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## **Made in WNY: Alden Optical**



[Dan Miner](#)

Reporter- Business First

[Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Google+](#)

[Tom Shone](#) had grown tired of his high-level executive position at CooperVision, the Fairport-based giant in the world of contact lenses.

He had risen with the company through an exciting period of growth in the 1990s, only to find himself unsatisfied in the world of corporate management.

So when Shone lost his job as a result of a merger, he looked for an endeavor that would sate his entrepreneurial spirit.

[Charley Creighton](#) was running Alden Optical – the company his optometrist father founded in 1969 – from the cramped confines of a former house in the village of Alden.

The company had a solid reputation but stagnant growth in its chosen industry – making contact lenses for patients with specific optical conditions, such as severe astigmatism.

The men met in 2009 and joined forces. Creighton is CEO and Shone is president.

“Charley was looking for somebody to grow the business and I was looking for a business to grow,” Shone said.

Things are stagnant no longer. Since that meeting, the company has grown from seven to 16 employees and revenues more than tripled, from \$800,000 to a projected \$2.8 million this year.

Last October, Alden Optical moved from its former tight space to a 14,100-square-foot headquarters on Lancaster Parkway in Alden, for which it paid \$511,000. There is plenty of room for more employees and more equipment. The company plans to install a new lathe this

year that will add manufacturing capacity.

Company leaders said all the pieces are in place for continued growth, with Creighton focusing on production and Shone on commercial strategy.

The company has come a long way since its founding in 1969 by Alden optometrist Charles "Pat" Creighton. He saw a future for a made-to-order contact lens company, designing his own products and selling them in Canada before finally getting federal approval to sell them in the United States in 1984.

Over the years, Alden Optical invested in automated machines to make the contacts.

Charley started running the company about 15 years ago and, using his background in mathematics and computers, wrote the computer programs on which they operate.

Despite its growth, Alden Optical lives in a sliver of the optical world. About 35,000 optometrists operate in North America, but only about 3,000 deal with specialty contact makers.

Those doctors turn to companies such as Alden Optical when they encounter patients with unusual eye conditions that require specialty contacts. Contact lens companies such as CooperVision that dominate the market don't do such work.

That means Alden Optical must be careful to maintain close relationships with the doctors who order its product. Quality, consistency and reliability are of utmost importance to survival, let alone growth.

These are contact lenses, after all. The people who wear them will take notice of the fit, quality and comfort, and they will express their level of satisfaction with their optometrist.

"The end user will scrutinize our products," [Charley Creighton](#) said. "They will always notice problems because they will be uncomfortable or unable to see."

The industry is undergoing a moderate expansion, as innovations to contact lenses have made them possible for an increasing number of unusual or severe eye conditions. Shone and Creighton said their company will pursue growth of the current market share and act on new opportunities, including acquisitions, that will allow them to expand their footprint and grow stronger.

Creighton said it's a thrill to continue the company his father started more than 40 years ago, noting its mission is almost exactly as his father envisioned it.

In the world of specialty contact lenses, Alden Optical places a premium on cultivating good employees and then retaining them.

Shone said he is far more satisfied as an entrepreneur at a small company than a manager at a large one. He said he enjoys the occasional need to do menial tasks, to talk to customers, to envision a brighter future.

"It's fun to go back and do growth again," he said.

Dan Miner is Business First's enterprise reporter. He also covers education and public companies.