

Leonard Rifkin's father, Irving, immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1920. In 1941, he moved to Lima, Ohio, to work for relatives in the surplus materials business. A year later, he started his own scrap metal business, with one truck and a rented garage.

In 1943, he bought a small scrap yard in Fort Wayne, near what is now Headwaters Park, and named his company Superior Iron & Metal. That purchase became the foundation for what would grow to become OmniSource Corporation, which today is one of North America's largest scrap recycling companies.

Working in the family business after college and his service in the military, Leonard Rifkin dedicated his life to build OmniSource, first into a business that would support his family, but moreover, into a progressive, successful, and highly respected enterprise that became one of the leading companies in its industry. When OmniSource was sold in 2007, his vision of providing long-term security for future generations of the Rifkin family was realized.

"I worked hard to build OmniSource so everyone in our family could be secure" Leonard, age 76, said in an interview shortly before his death from a stroke on February 28, 2008. "It was the same for the employees, too, because our people were critical to our company's growth. We didn't do this by ourselves, or just for ourselves."

Leonard was quick to point out that he didn't initially plan to work in the family scrap business. As a teenager, he thought it "was a dirty business. Then, during my college years, I worked at the family business during the summers. I got more interested as time went on and saw the possibilities for growth."

After earning his business degree from Indiana University, Leonard completed two years of law school, got married, and served in the Army. In 1956 he returned home to "take a shot at the family business. It seemed like the best career opportunity, and my father wanted me there."

He worked first in the scrap yard and metal warehouse as a laborer. He grew familiar with the materials, learned how to sort and prepare scrap for customers, and the prices of every item.

"I was learning from the ground up," Leonard said. "I learned to operate cranes, shears and balers, too. I learned how to drive a truck and eventually became operations manager. We were a small company, and I had to know how to do everything. I got involved in dealing with customers, selling scrap, and was also a buyer for the company. Eventually, I got into the financial aspects of running the business."

Leonard said he always saw the potential for the family business to grow. He knew he had to increase the company's volume and recognized that there were only so many tons of scrap metal in Fort Wayne alone. He also saw the benefit of using processing equipment and larger facilities to become more efficient, more competitive, and be able to fund this anticipated growth.

"In 1969, we made a strategic move into a related business and purchased San-A-Tainer," Leonard said.

San-A-Tainer was a company that provided containerized commercial and industrial trash removal. By 1973, larger, public waste companies were buying the smaller, regional providers, and Leonard was able to sell San-A-Tainer. That sale helped provide the capital needed to expand Superior Iron & Metal.

From 1974-2007 the company made more than 25 acquisitions. The purchases were scrap processing companies in an ever-widening geography, based on concentric growth from Fort Wayne, which led to a sizeable Midwestern scope, and later to a more national presence.

Admitting that he was sometimes nervous, Leonard said that “I learned that in bad times, you cut back and live within a tighter budget. People working in the company always responded to those times, too. They were comfortable with our judgment and trusted our leadership.”

In 1983, the family business and its various acquisitions were consolidated under one business name, OmniSource.

“As we purchased other companies, we often kept the original names to maintain the goodwill and preserve existing relationships,” Leonard said. “But then we got so big we realized we needed to consolidate under one name. Plus, by centralizing accounting and certain other functions, we could save money and be more effective.”

As the company grew, Leonard said he worked to establish systems and procedures, because a bigger organization needs additional structure to operate successfully. Also during this period of growth, Leonard’s three sons entered the family business. Danny became a full-time employee in 1977, Rick began his career in 1980, and Marty joined in 1985.

The decade of the 1990s was a time of tremendous growth and expansion for OmniSource. As OmniSource grew, Leonard said the acquisitions were made in “concentric circles around Fort Wayne. We believed in the synergies that come from being close to home, and we broadened our scope as the circles grew larger and larger.”

In 1992, OmniSource was one of the original founders that led to the formation of a new steel company, Steel Dynamics, Inc., partnering with Toledo-based Heidtman Steel, and the management team of Keith Busse, Mark Millett, and Dick Teets, plus a group of other equity investors.

“The concept was simple,” Leonard said. “OmniSource would supply the scrap, the management team would produce steel, and Heidtman Steel would sell the output. After lots of meetings with people who said we were crazy because a new steel mill hadn’t been financed and built in the United States in decades, we put the pieces in place and shared the story with the right people.”

Leonard said OmniSource was “playing in a new arena and learned that we were novices in big investment banking deals. As the steel company grew and expanded, I realized that ‘all you know is what you know.’ So, after years as SDI’s exclusive scrap buying agent, we agreed to go our separate ways. OmniSource became a regular supplier instead, and we continued that way, right up to the sale last October.”

Throughout the ebb and flow of normal economic and business cycles, OmniSource continued on a steady growth path and remained family-owned and managed.

The culture the company has maintained is based on the Rifkin family's core values of hard work, integrity and perseverance. For Leonard, selling family-owned OmniSource to Steel Dynamics, Inc. in 2007 was an especially difficult decision.

"It was a decision that was best for the company and its shareholders," Leonard said. "It was a bittersweet decision, but I recommended it for two reasons. Ultimately, it was a great opportunity for the growth of both OmniSource and Steel Dynamics. But I thought it was also the best decision for the long-term security of the family and the employees. I feel that I have accomplished the goal of making sure that I've taken care of my family."

Leonard said he was also proud of the way the family and the business have given back to the community.

"We are part of the community and have been Fort Wayne residents for 65 years. This community has been good to my family and its commercial activities," he said. "We haven't just said 'thank you' and walked away. We have always believed that it's important to give back to the community, but have chosen to do so without a lot of fanfare. We have tried to put our individual, family, and corporate support towards worthwhile causes, and hopefully, directed that support to the right places."

Postscript:

Leonard Rifkin passed away in Florida on February 28, 2008. His reputation and his legacy live on through his family, his company and his name.