron Range and Industrial Lubricant “with the work ethic on the Range and the knowledge of the people and business in the area it works well to be in Grand Rapids,” explained Jim. “It’s world-class knowledge and world-class industry here.”

For more information about Industrial Lubricant, visit [www.indlube.com](http://www.indlube.com).



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