

Murray, Ike: Things that Last ^[1]

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Ike Murray: things that last

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 11/12/2006. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I visited Ike Murray at his family's machine shop, Durham Brazing and Welding Works, in downtown Durham. He and his brother, John, now run the business that their father founded 83 years ago. Demand for their work is still high, but in many ways the shop is a throwback to America's industrial age. All of the company's machinists and most of the heavy machinery predate World War II. One of their machines, a metal roller, has a transmission that their father took out of a Model-T Ford. The radio in the office is a 1927 model. The truck in the driveway is a '59 Chevy. The company's way of doing business is almost as old-fashioned: Keep things simple. Don't waste anything. Make things that last.

In Ike Murray's words:

Ike Murray Sr. and Baxter Sapp started the Durham Brazing and Welding Works in the year 1923. Ike was my father. It was a repair shop specializing in welding with a torch and arc welding. They did a lot of repair work on old automobiles. My father had a knack for nuts and bolts. He had a mechanical ability, that's the best way I can explain it. Daddy didn't have much use for lawyers and people like that. He thought more of people that created things, built things, made things that I grew up in the business. Daddy would bring me down here when I was 6 or 8 years old, and I would spend the afternoon beating on things and getting greasy. Then, when I was a little older, I would do things around here. I could run a drill after college -- I went to Georgia Tech -- I came here full time, and I've been here ever since. Daddy's brother, Josiah Murray, bought out Baxter Sapp's half interest, and Ike and Joe ran the business until their deaths. I took over in 1959 as follows: Over the years, we grew into a custom-fabrication shop, specializing more in heavier material. We work with material from 1/16th of an inch on up to 4 inches thick, steel mostly. Through the years, we've made a little bit of everything. You know the Old Well at Chapel Hill? That was rebuilt back in the '50s, and we made a steel frame for it. We also built the Victory Bell -- you know the Victory Bell they haul around at that time, they were junking a lot of locomotives and switching to diesel engines, so they got a bell from one of their friends in the railroad business and we did the rest. We used to make a lot of heavier stuff -- smokestacks, fire escapes. We built ice and coal bodies for trucks. We made grain bins for the Farmers Exchange. We built a few water tanks. We made a lot of specialty stuff for contractors that were Why do we have so many old machines? Well, what we do is kind of a basic thing. That shearer out there is a 1936 model, and it cuts as good as one built today. Cuts through steel like butter. The bending machine is the same way. We've had it since 1939. It has 300 tons of force. That will bend 10 feet of 1/2-inch plate. They are not highly precise like some machines. These are fabricating machines, where you cut metal and bend it and roll it and punch holes in it. That's not real precise. If you were making parts to go in a transmission of a car, now that's a different story. They have to be within 2 or 3/10,000th of an inch of accuracy. It takes real precision machinery to do that. Those machines don't last as long, because they Daddy built that little roller in the '20s. It has trolley car axles on it and a Model-T transmission. We were using it this morning. I was running that little flame-cutting machine in the 1930s. Now that torch, right up at the tip of the flame, that gets to about 6,000 degrees Fahrenheit. But then, when you blow the oxygen into it, it's a chemical process. It's just a rapid oxidation. These are drills, and that one is old as heck. It's 100 years old probably. It came out of a plant in Covington, Kentucky. It's not obsolete, but it's getting pretty darn old. You go through lulls and boom times. We were here in the Great Depression in the '30s. I know that Daddy said during the Depression, one day they did 50 cents' worth of business. World War II was a boom time. We made battery boxes for Caterpillar tractors. We made duct work for DE -- destroyer escort -- boats. And there's a thing hanging on the other side of the wall that we did. It looks like a corkscrew. We made a At one time, we probably had 15 employees. A lot of them were here for a lifetime. We had one fellow, a black fellow, he stayed 50 or 60 years. My brothers, they got out of the Coast Guard, and they pretty much worked here since then. Mr. There are three of us here now: me and my brother and one employee. We're letting things settle down. We don't want to set the world on fire. I'm 80 years old. My brother is 76. Donnie, he's 68 or 69, probably. I don't know if they'll ever retire, but I don't think I ever will. It beats staying at home, especially if you're by yourself. My wife died 25 years ago this month. I'd go crazy as heck if I had to stay home. There isn't a darn thing I want to do at home. I don't want to work in the yard. I don't even want to clean the house. I don't mind work -- I just want to work here.

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[4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/taxonomy/term/3175>

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