

Plant in Millard Marks 40 Years

By whatever name it's been called, the Omaha Works has meant jobs for thousands

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A 22-year-old Dan Langdon landed a job at the new Western Electric plant in the late 1950s to support his wife and two kids.

Dale C. Wichman was discharged in 1957 from the U.S. Army and returned to Council Bluffs, applying for a position at the same manufacturing facility to support

his family.

And about the same time, Western Electric closed its Lincoln site, transferring Bill Stoner to the new rural Omaha plant.

Now, 40 years later, the three men share a table and talk about doing something that few people have the opportunity to do these days: retire from a job they have held their entire working life.

In this era of corporate mergers, consolidations, downsizings and obsolete technology, the plant situated on L Street between 120th and 132nd Streets has continuously churned out equipment that keeps the nation's phones ringing.

Moreover, the plant formerly known as the AT&T Omaha Works is going through a

renaissance under its new parent company, Lucent Technologies. Its 3,600-member work force grows by about 50 people each week to make parts for the booming data and wireless communications industries.

"The people are so adaptable," said Langdon, 63, giving a reason for the plant's longevity. Workers have kept pace with the advancing telecommunications technology. The original mechanical relays and copper wires that transported voices over the telephone networks in the 1950s have given way to high-speed cables and electronic components that zap computer data around the world in seconds.

"No matter what they'd give them,

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Inside the Omaha Works

The Omaha Works is celebrating its 40th anniversary with an invitation-only open house today. Some facts about the Lucent Technologies plant at 12000 I St.:

- Floor space: 2,400,000 square feet
- Employees: About 3,600
- Annual payroll: \$140 million
- Annual sales: Nearly \$1 billion worldwide
- Products: "Connectivity solutions" (electronic wire and cable, electronic cabinets) and "interconnection products" (used in telecommunications and in data, video and audio transmission)



MELINDA NORRIS/THE WORLD-HERALD

BY ANY NAME: The Omaha plant on L Street between 120th and 132nd Streets, now run by Lucent Technologies, has been home for Dale C. Wichman, Dan Langdon and Bill Stoner for 40 years, regardless of what it has been called.

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they'd do it . . . and do a beautiful job," Langdon said.

"That's the world any more," said Wichman, 63. The Omaha workers know they have to do the best job or lose out to competitors.

Other Western Electric and AT&T plants have seen production cutbacks or have closed. Employees migrated to work in Omaha from plants in Buffalo, Baltimore, Chicago, Atlanta, Duluth and Shreveport, La., to name a few.

The Lucent Technologies Omaha Works is one of the world's largest producers of telephone cables. It also makes electronic cabinets and thousands of other interconnection products and devices for telecommunication, data communication, video and audio systems. Sales reach \$1 billion annually.

The Omaha Works is celebrating its 40th anniversary with an invitation-only open house today, which is expected to attract more than 10,000 people.

While successful, it's not accurate to say the Omaha plant has been untouched by outside economics. Over

the years, the plant has had to trim hundreds of jobs on more than one occasion, and it has been idled by union strikes. The workers are represented by two locals of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

But recently, the plant has been in a growth mode. Last year, the company completed construction of a \$20 million, 400,000-square-foot Global Provisioning Center on the east side of its property to improve product storage and shipping to clients in Ireland, Switzerland, Asia and other points around the world.

"AT&T did us a favor by spinning us off," Wichman said.

Lucent's break from AT&T in a \$3.02 billion stock sale in April 1996 opened up new markets for the Omaha plant. AT&T competitors, such as MCI and Sprint, began buying Lucent products.

The Omaha Works has hired more than 500 people this year to keep up with demand, said Douglas Thoms, public relations manager.

When the plant opened in November 1958, about 4,000 people had jobs. Employment peaked at 7,543 in 1970 because of an unusual and short-lived demand for telephone equipment.

Western Electric spent two years building the original 40-acre facility among farm fields on the outskirts of Millard, then a community of 400. The plant's rural location caused problems for employees trying to get to work, Langdon said. The Interstate system didn't exist and 120th Street was "two

lanes of mud going through a narrow tunnel."

There was an excitement among the workers in those early days, the men said. The plant was new and almost everybody was the same age — early 20s. Wichman said his starting wage was \$1.35 an hour. Of course that was when a pound of hamburger was 20 cents and a cup of coffee sold for a nickel.

"I remember thinking if I could make \$100 a week, I'd be really living well," said Stoner, 63.

Today, wages begin at a little more than \$8 an hour, the company said.

Other things have changed as well, the men said.

Management seeks the opinions of the workers.

People on the plant floor are given more responsibilities.

And the company and union provide in-house training. The Employees Training Opportunities Program, or ETOP, offers classes ranging from real estate sales to computer programming.

The men said that the plant is prospering under Lucent Technologies, creating excellent long-term job prospects with stock benefits.

The excitement they felt as young men working in a new plant has returned to the Omaha Works, they said. You can see it in the faces of the hundreds of new employees coming through the doors, a new generation looking to make a career out of building telecommunications equipment at the Millard plant.