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Correction: Correction– TUESDAY 8–14–2012 A story in Sunday's Ideas section incorrectly listed the name of Black Mountain manufacturer Parameter Generation & Control.

A favorable CLIMATE

Family's manufacturing firm controls humidity around the globe

BLACK MOUNTAIN – An ordinary air–conditioning unit can give Clay Hile a comfortable room temperature in his office overlooking shady woods alongside Old U.S. 70. An old–fashioned barometer is mounted on the wall as a souvenir of a simpler time before the science and control of humidity turned digital.

But Hile's business, Parameter Control and Generation, is built on going beyond skin–deep comfort of 72 degrees and 45 percent humidity. "Our customer is anyone who needs precise control," Hile explained.

Like the Library of Congress.

PCG's devices protect the delicate pages of the Gettysburg Address the Gutenberg Bible and other priceless historic artifacts in the national library's displays in Washington.

When companies around the world worry about dialing temperature and humidity to fractions of a degree, they turn to this small, family–owned manufacturer here in Black Mountain.

And the mountains provide the right business climate for such advanced manufacturers like PCG, according to economic developers.

"Asheville is built for family–owned manufacturing companies, and we're starting to see ramp–up in that space. It's been a banner year for advanced manufacturing," said Ben Teague, executive director of the Economic Development Coalition of Asheville–Buncombe County.

Climate for growth

Since 1977, PCG has built an international reputation for high–end equipment, reach–in chambers and walk–in rooms that can regulate both humidity and temperature to exacting standards. These aren't standard dehumidifiers or run–of–the–mill air conditioners, but range in price from \$15,000 to \$100,000.

Humidity or water vapor in the air doesn't just make the summers feel sticky and miserable. It can play havoc with delicate historical documents or suck out the effective ingredients from medicines stored on a pharmacy shelf.

Dozens of industries dealing in electronics and semiconductors, textiles or tobacco need high–end controls and chambers to adjust just how sticky the air gets around their products.

Humidity hasn't been on hiatus despite economic downturn. For PCG, business has been booming despite the Great Recession and the not–so–great recovery. "We've had a steady climb of 15 percent annual increases. Then in 2010–2011, we had a 50 percent jump," Hile said.

That kind of demand has doubled the workforce from 20 on the payroll in 2009 to 44 on staff now. And Hile

is building a 7,500–square–foot addition to relieve overcrowding in the existing 18,000–square–foot factory.

PCG isn't alone in its success.

After 20 years of layoffs and factory closings, local manufacturers have been adding jobs in the past year, especially in metal–working, computer and electronic products, electrical equipment and transportation equipment manufacturing.

That boost in good–paying manufacturing jobs, along with growth in the area's strong health care sector, has boosted Asheville into the state's top–growing metro area despite a weak recovery. Asheville is tied with Durham–Chapel Hill for the state's lowest unemployment rate at 7.9 percent.

"Clay really represents the ranks of smaller manufacturers like W.P. Hickman, Advanced Manufacturing Solutions, AVL Technologies – these locally owned, higher–tech companies," explained Clark Duncan, an EDC staffer at the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce. "They are smaller size, so they are more nimble. We are really blessed in Buncombe County with more of these companies."

Family–built business

PCG was formed by Hile's father, John, and his brother, Ross, in 1977.

The elder Hile had moved to the area from Baltimore and ran the student work crews that designed and built the chapel at Warren Wilson College. He had also worked as a salesman for American Instruments Co. in Silver Springs, Md., which had manufactured many of the humidity–control equipment.

After Baxter bought out American Instruments Co., John Hile picked up the licensing for the equipment.

Clay Hile joined the company in 1985, fresh out of college. He's seen real changes in technology from old–fashioned mechanical controls to solid–state analog circuits to completely digital signals.

In recent years, they have diversified their client list after the collapse of a major semiconductor customer put a real dent in PCG's business. Now the pharmaceutical industry provides a healthy part of the company's revenues.

Hile's brother, Ross, has moved down to Wilson in the eastern part of the state, where PCG partners with other companies to provide temperature– and humidity–controlled storage for drug firms. It's part of a tightly regulated regimen for medicine that must meet strict standards for shelf life.

For Clay Hile, the reward of operating a globally competitive company has been the opportunity to travel the world and get a sense of other cultures beyond the typical tourist's experience.

PCG is now selling in 30 different countries with exports making up 35 percent of its revenues.

"The technology has gotten trickier with time," said Barry Wilson, who's been at PCG for 28 years, one of several veterans on the payroll. "I got here on the tail–end of thermostats."

Now Wilson helps customers who want to see their humidity controls in real time online from around the world. "As soon as we are able to do something well, we will find another challenge."

WHAT?

Parameter Control's

services include:

Preserving priceless artifacts,
such as the Gettysburg Address
and the Gutenberg Bible, right,
at the Library of Congress.

Maintaining controlled

environments for pharmaceutical, electronic, textile and tobacco
industries.

Caption: From left, Clay Hile, Randy Wilson and Barry Wilson work on a temperature and humidity calibration chamber in the ambient control test room at Parameter Generation & Control in Black Mountain. Hile's father and brother started the company, which now sells climate controls around the globe. – John Fletcher/Jfletcher@citizen-times.com

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