Winegard Company Background

Summary

Winegard Company was founded in 1954 in Burlington Iowa by John Winegard. He began designing outdoor TV antennas in 1948 to receive a signal from TV station WBKB (now WBBM) broadcasting from Chicago, two hundred miles east and north of Burlington. Winegard Company, now led by his son, Randy Winegard, continues to make major contributions to the television and radio reception industry.

Winegard Company is a leading manufacturer of quality television reception products, and consistently meets the challenges of the ever-changing electronics market. The Company remains committed to continuous improvement in quality, cost, delivery, and service to meet customer needs. Winegard currently has over 1000 products in four product lines, distributed in all states and worldwide.

- **Satellite Antennas and Mounts:** Residential antennas ranging in size from 46 cm to 1 meter, including mounts and accessories
- **Mobile Television Reception Products:** Recreational vehicle, truck, marine, and automotive applications. Satellite systems ranging from manual crank-up models to automatic satellite tracking systems with GPS/DVB. Off-air antennas including bi-directional and omni-directional VHF/UHF/FM antennas. Ground Antenna Mounts and Accessories.
- **Off-Air Antennas:** From DC to 5.8 gigs VHF/UHF/FM/AM Antenna Systems, Distribution and Preamplifiers, Power Supplies and Accessories
- **Telemetry:** Medical and Data Antenna Systems, Distribution Amplifiers, Power Supplies and Accessories.

History

Forty-Nine Years And Counting —

“One hears constantly of the legendary tales of Horatio Alger. It’s easy to think of Alger stories happening half a century ago in some other place than Burlington, Iowa. But Burlington has a success story to rival the best of Alger tales, and it is barely past the first chapter.” So read the Sunday edition of the Burlington, Iowa “Hawk-Eye” in September of 1965. The story was about John R. Winegard, and his 14-year-old television and FM antenna manufacturing company, and the author was right, the story was just beginning.

This family-owned, multi-million-dollar firm was born in a basement from several lengths of aluminum tubing, a hand drill, a hacksaw and about $200 in capital. The Horatio Alger mystic is still alive and well in the stories told about the self-educated, engineer/inventor who founded the company and rode the wave of a video explosion that spawned hundreds of other companies at its peak. It took more than innovative genius, however, to stay on the crest of that volatile wave and emerge as a leader in an industry where less than half a dozen companies remain.

John Winegard died on Feb 19, 2002. Randy Winegard, the founder’s son, became President of the Company in 1977, successfully bridging a transition from the school kid who sold candy bars to Winegard employees to a modern, innovative manager with a presence and a direction of his own.

John Winegard worked at what he loved, and it grew into a company beyond his wildest vision. In fact, he said he had no far-reaching vision in the early days. “In a sense, ignorance is bliss, you don’t know you can’t so you just go ahead and do it.” He credited most of Winegard’s success to its employees and distributors who had worked hard and remained loyal through the years.

Randy has a great deal of respect for the man and the company he built, and says his father had an instinct for managing people and always showed unbelievable patience.

“He gave people the freedom to make mistakes and to learn,” Randy says, “and in return he was rewarded with loyalty.... So many of the people that we have here have been with the company a long time. They’ve grown up with the company just like I have.”

John Winegard - Innovator and Inventor

John Winegard’s training wasn’t formal, but he had always been an avid reader and a believer that if you don’t understand something there is a book that can explain it to you. As a child of the Depression, he knew what it was like to not have much money, but that didn’t stop his interest in electronics. When he couldn’t afford a toy telegraph set like a friend had, he constructed one from a Prince Albert tobacco can, a Model-T Ford horn and a battery salvaged from behind the town’s telephone company. In high school, he built his own 14-tube ham radio receiver with five bands and stayed awake listening to voices from around the world, growing more and more fascinated with the technology that brought them. When he graduated from high school, World War II broke out, and he enlisted. It was the military that gave John his first formal training in communications.

Following the war, he returned to Burlington as a radio repairman just as television was developing. Two hundred miles east of Burlington, Chicago was broadcasting from TV station WBKB (now WBBM), and just as he had done years before when he wanted that telegraph set, he constructed his own antenna and installed it on the roof of a local appliance dealer’s shop. Soon friends were giving him orders for similar antennas — and Winegard Company was born.

In January 1954, the first month of the company’s existence, Winegard introduced the world’s first all-channel Yagi television antenna, known as the Interceptor. This antenna, based on the Japanese Yagi design, utilized the patented Electro-Lens director system which, like an optical lens, directed, controlled and strengthened the TV signal, focusing it on the driven elements. The traditional antenna was too large and bulky and easily knocked out by storms. The Yagi design was smaller and weighed only 3-1/2 lbs., but it was only sensitive to narrow bands. Winegard’s improved Yagi worked on both high and lower bands of the VHF spectrum. It was highly directional and produced high gain but maintained maximum rejectionability from the back and side, thus eliminating co-channel interference. Small, lightweight and compact, it was the ideal fringe antenna. The Interceptor completely changed the antenna industry.

People say John Winegard is a brilliant engineer and that’s true. One of his greatest strengths was engineering. Today, people talk about ‘manufacturability’ and that is exactly how John Winegard designed his products back in the 50’s. He would be asked why he designed a part a certain way and he would answer by showing why it would be easier to put together that way. He had a keen understanding of the process. What people don’t realize is that he was an effective marketer too. He had an overall grasp of business.

Marketing and Customer Service —
A Foundation To Build On

The Interceptor was a good product, but John knew it would take more than a hot product to launch a business. Since it was too late to get a booth at the antenna and electronic parts show in Chicago, he reserved a room in the old Blackstone Hotel across the street from the convention center. Armed with aluminum and plastic parts that had been molded for him, he snapped his antenna together and propped it up against the wall of his room. Then, he went across the street to distribute simple catalog sheets stamped with his room number. He returned to his room to wait. It was several hours before the first curious distributor stopped by the room to look at the Interceptor, but when the show was over, Winegard had more orders than he knew how to fill.

This was to be one of the first unusual, innovative marketing techniques the young entrepreneur would use to promote his fledgling business.

In 1956, consumer advertising in the TV reception field was unheard of, but Winegard placed advertisements in national consumer magazines. “Life, The Saturday Evening Post, Better Homes and Gardens, Farm Journal” and “TV Guide” carried ads with headlines like, “If You Can Hammer A Nail, You Can Get Fabulous New TV Performance For Just $17.95.” Winegard used direct mail, newspaper advertising, radio spot announcements and a point-of-sale merchandising program that delighted dealers. In 1960, Winegard Company began sponsoring the Paul Harvey news program and over the years other celebrities like Loretta Young, Gale Sayers and Merlin Olsen endorsed the company’s products.

John Winegard believed in advertising to the end consumer as a way of supporting his distributors, but he also knew that customers were the key to his business. Customer service became a byword at Winegard Company long before it became a buzzword to American business.

In one of the more innovative campaigns, black and white advertisements in “Life” magazine showed John Winegard and a telephone. The headline read, “Call Us And We’ll Call You Back,” and he did. He believed the telephone was the lifeline to the customer, and it was company policy long before the WATTS line to accept collect calls from anyone, anywhere.

Randy says his dad was a self-taught businessman. “He has a very open mind and very few preconceived notions about things. He taught himself everything from costing principles to marketing strategies to engineering.”

Inventions and Improvements

In 1955, when the government opened up the UHF spectrum to TV broadcasters, Winegard introduced the first 82-channel antenna, the Twilight. He also introduced the electrical-chemical process, anodizing, which creates a coating that protects the antenna against corrosive deterioration from weather, salts and gases. Although anodizing was implemented for practical reasons, Winegard also developed a way to add color to the process. He introduced color into the Winegard line. Colored antennas, especially the gold ones, became a marketing tool and helped Winegard antennas stand out from the competition.

In the 50’s the number of color sets in this country was very small and there was little color telecasting. No one knew if color TV was here to stay, but John Winegard decided it was and began development of color television antennas. In 1956, Iowa Governor Leo A. Hoegh presented a citation to Winegard Company for outstanding industrial growth. By 1959, the company was making 156 different models of antennas and selling them to parts distributors in all 49 states plus Canada, Sweden and Belgium. The 60’s brought more growth, new inventions and patents including the Powertron, the first electronic antenna with a built-in preamplifier that could handle multiple television sets.

In 1964, when UHF reception remained a problem area for antenna manufacturers, Winegard invented a collapsible parabolic antenna for use on Channels 14 through 83. In 1968, the industry was to be largely affected again when Winegard invented the first transistorized antenna preamplifier, named The Red Head.

In 1969, Winegard was again recognized for service when the company received an award for its contribution to the success of the Apollo II space mission. The 70’s brought the advent of cable TV, satellite-to-home reception and other video reception methods. The industry was changing and in order to maintain a profitable share of the market, Winegard had to change with it.

Growth, Expansion and Change

Expansion beyond the home base in Burlington began in 1971, with the construction of the Evergreen, Colorado research and development laboratory. An additional assembly plant was added in 1973 in Matamoros, Mexico and an antenna assembly facility opened in Chariton, Iowa in 1980. In 1981, the firm acquired a cable TV products firm in Colmar, Pennsylvania.

The 70's also marked the decade of space-age technology, and Winegard entered the satellite TV reception market. Product lines were expanded to include amplifiers, outlets and related products for master television systems in motels, hospitals and schools as well as home satellite antennas and cable TV distribution equipment. Special antennas for medical telemetry and monitoring systems were also developed during the 80's.

At the same time, Winegard recognized a change in lifestyles and leisure-time activities which opened new markets. Three of its newest products were created for those markets, but the technology was invented several years ahead of its time.

"The technology for the Sensar® TV antenna was my father's," Randy says, "but it was invented about 24 years ago. In fact, the patent had almost expired when we discovered a new market."

The original technology was intended for close-in TV reception market, according to Randy, but a few years ago Winegard began to look at the growing Recreational Vehicle (RV) industry. Someone in the company suggested putting an antenna on a mechanical lift and attaching it to an RV.

"That was a pretty good application of knowledge," Randy says, "and a pretty good idea. We sell thousands of Sensars®. Today, the Sensar® is still one of the backbones of the company and has developed into America's number one RV-TV antenna." In the 90s, digital satellite television became a reality. Winegard developed antennas for residential and mobile applications. To meet the market demand, a new addition to the manufacturing facility was completed in 1994. Winegard manufactures digital satellite "dishes" in 46, 60, 72 cm, 1 meter, and elliptical 18" x 24". Digital satellite units for the mobile/recreational vehicle market are manufactured as portable, crank-up and automatic systems, plus a new domed automatic. GPS (Global Positioning System) is available on several different mobile models.

A New Dream - A New Challenge

After graduating from college, I wasn't sure I was returning to Burlington," Randy says, "but my dad built the Pzazz restaurant and wanted me to stay in Burlington and manage it. I think he really used it as a way to train me in basic business principles."

In the early 70's John Winegard began spending more and more time in Evergreen, Colorado. And in 1975, Randy came to work at Winegard fulltime and John moved to Colorado.

The Winegard Company is much different to manage today than it was 25 years ago, but Randy has remained steadfast in his father's commitment to quality and customer service. He admits it wasn't always easy making the transition from founder's son to manager at first.

"I feel comfortable in this job now," Randy says, "and I have a direction, and because I have a direction, the company has a direction."

For several years this growing company has been working with a plan to improve processes. The company's employees are actively involved in projects and teams to identify problem areas and develop plans for process improvements.

"All manufacturers are in a survival mode today." Randy says, "If they can't be the highest quality, lowest price producer, someone else will and they won't be in business long. In my opinion one of

the greatest myths upheld by the American manufacturer today is that you have to pay more to get quality."

Winegard believes the traditional concepts used by American manufacturers to achieve quality control are based on the myth that quality costs more, and he thinks there is a basic lack of understanding as to what quality really is. "You can't inspect quality into a product, "he says, "Once the product is created, its level of quality has already been determined. Under the traditional way of inspection, you just sort the good from the bad and generate a lot of scrap. That doesn't make a company competitive."

"My father believed in quality, and we have an historical strength based on that, but the responsibility for maintaining and improving quality rests with current management. You can't just say you're committed to it. You have to get involved."

The quality and simplification of processes that go into making a product have received a great deal of emphasis at Winegard for several years, and some of the results have been amazing. A preventive maintenance program has been implemented and equipment that had caused a great deal of down-time has been reconditioned and brought up to standards at a fraction of the cost of purchasing new. Processes have been simplified and improved through a teamwork approach, and in one case, a process that once took a week has been reduced to less than a day.

"I believe the secret to higher levels of productivity is higher levels of quality during the process." Randy adds. "It goes back to a teamwork concept, and the need to involve the major players in a process before you can improve it and develop the highest possible quality. Quality needs to involve the engineer, the marketing people, the operators, the production workers and anyone who has a stake in the process. We are trying to tear down that vertical chart and get back to a horizontal flow or a linkage of processes. It starts with the external market and what it wants. It continues with feedback, and it is an ever changing cycle."

Randy says that even though his dad had a good understanding of the value of quality, the company has grown to the point where there is no longer a single person involved in every facet. "When a company grows there is a tendency for 'little kingdoms' to develop, and sometimes barriers build up between these 'kingdoms' or departments. You can lose the entire concept of team.

"We have recognized that we have customers within the company too," he adds, "That person who receives your work is just as much your customer as the end user. We believe our employees need to be more concerned about that internal customer and the quality of work he or she receives than they are about what their boss thinks. The customer determines the features and the level of quality he is willing to accept. It doesn't make any difference if the customer is internal or external."

Today

Today with the loyal support of our regional sales managers, marketing and sales staff Winegard products are distributed in all states and worldwide through a system of OEM's, distributors and dealers.

Winegard Company currently employees 500 highly skilled professionals who work their magic every production day. Many employees have 20, 30 and even 40 years with the company. They know what they're doing and they do it well. With their skills and continuous process improvements, they enable the company to maintain a competitive edge.

They work together as a team.

We can't talk about our products without taking a closer look at our capabilities and processes. From fabrication and finishing of raw materials through assembly and shipping, a creative staff of engineers responds to the ever-changing needs of our customers.

To meet the demands of production a major addition of 170,000 sq. feet to the manufacturing area was completed in 1995. A new 30,000 sq. foot administrative office was built in 2000. Throughout our history Winegard company has strived to be a vertically integrated manufacturer. From design through production, it's all done right here.

Having held 60 patents over the years, 26 current US and 2 current foreign patents; Winegard Company has accomplished many "firsts" in the industry. John Winegard designed and built the world's first all channel Yagi antenna which completely changed the antenna industry.

We were the first in our industry to use an E-coat paint system for mounts and brackets. This superior finishing process pretreats and cleans the metal using eight separate tanks. While the product is in the paint tank, an electrical current "fuses" the coating to the steel. After leaving the paint tank, parts are then cleaned of excess paint before going through an oven to cure. We have the capability to E-Coat 1000 pounds of material every three minutes.

Two 400 ton presses are used to form mount parts and other support pieces used in the production of satellite antennas. High speed tooling results in very little worker handling. The CNC tube bender allows us to bend tubing with pinpoint accuracy while actually strengthening the material.

With our computer programmable 800 ton press, we fabricate 46 cm through 1 meter satellite antennas and can respond to other size requirements our customers might have. Our capacity is between 800 and 1200 satellite dishes per hour, depending on the size of the product being fabricated.

To ensure accurate surface tolerance on all satellite antennas, testing is done a minimum of every 2 hours. Accurate surface tolerance is necessary to ensure that maximum signal is collected and directed to the focal point of the antenna. The process uses a Coordinate Measuring Machine and tests the same 49 positions on each reflector for exact data comparison.

Satellite antennas dishes have they are called, are powder coated. This finish is UV resistant and exceptionally tough. Combined with our E-coat process, these two systems are able to withstand a 200 hour salt spray test.

Winegard operates rolling mills in-house, where raw, flat UV coated aluminum is formed into elements used in traditional rooftop antennas. These traditional outdoor antennas are still a large part of Winegard business. "Winegard Specials", antennas designed for specific areas, are also manufactured.

The Company has an electronic manufacturing area, a "clean room", where electronic pc boards are produced and tested in a static-controlled environment. Other electronic assemblies are also manufactured in this environment. A large number of accessories including wall plate amplifiers, distribution amplifiers, boosters, couplers and splitters are also manufactured. Parts used in Winegard products are molded in the mold and fabrication areas.

Winegard Customer Service personnel are available to assist the customer with information, answer questions and provide solutions to most challenges a customer might have.

The Technical Services staff is available for specific information on installation, operation and repair of Winegard products in the field. These folks take the time necessary to make the customer's experience with Winegard products a pleasure.

Winegard employees are passionate about their work. From design to production, they come together each day to design and build products their customers want.

Winegard is proud of its founder and the Company's reputation for quality products and has great appreciation for the customers who have used Winegard products for nearly 50 years.

Under the direction of President and CEO Randy Winegard, Winegard Company will continue to grow with new products and new customers proving without doubt that they are "Clearly the World's Best!"