German Company Visit: Borbet, Auburn

I had the pleasure of meeting with Ulf Kranz, President and CEO of Borbet in Auburn, and their plant manager Marty Stroer. That day I got to see wheels, lots and lots of wheels!

Borbet Group was originally founded in 1881 as a brass foundry in the German province of Westphalia by Gustav Borbet. The foundry began sand casting aluminum in 1928. The modern company was born in 1962 when Peter Wilhelm Borbet started sand casting, die casting and low-pressure casting of various aluminum parts and components. Then the next step was in 1977 when the production of alloy wheels began. Borbet was one of the first companies to cast aluminum wheels. Today, the company employs about 3,700 people in the main plant at Hallenberg-Hesborn, Germany, as well as facilities across Germany, South Africa, Austria and the United States. The family is still represented on the board by Mr. Borbet, age 77.

Borbet is considered the preferred supplier of aluminum wheels for Europe's automotive industry. They offer a product line of approximately 2,000 different types of light alloy wheels. The company designs and manufactures products for Audi, BMW, Jaguar, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche, Rolls Royce, Saab, Volkswagen, and many others.

The Borbet Group acquired ATS Light Alloy Wheels Alabama, Inc. in Auburn in 2008. Borbet in Auburn have grown to currently 350 employees. The plant is busy making about 5000 wheels a day! I wondered how that was possible; well, they do it by working 7 days per week and several departments do 4 shifts a day. Like many other manufacturers, acquiring skilled workforce can be a challenge, but Borbet is hoping more outreach to the local community and educational system will help with that.

Mr. Kranz informs me that Borbet does not do “plain and simple” when we talk wheels. All the wheels are made for premium cars like Mercedes-Benz. I might not have been one to look at wheels before, but I have to agree with Mr. Kranz after seeing their wheels, there is **nothing** plain about them.

The whole process of making a wheel from melting the metal to the finished wheel is done at the Auburn plant. Mr. Stroer, the plant manager, took me on a plant tour. First special aluminum bars are melted down in the melting furnace. The melting process takes place at a temperature of approx. 700°C (1292°F). During the casting process, the 700°C hot metal is poured into the molds. After the casting process, the alloy wheel is removed from the mold by a robot arm and cooled down to room temperature by dipping into a cold water bath. To make sure none of the wheels has a casting defect, they

pass through an x-ray system, which automatically x-rays every single wheel. Afterwards the cast blanks are subjected to a heat treatment in order to increase the strength of the material. Different finishes are produced in the painting department including polished surfaces. Before a wheel leaves the plant, it is examined in detail by a specially trained employee. Only wheels that have passed these tests, with flying colors, are sent on to the logistic department where they are prepared for shipment.

After my visit with Borbet in Auburn, I will be looking at wheels in a different way!