

Joe Works – B&W Trailer Hitches – Part 2

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

NBC Nightly News, March 16, 2009. The evening prime time newscast features a story about a business which was hit by the economic downturn – but instead of laying off employees, it kept them on the payroll and sent those employees out to work on projects for the community. The remarkable business which used this amazing strategy is found in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about B&W Trailer Hitches, owned by Joe Works. Joe and co-founder Roger Baker designed truck beds and gooseneck trailer hitches which are now sold nationwide and beyond. These include the innovative Turnover Ball which revolutionized the industry. Beth Barlow, Joe Works' daughter, is marketing director for the company.

Many manufacturing companies were hit hard by the economic downturn of the past decade, and certainly B&W Trailer Hitches was affected as well.

"We did go through a lot of lean years and I know what it's like," Joe said. Beth Barlow remembers those times well. Sales were down and employees were idle.

"It was heartbreaking," Beth Barlow said. "We were looking at how to lessen the payroll, and we took a few days to learn about how the state would handle our unemployment."

But then the company took a different course. "Joe came in one day and said, 'You know what, let's just not lay anybody off,'" Beth said. Instead, the company tried something different. Joe sent the employees into the community – with full pay – to use their skills on various projects around the town. The labor was provided to the community free of charge.

So, instead of welding trailer hitches inside the company's plant, the workers went out to repaint churches, prune trees, spruce up playgrounds, and refurbish the baseball fields. Not only did these projects significantly benefit the community, it benefited the workers and their families as well as the local economy by keeping those workers employed.

But what about the impact on the company itself? "It was a good move," Beth Barlow said. "I think it was a forward-looking move on Joe's part. He believed (demand for products) would come back, and it has. We have an investment in training our employees. Doing these community projects utilized our employee's skills and retained them in the company."

Business has recovered for B&W Trailer Hitches. In fact, the company had record sales months in late 2011 and early 2012. At the time of the downturn, the company employed 180 people. Today, B&W Trailer Hitches has grown to 220. B&W Trailer Hitches is now Humboldt's largest employer.

Sending the employees out to work in the community is an amazing alternative to the layoffs experienced by so many manufacturers in the 2000s. In fact, it was so unusual that it came to the attention of NBC Nightly News. A television reporter and camera crew came to the rural community of Humboldt, Kansas to cover the story. Humboldt is a town of 1,964 people. Now, that's rural.

The TV reporter interviewed Joe Works and other local citizens and shared their comments about the mutually beneficial relationship of company and community.

“Because I’ve been blessed by a business that’s been successful and made some money, I don’t want to hang onto that with a greedy attitude, I want to share,” Joe said. “It’s Midwestern values, but this is above and beyond,” said Larry Mendoza, Humboldt recreation director. “It’s like one big family,” said Janet Pulley of the Poplar Grove Baptist Church. “What hurts one hurts the other, and what helps one helps the other,”

The reporter described it this way: “Restoring a piece of the heartland – Keeping one hometown alive for the next generation.”

For more information, go to www.turnoverball.com.

It’s time to turn off the NBC Nightly News, but we are thankful that a television network would highlight this innovative way to utilize employees during an economic downturn. The television segment about B&W Trailer Hitches was fittingly titled “Making a difference.” We commend Joe Works for finding this creative way to benefit the community while benefitting his employees as well. To me, that result is big news.

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