

NEW LEADERSHIP, OLD ROOTS DRIVE RONK ELECTRICAL FORWARD IN NOKOMIS

In towns like Nokomis, Illinois, you don't stumble upon industry. You arrive at it.

"You're driving through acre after acre of corn and soybeans and then you hit Nokomis," said Ryan Langdon, regional manager for the Illinois Manufacturing Excellence Center (IMEC). "Then you go past it, and you're immediately back in farmland."

And yet, in that stretch of open road sits a company that speaks directly to where manufacturing is headed.

Ronk Electrical Industries, a seven-decade-old manufacturer, has long been a quiet force in rural electrification and power systems. Today, it's also becoming a proving ground for a new kind of leadership and a new phase of industrial growth. That leadership shift is shaped by intention.

At the center of that shift is Caitlin Simhauser.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF NEXT GENERATION

Across Illinois manufacturing, Langdon sees a transition underway.

"There's a changing of the guard," he said. "Younger leaders are stepping into executive roles, and it's only going to accelerate." Simhauser is part of that movement, and her path stands apart.

She didn't grow up inside Ronk. She chose it.

While she comes from a fourth-generation business family tied to Springfield Electric Supply, Ronk itself was an acquisition. She pursued the opportunity and ultimately took ownership in 2021 at a moment when uncertainty defined both the economy and the manufacturing sector.

"I've been around electrical products my whole life, and I've always had a fascination with manufacturing," Simhauser said. "When the opportunity came to step into Ronk, I jumped at it because of the people, the community, and the impact we can have."

What she stepped into was a company with deep roots and clear gaps.

"We had a strong product, a strong team, and a great reputation," she said. "But we didn't have the systems or visibility to grow the way we needed to."

Rather than preserve the status quo, Simhauser made an early decision to have Ronk evolve. "As owner and operator, I quickly realized it takes a whole lot of leaders and team members to succeed. For example, my husband, Mark, joined the company in 2022 as manager of Ronk's product development and manufacturing strategies. And other leaders have stepped up as well."



DEDICATION, SKILL, AND PRIDE BUILD COMMUNITIES

One of the reasons I value the *Made in My Hometown* series is that it shines a light on the stories behind successful manufacturers and the people who help them grow. Ronk's journey illustrates what can happen when a company embraces continuous improvement and invests in its future.

What makes Ronk's story especially compelling is the depth and variety of solutions it has utilized through its partnership with IMEC. These include growth strategies and automation assessments, ERP implementation, safety initiatives, lean practices, and workforce development through internship programs. Ronk has demonstrated a commitment to strengthening every aspect of its business.

Stories like Ronk's show how innovation, adaptability, and a focus on people help build stronger companies and stronger communities.

Warmest regards,

Jaclyn Kolodziej
IMEC
Director of Marketing



BUILT FOR RURAL AMERICA

Ronk's origins trace back to 1950, when founder Leroy Ronk developed a solution to a uniquely rural challenge: how to bring three-phase power to farms without the cost of new utility infrastructure.

The company's three-phase conversion technology allowed farmers to generate the power they needed from single-phase lines that the rural electric cooperative installed along the roadways. The conversion technology helped farmers save thousands of dollars and transformed agricultural productivity across the Midwest.

That core product line still exists today.

"We're serving that same market with that same core technology," Simhauser said. "It's evolved, but the purpose hasn't changed."

Over time, Ronk expanded into electrical switching products and emergency power systems, positioning itself to serve industries ranging from utilities to healthcare, sectors where reliability isn't optional.

From its single facility in Nokomis, the company now ships across North America, maintaining its small-town footprint while supporting critical infrastructure far beyond it.

A COMMUNITY ANCHOR

With nearly 50 employees in a town of about 2,500, Ronk's role in **Nokomis** extends well beyond its walls.

"It's a huge provider of jobs," Langdon said. "And it's not just the jobs. It's everything that comes with it. These jobs help local gas stations, restaurants, and suppliers. Manufacturing has a lot of tentacles in a community like that."

For Simhauser, that responsibility is part of the job.

"We're investing in our team and our company here, and the community is investing right back," she said. "We're able to employ families here, often across generations."

That connection shapes how decisions get made, from hiring to training to long-term investment. Growth is measured in stability.

REINVENTION IN REAL TIME

If Ronk's **products** were built for reliability, its internal systems told a different story when Simhauser arrived.

"We had no visibility into our data," she said. "We were relying on older systems that didn't talk to each other." Without real-time insight, growth would remain constrained.

Through its partnership with IMEC, Simhauser led a structured transformation, starting with a growth readiness assessment and expanding into safety, process improvement, and critical technology.

The centerpiece was a new enterprise resource planning (ERP) system.

"It has completely transformed our business," Simhauser said. "We can now see production, inventory and sales in real time. We're making better



"We're able to employ families here, often across generations."



decisions, planning better, and ultimately serving our customers better.”

The change required more than software. It required buy-in across the company. “The shift was cultural more than operational,” she said. “It created a level of trust. Our teams needed to trust the data, trust the process, and trust that we can handle change.”

Langdon points directly to leadership as the difference-maker.

“If you don’t set the right environment, these kinds of changes fail,” he said. “Caitlin created a vision that people could get behind. That’s why it worked.”

INVESTMENT THAT STOOD OUT

Executing that transformation required an investment in technology and people.

Through a partnership involving IMEC and the **West Central Development Council** (LWIA 21), Ronk secured more than \$100,000 in workforce training grant support.* The funding reimbursed the company for a substantial portion of both the ERP implementation and the training required to bring every employee onto the new system.

For Matt Jones, executive director of the West Central Development Council, the scale of the project was immediately clear.

“This was an ambitious project,” Jones said. “The scope and cost were larger than what we typically see for these types of grants.”

In fact, it pushed beyond the norm.

“We don’t usually fund projects at that level,” he added. “But this checked all the boxes. It was high impact, had quick implementation, and had a long-term benefit for both the company and the community.”

The investment ensured the technology didn’t sit idle. It was adopted, understood, and used across the organization.

“Training our team has enabled better decision-making and improved practices across the board,” Simhauser said.

The effort also earned Ronk a nomination for the **Local Workforce Innovation Area 21** Business Leadership Award.

“It was an easy selection,” Jones said. “The scale of the project, the leadership, and the community impact all stood out.”

LEADING WHAT COMES NEXT

For Langdon, Ronk offers a clear signal of manufacturing that is focused on a leadership team that is intentional, data-driven, and grounded in people.

That shift is already visible inside the company.

Simhauser continues to invest in equipment, explore automation opportunities, and expand training programs. “Ronk wouldn’t be where we are today without the West Central Development Council and IMEC.

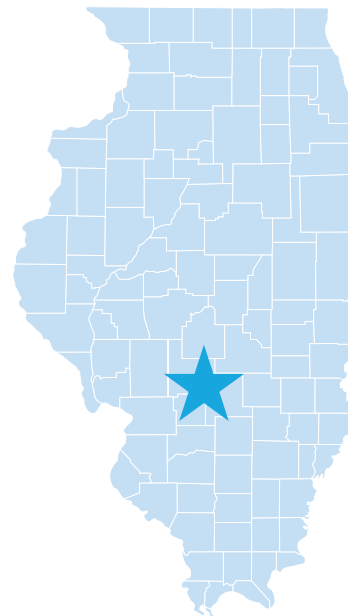


“Ronk wouldn’t be where we are today without ... IMEC.”



RONK ELECTRICAL INDUSTRIES

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*Most of the funding was provided through the **Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity (DCEO)** and its **Supplemental Grant** made available through the Governor’s General Revenue Funds.



Our goal is to make our business more responsive, more efficient, and more resilient."

But the throughline remains consistent.

"We don't make changes just to make changes," she said. "Everything we do is about making the work easier, getting better results, and continuing to grow."

It's a practical and disciplined philosophy. Every investment, every system, every shift is tied back to performance and people.

FROM DOT ON THE MAP TO DELIBERATE GROWTH

Nokomis may be easy to miss on a map. But what's happening inside Ronk Electrical Industries is anything but accidental.

The company's story is about intention and choice. A leader who chose to step into a legacy business. A company that chose to confront its gaps. A team that chose to evolve together.

Or, as Langdon put it, somewhere between stretches of open road and farmland, "you hit Nokomis."

And inside that stop is a company proving that the future of manufacturing isn't just inherited.

It's built deliberately.



"Our goal is to make our business more responsive, more efficient, and more resilient."

MADE IN MY HOMETOWN SERIES

In every Illinois hometown, manufacturing impacts families, community, state, and country – and IMEC is there. We're the first stop to taking small and midsize manufacturers from status quo to unstoppable. You bring the can-do spirit, we bring the know-how to scale your goals.

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