



THE JOB OF A LIFETIME

Allie Cordonnier marks 55 years at one company

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Editor's Note:

Our society consistently praises athletes like Kobe Bryant and Dirk Nowitzki for staying with their teams for more than 20 years. Isn't it time we applaud hardworking employees in our industry for the same type of loyalty—or better?

At a time when companies are struggling to attract and keep quality employees, Allie Cordonnier's 55 years working for one company in one industry stand out. Here, he shares his perspective and insights on the evolution of the manufacturing industry and on the benefits of being a "career-long" employee.

Background

When did you start working for Clopay?

I started on May 24, 1965, the day after I graduated from high school. This is my 55th year with the company.

What was your first job?

I was raised on a dairy farm, so, technically, my first job was milking cows every day at 5 a.m. My first job at Clopay, and in the door industry, was assembling garage door track.

Clopay had just opened six months before I graduated from high school, and the company was only one mile from my house. My second cousin was a part owner. I was eager to start earning money, so I asked him if he needed any help. He said, "Come on over." That was the end of the interview process and the beginning of my career.

You were the 12th person hired at Clopay. How many employees work at Clopay today?

About 1,900 employees.

How has the growth of Clopay affected your job?

The company was small, and everyone could do each other's job.

We were all from the same farming community, grew up working hard, and wanted to make a good living. We were a family outside of work and on the job. Clopay still has the same family atmosphere, but, obviously, jobs are more specific.

After 55 years working in various roles, what's been your favorite?

I've worked in virtually every position in garage door manufacturing and distribution. I started as a track assembler and then moved to the production line. At that time, garage doors were made from wood and everything was done by hand.

From there, I moved to shipping, loading, and delivering doors to dealers in Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, and Michigan. I did that job for 15 years, and really enjoyed getting to know the customers.

I've also worked as a foreman, and currently, I work as a material handler and drive a forklift. I don't log as many miles as when I delivered to dealers, but considering Clopay's plant is over a million square feet, I still cover some ground.

Did you ever consider taking a position outside manufacturing and distribution?

No. I prefer hands-on work.

continued on page 56

Key to loyalty

Tenured employees are common at Clopay. 30% of its employees have worked at the company for more than 10 years, and 15% have worked there for over 25 years. Only Cordonnier and one other employee have worked for Clopay over 50 years.

What's motivated you to stay with one company this long?

Clopay is a good company to work for. I love coming to work and I love the people. When I started in 1965, my wage was \$1.50 an hour, and I was happy to get it. It was a blessing to have a job. I've been able to learn and work in different areas of the plant, which keeps it interesting.

We don't have to travel to far-off places to make a difference. We can make a difference in our own community by investing in local business and helping it grow. I'm proud to be part of Clopay's growth.

Are there advantages to staying a career-long employee?

In 1969, I bought my own farm and operated a hay and straw business. I'd work at Clopay during the day and manage the farm business at night. I'm married and have five children, and the insurance from my Clopay job was a very important benefit.



Cordonnier with his shift team.

made of wood. There wasn't a variety of styles and designs.

The reason the industry shifted to steel is because the quality of wood declined, and it became harder to get. Today, wood is considered a high-end construction material that represents a small percentage of the market. The construction and finishing methods have improved, and they are still made by hand. Wood garage doors are like a work of art.

What do you think is the most important advancement offered in modern-day garage doors?

The durability and the appearance of garage doors. I never dreamed that technology would evolve to the point that manufacturers could make steel doors look like wood without the maintenance issues of wood doors.

Clopay Director of Manufacturing Brian Homan says, "Allie is respected by everyone for his positive outlook, family values, job experience, life experience, loyalty, knowledge of the company, and business acumen. They seek his advice on work-related matters and about life in general. He is a bright light in the company."

How has the manufacturing process changed?

The automation of the manufacturing process has been the biggest change. We couldn't produce the number of doors we do now or offer all the custom sizes and designs. Distribution has also expanded. With computer systems, we can coordinate everything from order entry to delivery. When I worked in shipping and delivery, for example, the plant loaded a total of three or four trucks a week. Today, they often load 15 times that in one day.

Evolution of the industry

What was the industry like when you were first hired?

It was a simpler time. We lived in a small community. You worked with friends and neighbors. You counted your blessings. You never locked the door on your house. You played ball together when you weren't working. People respected each other and shared a common goal. We all wanted to make a decent living and provide for our families. We had dreams and knew that hard work was the way to make them come true.

What is the most significant change you've seen in garage door products?

Nobody thought about how garage doors affect the look of their house or building like they do now. When I started, all doors were

Is there anything you miss?

I don't miss the piece work and the manual process of tracking materials and orders. I prefer the fully automated process we have now.

Manufacturing in our industry has grown. How has this growth affected Clopay?

Clopay is one of the few major garage door manufacturers that is still American owned. We've always focused on producing high-quality products at reasonable prices.

I personally believe that the recession of 2008-2009 made Clopay a better company. It forced us to take a hard look at every aspect of the business to determine where we could be more efficient, how we could adapt our operations, and where we should be investing for the future.

We had just moved into our 1 million-sq.-ft. facility in Troy, Ohio. Four different plants were brought under one roof. The company was about to launch polyurethane-insulated doors. People came together and did what they had to do to weather tough times. In those situations, the strong survive and the weak disappear. After that kind of experience, every employee views things through a different lens.



Clopay's Russia plant in the early 1970s.

continued from page 56

What other significant changes have you witnessed in the industry? Any surprises?

Technology is a benefit. It has accelerated the pace of life. With the prevalence of social media, everything is about instant gratification. People don't think long-term. They don't reflect; they react. For instance, if a person needs \$500 to pay a bill, they focus on earning the \$500 instead of considering how to turn that hard work into \$1,000.

Young people want a work/life balance, and that's important, but they need to remember that work is still part of the equation.

Bright future

In a time where most people are counting the days to retirement, what's your secret to staying happily employed?

Between Clopay and running my own farm, I worked two jobs for 40 years. Having one job is a piece of cake. My life is full. I don't feel like I have missed out on anything. Whenever someone asks how I'm doing, I always answer, "It's a great day to be alive."

I enjoy spending time with my wife, five children, and 18 grandchildren, and going hunting and traveling. I have visited 49 out of the 50 states and visited 11 countries. My wife and I are going to Ireland and Scotland in the fall for our 50th anniversary.



Cordonnier and his wife built their dream home in 2010. He installed the Clopay Coachman Collection doors because they remind him of the old-fashioned horse-and-buggy doors typically seen on a barn.

Do you have any parting words of advice for anyone entering the door industry?

My advice to them and any young person is work hard, set high goals, and be a blessing, not a curse. Also, use every benefit your company offers. I was 37 before 401k plans came along. They are standard now. Save and invest. If you do, you'll be set for life.

Manufacturing is a great career choice for young people. They don't realize the impact technology and automation are having on the way products are made today.

There is plenty of opportunity for college graduates, trade school graduates, and high school graduates. The benefits are impressive, including tuition reimbursement and on-the-job training, and there is plenty of room to advance. You can make a great living.

Do you have any hopes for the future of the door industry?

To anyone in the industry—manufacturer, dealer, employee—I would tell them to stick to the basics. Offer a good product at a fair price, provide excellent service, and treat your customers like you want to be treated. ■



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