



# Member spotlight – Great Lakes Calcium Corporation

By Nancy Jean

Very few people are ever going to just run across Great Lakes Calcium Corporation. But don't let its discreet location at 1450 Bylsby Ave. fool you. This busy company is an important part of the history of Green Bay dating back to just past the Civil War. (See [www.glcalcium.com](http://www.glcalcium.com).)

It was founded in 1871 as the Hurlbut Calcium and Chemical Company by entrepreneur Fred Hurlbut Sr., who realized the strategic location of Green Bay and the economic opportunity of Great Lakes shipping following the Civil War. By 1913, second generation owner, Fred Hurlbut Jr. had grown the company into a major coal and bulk distributor in Northeast Wisconsin.

Under the direction of Wesley H. Garner I, Charles Bennett and Frederick J. Lenfestey, third generation family members, the Hurlbut Company diversified into the calcium products and concrete products businesses. Frederick L. Garner joined the company in 1965, and after serving in various capacities in the Hurlbut Company, he purchased Hurlbut Calcium and Chemical from the family in 1986.

That's when the name changed to Great Lakes Calcium Corporation.

Wesley Hurlbut Garner II, the fifth-generation family member to own Great Lakes Calcium Corporation, purchased the company in December 1996. Recent investments include modernization of drying equipment, updating process control systems and adding additional storage capacity. Their product comes from two quarries on the shores of Lake Huron.

Just what is calcium carbonate used for? It's in some ways better to ask what it isn't used for. "That's the real strength of the business. We serve a lot of different industries," said Dave Nelson, chief financial officer, who is also an active member of the Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce's CFO Roundtable. That has



**Great Lakes Calcium Corp. has had a waterfront presence on Bylsby Avenue since just after the Civil War.**

helped "weather the storm" in the downturned economy, he said.

"In basic principle, we do what was done 50 years ago," said Nelson. But the uses for calcium carbonate have expanded dramatically.

The glass industry is an important client, as are the agriculture and agronomy fields. Calcium is the most important mineral needed for plant, soil and animal nutrition by weight and volume. It improves lawn and garden fertilizer efficiency. The "chalk white" on athletic fields is also calcium carbonate.

As a natural product, calcium carbonate is used for environmental protection applications as well. For example, flue gas desulfurization, drinking water treatment and wastewater treatment use Great Lakes' product because it has a natural buffer-effect and works as a pollution filter.

And yet it is also an important product in the manufacturing world. Calcium carbonate

is by far the most important mineral for compounding with polymers. By weight it accounts for more than 60 percent of the filler and reinforcements market. Main applications include plasticized and rigid PVC, unsaturated polyesters, polypropylene and polyethylene. Other important areas of use include rubber, foamed carpet backings, asphalt, coatings, sealants and adhesives.

Here are some other thoughts:

- Nelson and most of the management team came from large publicly traded corporations. They brought with them some business strategies, left the feeling they were working "in a silo," he said. The company's 24 employees work as a team, he said, with weekly meetings at the 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. shift changes to keep everyone apprised. Great Lakes runs 24 hours a day five days a week.

- What is different from the large corporation to a smaller business? "That concept of shared fate is pretty powerful. We're a family

atmosphere and that gets back to our shared fate, said Nelson."

- Great Lakes has a great safety record. The company has integrated some ideas from the large corporate world to enhance safety including more lights and fastidious housekeeping. "We could bring a customer through our plant at any time," he said.

- The company, which primarily serves the Midwest and into Canada, has a great reputation because of its consistency and reliability. Each customer requires calcium carbonate to be ground very specifically to meet its chemistry needs. Product also needs to be expedited on time. That's where exceptional customer service comes in, said Nelson.

- The company performs customer service surveys and gets a 98 percent response rate. What people like best is that they always talk to a live person when they call, he said. "Always put yourself in the shoes of the customer," said Nelson.

- Long-time employees are common at Great Lakes. The company recently had a third-generation family member working for the summer. "We have a lot of employees who have been here 10 plus years," he said. "I think it's our values. We treat everybody with dignity and respect. We are fair and honest in our dealings." That holds true, he said, not only for employees, but customers and suppliers as well.

- They company is ISO certified and has "robust" quality control, said Nelson.

- The Chamber's CFO Roundtable is important to Nelson. "In a small business you are the only one," he said. At Great Lakes, his responsibilities include finance, but also HR, IT and purchasing. With his 10-member roundtable, he values having access to people to bounce ideas off of at gatherings or with a quick phone call. Healthcare and banking have been active topics lately, he noted.

In 2008 the company suffered a major fire. With a recommendation of a CFO Roundtable member, the company enlisted the help of a CPA firm in Milwaukee which probably saved them a half-million dollars post fire, he said.