

Joe Works – B&W Trailer Hitches – Part 1

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

“Do you know where your trailer hitch was made? Should you care?” Those leading questions were found in an ad in a national magazine. The ad described the importance of using American-made products, such as the ones built by this particular company which is located in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Joe Works is owner and co-founder of B&W Trailer Hitches in Humboldt, Kansas. Joe grew up on a farm near Humboldt in southeast Kansas and returned to the farm after attending K-State.

When the farm economy took a downturn in the 1980s, he did some welding at night to supplement the farm income. While at the welding shop, Joe met a guy named Roger Baker. During their breaks, Joe and Roger started talking about trucks and drawing out truck bed designs on a napkin. Roger built a prototype for this new design in his garage, and ultimately the two men went into business together. Using the initials for Baker and Works, the company was named B&W Truck Beds.

Their goal was to build the highest quality truck bed on the market. The business grew and diversified. Then Joe and Roger thought about how to improve the gooseneck trailer hitches then in use.

At that time, the best option for getting the gooseneck ball out of the way in a truck bed was a large plate with a ball that folded down. This option required a huge hole in the truckbed, and installation was cumbersome.

Together, Joe and Roger designed a hitch with a ball that could be pulled out, turned over, and stowed beneath the bed. They designed a framework which is bolted to the truck frame and requires no welding, drilling, or bed removal to install. This new hitch, called the Turnover Ball, revolutionized the gooseneck hitch industry. This type of ball storage and mounting system is used by nearly every gooseneck hitch manufacturer today.

The company is now known as B&W Trailer Hitches. Joe's daughter, Beth Barlow, is marketing director for the company.

Today, the company employs some 220 people. Employees come from nearby towns like Chanute and Iola, and also rural communities like Piqua, Gas, and Bronson, population 346 people. Now, that's rural.

In 2002, Roger Baker retired from the company and sold his shares to Joe. In 2009, the company began an Employee Stock Ownership Plan under which employees buy into ownership of the company's stock. “This helps the employees function as owners when they make their decisions,” Beth Barlow said.

Today, B&W Trailer Hitches offers an extensive line of products relating to trucks and livestock. These include gooseneck and recreational vehicle hitches, receiver hitches and accessories, truck cab protectors, gooseneck couplers, truck beds, farm and ranch equipment, and all terrain vehicle accessories.

Where are these products sold? The answer is, coast to coast -- literally from California to the Carolinas. B&W Trailer Hitches has a network of more than 6,000 dealers across the U.S. and in Canada.

Yet the competition is steep, particularly from low-cost overseas manufacturers. “So many companies have taken their manufacturing overseas,” Beth Barlow said. “It’s investing in the latest technology that makes us efficient and able to compete with foreign competition.”

The company’s website is www.turnoverball.com. It says: “Made in the USA’ can succeed, but only if we rely on the principles that work in our own neighborhoods. We grow by earning trust and improving customer value, not by cutting costs. We let people use cutting-edge technology to make things safer, easier, and higher quality, rather than let technology use us. We respond to customers and changing markets by being right-sized and flexible, not just bigger. We treat each other as family, not as “labor” exportable to the lowest bidder.”

“Do you know where your trailer hitch was made? Should you care?” It’s obvious that the people of B&W Trailer Hitches care about making a difference with homegrown manufacturing.

And there’s more. When B&W Trailer Hitches suffered from the economic downturn, the company considered laying off employees – but instead it chose a different course. We’ll learn about that next week.

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