

Kent Jost – A&C

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

Let's go to China, where a load of aluminum sheets is arriving from the U.S. These long, aluminum sheets are such a size that they require a special type of container to carry them. In fact, these containers are produced halfway around the globe by a company in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Kent Jost is founder and owner of A & C Enterprises which produces these custom-made containers and pallets for shipping. Kent is a native of Hillsboro, where he and his wife Diane grew up. He played baseball at Butler County Community College and was trained as an autobody technician.

After he and Diane were married, Kent worked in various positions, such as warehouse manager, insurance sales, and as a supervisor at a manufacturing company. One of his responsibilities was to supervise the shipping department.

"We did our own crating," Kent said. In other words, Kent and his crew custom-built the shipping containers for the company's products. In the process, he learned a lot about shipping and containers.

Through a friend with a wholesale lumber company, Kent learned about a man who had a business building pallets and explored the idea. In May 1994, Kent started his own crating and pallet business.

"We build custom crates, boxes, skids, and shipping containers," Kent said. "We do very few of the standard-size pallets. Most of what we do are specially-sized shipping pallets." These are often called skids.

For example, instead of a simple four foot by four foot pallet, for different customers Kent might build a three by eight foot pallet which would go on a semi-truck or even up to a ten foot by thirty-eight foot skid. Those skids are used to carry long aluminum sheets such as those which go on the fuselage or wing of an airplane.

In another case, Kent's crew builds shipping crates for lawnmowers, including sides, ends, and a top. The manufacturer drives the mower onto the skid and then adds the sides, ends, and top for shipping. Of course, these crates are custom built to fit the lawnmower just right.

These carriers and containers are the unsung heroes of the shipping world. They are the part we take for granted when we order something, expecting that it will arrive carefully packed and intact.

Kent experienced all the challenges of a small entrepreneur getting his business started. He hired his first full-time employee two months after the business began. "My wife was teaching and I was working at another job on a 5 to 11 a.m. shift," Kent said. "Then I could work in the shop and sell in the afternoon." The business grew.

Of course, there was a question: What should the business be named? "We had two kids, Ashlee and Cole," Kent said. "So we decided to name the business in their honor: A & C Enterprises. It also put me in the front of the phone book," he said with a smile.

In later years, another daughter came along. Fortunately she was named Ali, so she fit the pattern of the company name as well.

When A & C Enterprises got started, Kent and Diane were living in Wichita, but he knew of a guy who had warehouse space available in the town of Halstead, Kansas. So A & C Enterprises set up shop in Halstead. Today the company serves customers within a 90 mile radius of Halstead, or as far away as Ponca City, Oklahoma. But the products which are carried in his containers literally go around the globe.

Kent's containers are built of heat-treated lumber and are certified for export, and they've gone to such places as China, Europe, Brazil, and Australia. Sales at A & C Enterprises are well over a million dollars. Wow.

That's outstanding for a business in the rural community of Halstead, population 1,880 people. Now, that's rural.

It's time to leave China, where we saw a shipping container from halfway around the globe in Kansas. We salute Kent Jost and all those involved with A & C Enterprises for making a difference with hard work and entrepreneurship. My pride can hardly be contained.

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