

Good as Gold: TABC, the ‘Can Do’ Plant, Celebrates 50 Years of Success

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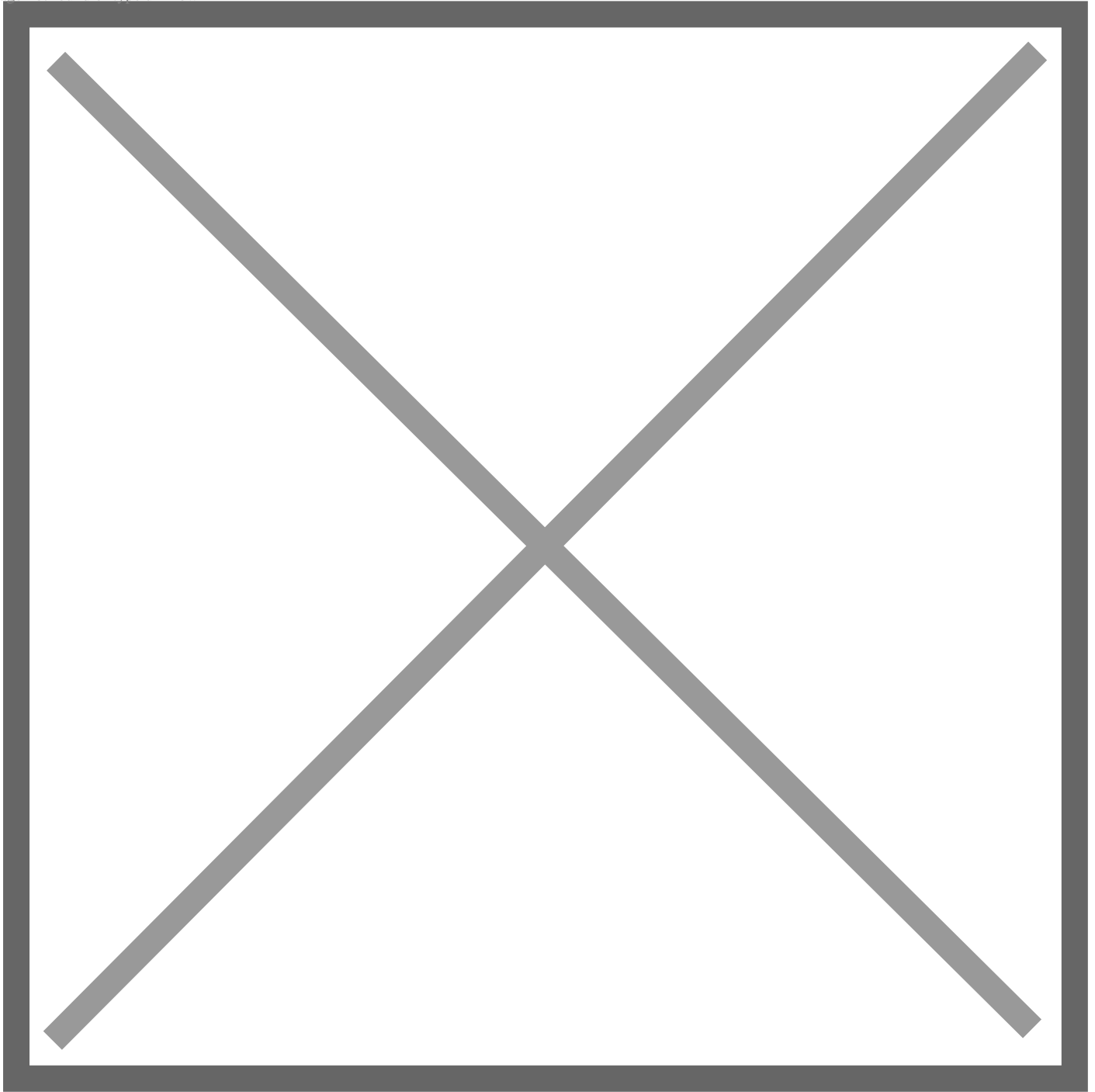
In the beginning, it took flight thanks in large part to chickens. And in the future, it might well continue to soar thanks to the proliferation of electric vehicles.

But, one way or another, there's every reason to believe that TABC, Inc., which is celebrating its 50th year in operation as Toyota's first North American manufacturing facility, will thrive and prosper.

"We think of ourselves as the 'Can Do' plant," says TABC President Jim Zehmer. "Anything that gets thrown at us, we will give it a try. And more often than not, we walk away successful."

Zehmer came to TABC from Hughes Aircraft as a financial analyst 30 years ago, so he wasn't there at the start. But he knows the history.

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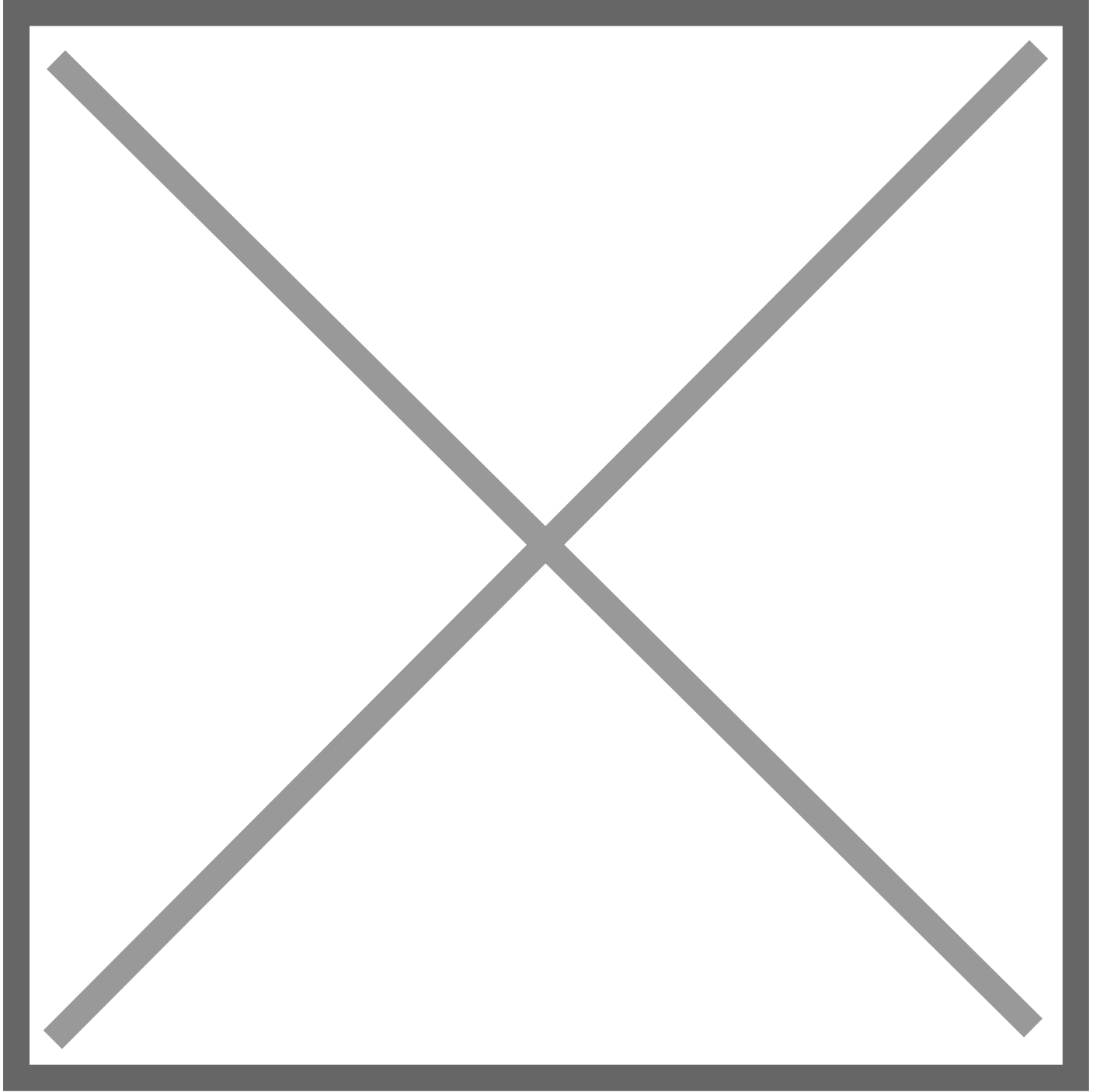


Watchful Eye — Throughout his 30-year tenure at TABC, President Jim Zehmer has maintained a hands-on approach to the business. “I know at least 90% of our team members by name and often have conversations with them. At our core, we’re really very much like a family.”

Toyota, which had established its base in the U.S. in 1957, was beginning to ramp up sales in the early 1970s due in part to the growing popularity of its Hi-Lux pickup truck. The best way to comply with the import regulations at that time — which, believe it or not, [were impacted by chickens](#) — was to import the cab and

frame without the truck bed.

And thus emerged what was once called Toyota Motor Manufacturing after Toyota first contracted with, and then purchased, Atlas Fabricators in Long Beach, California.



Steady Hand — *Lupe Contreras has been a fixture at TABC for more than 48 of the plant's 50 years.*

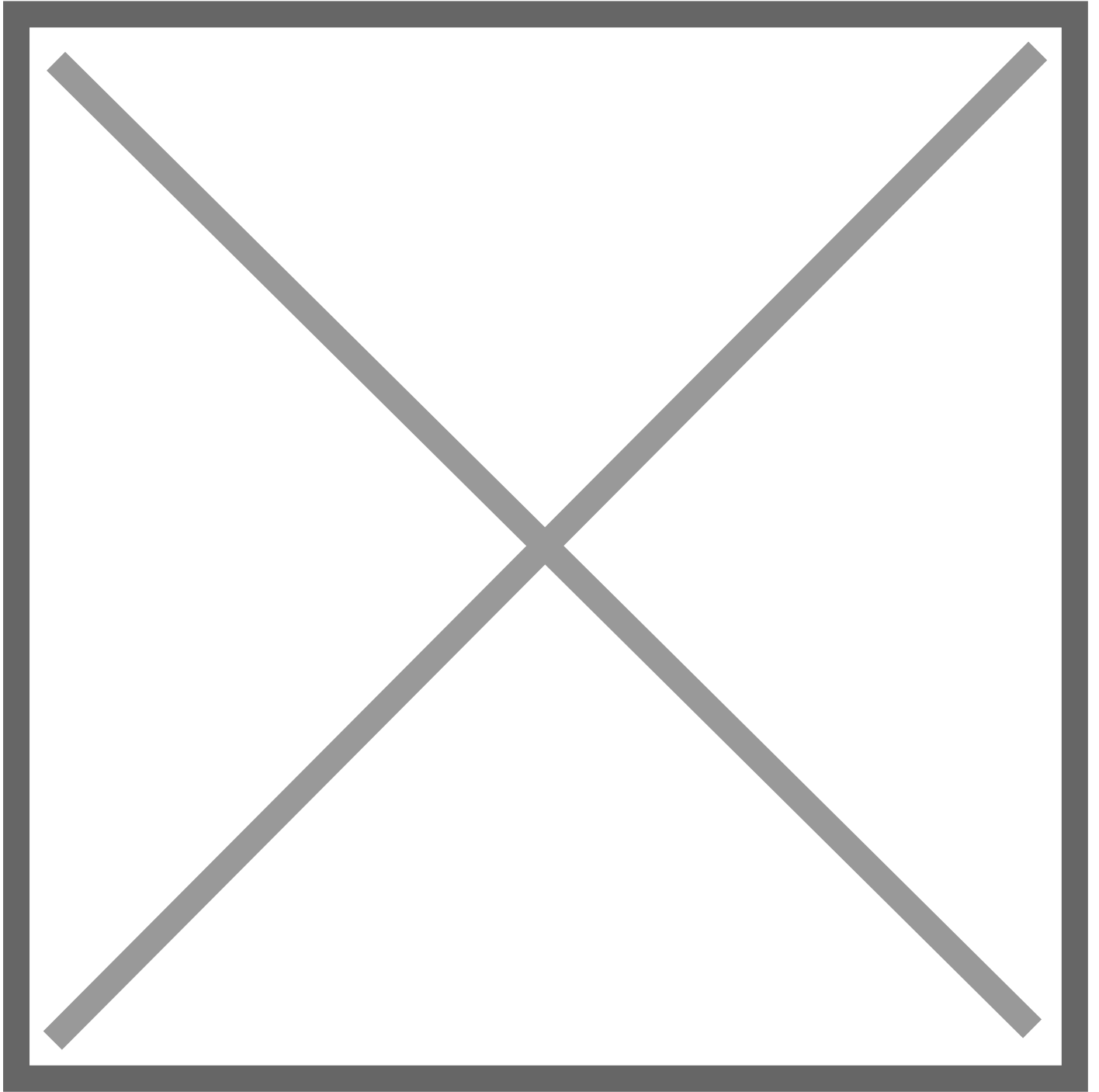
Toyota employee, Lupe Contreras *was* around at that time. Amazingly, he's still on the job at TABC more than 48 years later. As a crane operator for Atlas starting in 1970, he helped churn out its primary product: shells for bombs destined for the Vietnam War.

When Toyota took over the facility, it used forklifts rather than cranes to move around the dies used to stamp sheet metal into truck beds. So, Contreras learned how to operate a forklift. Eventually, TABC reintroduced cranes, so he transitioned back to his original specialty. He's remained in that role for the past 23 years, except for a short stint in another role as a team leader.

“When new technology came in and they started using computers, I said that wasn't for me,” Contreras says. “I just wanted to be a crane operator.”

Over the years, TABC's core capabilities of stamping, welding and painting parts have remained a constant. The parts they've produced, however, have changed. For example, in 1989, it started to make catalytic converters. In 1999, it began producing stepside truck beds — a project headed by a young Akio Toyoda. Since then, it has added other components to its portfolio, such as steering columns, weld sub-assemblies and other sheet metal and aluminum parts.

Earlier this year, Toyota Motor North America (TMNA) announced it would invest \$27 million on top of the \$485 million spent to date to support an increase in TABC's production capabilities. This will include TMNA's first coil-fed laser blanking line that will allow TABC to cut 5.6 million steel and aluminum blanks on the same line annually. As such, TABC will be in a better position to support Tacoma production.



A Team Effort — Contreras (*center*) shares his lunch break with fellow team members Andres Rosales (*left*) and Luis Munoz (*right*).

Meanwhile, Contreras and his fellow team members will continue to produce service parts for older Toyota pickup trucks that — thanks to Toyota’s legendary quality, durability and reliability — continue to rack up the miles.

Along the way, he plans to keep racking up the years.

“I will keep working here until the day I can’t,” Contreras says, though his daily work routine requires him to leave his home at 3:45 a.m. to begin his shift at 5 a.m. “I am very grateful for the opportunity that TABC has given me to provide a home and shelter for my family. This company has been very good to me.”

Zehmer, too, has paid his dues. He was named president just a year ago after nearly three decades of taking on a wide array of responsibilities.

“The big turning point for me came in 1996,” he says. “I was given the opportunity to move from Finance to Production Control. So many other opportunities across the operation came along after that, including a two-year dual cap assignment at our plant in Baja, California, in 2016 and 2017. No two days are ever the same. I’ve learned so much and have really enjoyed it.”

Odds are, Zehmer will need to draw from that deep well of experience to ensure TABC remains robust in the years ahead. As he sees it, the resilience of the plant’s 350 team members and their willingness to embrace change in the past will serve it well in the future.