

Ted Bender – Bender Steel

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

What is being built by this business? In the case of one Kansas company, it might be decorative metal railings for a Big 12 football stadium or for Oklahoma City's Bricktown entertainment district. These are among the key projects of this entrepreneurial company in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Ted Bender is founder and owner of Bender Steel in Whitewater, Kansas. He grew up between Newton and Hesston, and took agricultural education classes at Moundridge from agricultural instructor Larry Goering. Here he learned to weld. That skill would become the basis of his career.

During the following years, Ted worked for a local manufacturing company and for various local farmers, including Mr. Goering. Then Ted married his wife Amy and moved to the Whitewater area, northeast of Wichita.

In 2003, Ted started his own business, primarily doing farm equipment repair. He also had a hay business and traded in antique tractors.

2008 marked a turning point in his business. "A guy from our church asked me if I wanted to do some welding on a handrail for a project he was working on," Ted said. Ted took on the project and it went so well that this type of custom welding became a major part of his business.

Today, Bender Steel is a full service metal fabricator of products such as steel fencing, architectural steel structures and custom design elements. "We've built everything from bike racks to trash cans to decorative fences," Ted said. Among the company's most popular products are the custom, ornamental handrailings.

The company's website says: "Our team can handle everything from the beginning stages of design to the installation of the completed project. Our technicians have experience in AutoCAD to begin the design process and produce professional shop drawings. We have the ability to fabricate plasma-cut projects as well as bend, shear, and roll steel. Our experienced welders can weld everything from aluminum to steel. Once the project is produced, we can sandblast, paint and install it."

From Ted Bender's one man shop, the company has expanded to include 14 employees. Bender Steel has worked on projects from Kansas City to Oklahoma City. For example, the company's products can be found near the Wichita riverfront, a bridge over Interstate 70 near the Kansas Speedway, bus stop shelters in downtown Wichita, a unique new waterfront park called A Gathering Place for Tulsa, and Bill Snyder Family Stadium in Manhattan.

"We built every piece of exterior rail (on the KSU west stadium renovation)," Ted said. "It's fun to think that everybody touches our product and our customers are happy," he said.

What are the keys to the growth of the business? "We owe it all to the Lord, one hundred percent," Ted said.

What about advice to other small businesses? "Building relationships with customers is really important," Ted said. "We need to meet and exceed expectations and make sure things are right in the end."

He pointed out the importance of going the extra mile for the customer. “Long after the pain fades from your extra effort, the customer will remember that you took care of them,” Ted said.

“It’s all about people, not about money,” he said.

Ted reflected on the basis for his business today. “It starts with faith and family,” Ted said. “My wife Amy has been very supportive through all of this. We have seven beautiful children, and I thank God every day for them,” he said.

He also gives thanks for the agricultural education instructor who taught him to weld. “Larry Goering was a fantastic ag teacher and a fantastic mentor for a lot of us,” he said.

All this has led to this successful business located near the rural community of Whitewater, population 718 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information about this company, see www.bendersteel.com.

What is being built by this business? There are lots of products, but more than that. We salute Ted Bender and the people of Bender Steel for making a difference with their craftsmanship. In the end, this is not only about metal products. “We don’t just build rails, we build relationships,” Ted Bender said.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.