

Doug Routh – R-TECH

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

San Francisco, California. A large metrorail construction project is underway, with the rails supported by huge 40,000 pound abutments. A heavy duty metal framework attaches to the abutments and supports those rails. Where do you suppose that metal framework was constructed? Would you believe, halfway across the continent in rural Kansas? It's today's Kansas Profile.

Doug Routh is the owner and founder of R-TECH Tools, the remarkable company which built the framework for these abutments. Doug is a Kansan. He graduated from Wamego and went to trade school in Salina. He worked in Kansas City and came back to Wamego to work at what was then Baldersons Manufacturing. For five years, he worked in a heavy equipment repair shop in California.

When Doug heard that Caterpillar had purchased a controlling interest in Baldersons, he thought that might create an opportunity for related business in the area. Doug and his wife Rachelle moved to Wamego again. In 1993, they set up a business known as R-TECH Tool and Machine, or R-TECH for short.

"We started out repairing machines and equipment for contractors or farmers," Doug said. For the first few months, it was just Doug and Rachelle. "I'd set up the machines, and she ran them," Doug said. She also did the books.

The company grew but it has remained a true family business. "Every one of my kids work for me in some way," Doug said. Rachelle still helps too. Their oldest daughter Chantel is the office manager, which includes human resources and accounting. Son Joshua oversees purchasing and tooling. Daughter Cassie enters orders and helps with accounting. Twin sons Jacob and Jordan are freshmen at K-State but also help on the shop floor and office. In fact, R-TECH now has more than 50 employees.

"We try real hard to take care of our people," Doug said. "We have one of the only climate-controlled shop floors around."

In 2008, the company made the largest investment in the history of the business, purchasing a multimillion dollar, state-of-the-art Versatech bridge mill. "It's one of the few of that size in private hands around here," Doug said. "That purchase has catapulted us to the next level."

Today, the company does large parts manufacturing, CNC machining, welding and fabrication, and prototype design and engineering. "We work real close with customers, building products that might not be practical for them to do themselves," Doug said. "We try to build a long-term relationship, rather than running from one job to the next."

R-TECH has been described as "the machine shop of choice for major manufacturers." One of those is Caterpillar, just as Doug had predicted back in 1993, but their customers extend across the nation and beyond.

An Italian engineering firm was stationed in Manhattan doing repair work on Tuttle Creek reservoir. One of their engineers stopped in at R-TECH, saw the company's machines at work, and asked if he could bring his boss. In a few days, the boss came in and was so impressed that he called the superintendent in Boston and said, "You need to get plane tickets and come here immediately." One week later, the superintendent was there. R-TECH is now doing projects for this company.

What are some examples of R-TECH projects? In addition to the abutments for the San Francisco metrorail, the company has done work on undercarriages for locomotives, bulldozer attachments in Waco, drilling rigs in West Virginia, silicon wafer bases in New York, and amusement park rides across the country. R-TECH products have literally gone coast to coast.

That's impressive for a company based in the rural community of Wamego, population 4,220 people. In fact, Doug and his family live south of the nearby unincorporated rural community of Wabaunsee which has a population of fewer than 100 people. Now, that's rural.

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

It's time to leave San Francisco where we found support frameworks on giant abutments built by this company across the country. We salute Doug and Rachelle Routh and all those involved with R-TECH for making a difference with entrepreneurship in manufacturing. Rural Kansas can be thankful to have that type of support.

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

Ben Weber – Completely Nuts

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

Completely Nuts. Does that sound like an unusual name for business? Today we'll learn about a young entrepreneur who is involved in several enterprises, but one is focused on a very specific line of products: In fact, the product line is nuts only. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Ben Weber is a young entrepreneur in southeast Kansas. His uncles farm and his father is a Pioneer Seed salesman and has been for 25 years. Maybe Ben got expertise in sales from his father.

First, though, Ben went to Washburn University to play football. Unfortunately, he blew out his shoulder and was unable to play. While in Topeka he met an older couple in the area that had a business selling cinnamon-roasted nuts. During school he helped them sell their products part-time. In 2001, he had the opportunity to buy their equipment from them. Two years later, he purchased another nut company.

Ben put himself through school selling these delicious flavoured nuts and then took the business on the road. When it came time to name the company, he came up with a tongue-in-cheek name, so to speak. He named the company Completely Nuts.

"I'm working for peanuts so I might as well have a fun name," Ben said with a smile. He had a roasting machine, a recipe, weighing scale, and supplies. He mixed cinnamon, sugar, and a splash of vanilla, added the nuts, roasted and cooled them and then hand-weighed them into bags. There are three sizes: Small, medium and large. Eventually he got three different sets of equipment so he could serve three locations simultaneously.

When I say he took the business on the road, I mean that literally. Ben started traveling to malls, festivals, and events to sell the delicious roasted nuts. He sold nuts as far west as Las Vegas and up and down the eastern seaboard. Ben sold the nuts from the Orange Bowl parade down in Miami up to Niagara Falls on the Canadian border. Wow.

One year Ben was selling nuts in a mall in St. Joseph, Missouri during the Christmas season. An attractive young woman bought nuts from him and they got acquainted. Her name was Lara. Sure enough, they fell in love.

“If this doesn’t work out financially, at least it worked out socially,” Ben said. Ben and Lara got married and eventually they moved back to Ben’s rural hometown of Yates Center, Kansas, population 1,586 people. Now, that’s rural.

Ben is now an associate in his father’s Pioneer Seed sales business while also selling Meridian seed tender wagons and independent crop insurance. He still sells cinnamon roasted nuts but doesn’t go on the road as much since he started a family. In fact, Ben and Lara have five children seven years of age or younger: They have girls age seven and five, plus a three year old son and twin boys age seven months. Forgive me for saying so, but life in a household like that might be completely nuts.

Ben Weber takes it all in stride. He enjoyed traveling with the nut business but he is really enjoying being home with his young children. In his traveling days, he had the opportunity to do a lot of sightseeing. Still, he said the greatest highlight of the business was the nice people he had a chance to meet.

Ben started selling his cinnamon roasted nuts at Bass Pro Shop stores and even met the owner of the chain. He has encountered other celebrities along the way as well.

“One day I was selling at a Bass Pro Shop in Dallas when Terry Bradshaw came along,” Ben said. “He bought some nuts and was so nice to pose for pictures with us. Not two days later, along came Deion Sanders and he was the same way.”

Completely Nuts. It seems like an unusual name for a business, but in this case it accurately describes the business’s products. We commend Ben and Lara Weber for making a difference with entrepreneurship and family life in a rural setting, and with a product line that consists completely of nuts.

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Thad Wende – Wende Woodworking

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

The business executive and his wife are building their dream home. For the kitchen, they are preparing to order fancy cabinets from Italy. But they decide to make a change. They end up with beautiful cabinets for less money by sourcing those cabinets from an expert cabinetmaker in rural Kansas. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Thad Wende is founder and owner of Wende Woodworking in Mayetta, Kansas. He came by his woodworking skills naturally from his father who was a do-it-yourselfer.

“My dad was one of those guys who didn’t hire anybody to do anything around the house,” Thad said. “If something was going to be done, we had to figure it out and do it ourselves. We grew up around concrete and lumber,” Thad said.

In high school, Thad spent lots of time in woods shop. He planned to go to Pittsburg State for a wood tech degree, but his cabinet-making business grew. In 1996, he formed Wende Woodworking LLC and started doing projects in his dad’s family’s garage.

One day Thad went to an auction where he purchased a hinge machine. Inside the machine was a book titled “How To Make European-Style Cabinetry.” Thad read the book cover to cover and it had a tremendous influence on him. The book may have been more valuable than the machine itself.

European styling uses lots of panels of plywoods and composites and has sleek hardware which gives the cabinets the modern, contemporary look. Demand for Wende Woodworking cabinets continued to grow.

Thad learned about Blum, a major hinge manufacturing company in North Carolina which pioneered the concept of dynamic space in designing kitchens. Thad Wende is now the only certified dynamic space fabricator and has the only such showroom in the Midwest.

Custom-made cabinets have become the specialty of Wende Woodworking. “We are what I describe as a job-at-a-time shop,” Thad said. Whether in a remodel or new construction, Thad will design the cabinetry with the client and then build it to suit. Wende Woodworking will deliver and install.

In 2007, Thad built a 10,000 square foot shop to go with his 3,000 square foot house.

Thad partnered with a company in Topeka to acquire a sophisticated computer-controlled router which could do fabulous designs and handle wood very efficiently. Once a design is created and assigned a bar code, the operator can select the file and the machine will use a vacuum device to load a single sheet at a time and automatically custom-cut the design.

“It’s pretty high-tech for redneck Mayetta,” Thad said with a smile. Mayetta is a rural community of 312 people. Now, that’s rural.

“Thanks to the router, our revenues grew one and a half times,” Thad said. He works at staying current on the latest trends in hardware and materials and attracts customers through word-of-mouth. “All our business comes from referrals,” Thad said. “We believe we have a unique skill set and we understand our customers’ needs. We’re fortunate to have great clients with great ideas.”

Thad enjoys the challenge of designing different cabinets for his customers. “My brain would go numb if I was doing the same thing every time,” he said.

Examples of Thad’s work can be viewed online at www.houzz.com/wendewood.

One day Thad was called in to meet a couple who wanted some built-in cabinets in their library. It was a business executive and his wife who were building their dream home. “What are you doing for the cabinets in the kitchen?” Thad asked. The couple explained that they were ordering cabinets from Italy. Thad offered to prepare a bid but they explained that they had already paid a retainer for the Italian cabinet company. “If you don’t mind, I’d still like to prepare a bid,” Thad said. He designed and prepared some creative ideas in cabinets and in the end, earned the bid.

We commend Thad Wende of Wende Woodworking for making a difference with entrepreneurship in cabinetmaking. Will such a business benefit the rural economy? It definitely would.

And there’s more. Remember that company which Wende Woodworking partnered with in Topeka? We’ll learn about that next week.

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Scott Halsey - Adapa

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

Do you have hang-ups? No, I'm not talking about your pet peeves. I'm referring to a type of hardware called a hang-up which is useful in hanging items from acoustical ceilings. That's one example of an item produced by an innovative company which now manufactures carts and other products for the workplace. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Scott Halsey is President of Adapa USA, the innovative company which produces hang-ups, shop carts, and more. This is truly a family business, started by Scott's father Paul Halsey in 1964.

After working in the aviation industry, Paul Halsey started a construction company in Wichita with a partner named Dan Tevis. They looked for ways to help their workers and improve their efficiency.

At contractor conventions, Paul Halsey's peers would ask him why he was winning so many competitive bids. He explained it was because his labor costs were lower due to his labor-saving devices. His friends wanted some of those devices as well.

In 1964 Paul Halsey started producing and marketing these items as a sideline to his construction business. His company got the bid to do the interior work at White Lakes Shopping Center in Topeka so he relocated his family there.

He continued to look for innovative pieces of equipment to help his workers. One of the first products was called a "hang-up." It looked like an upside down coat hanger with wire clips which are useful when used with acoustical tile. Those kinds of custom-made products may be simple but can be invaluable for a particular task.

Mr. Halsey's whole family was involved in the business. "The wire company would ship us a big clump of those clips and my brothers and sister and I would sit around the table, separating them and counting them out," Scott Halsey said.

By 1980, the demand for Adapa products became so strong that it became a fulltime business based in Topeka. Scott graduated from Washburn and joined the family business himself, eventually becoming president of the company. Over time, older products such as hang-ups were phased out and others were developed to join the product line.

The company is named Adapa Incorporated. Why Adapa? "The name comes from 'adaptable products for increased productivity,'" Scott Halsey said. "But I've also heard that the name comes from the first two letters of the founder's names – Dan and Paul," he added.

Either way, the company's products definitely do enhance productivity in the workplace. "You see a problem on a construction site, you try to solve it and make life easier for the workers," Scott said.

Many of these products involve handling materials. "When Dad worked at Boeing, he saw them use these rubber clamps," Scott said. "He figured out a way to use those in his business and it really helped the workers." Another company specialty became carts of various kinds, from drywall to residential, all terrain, trash carts, door carts, tree carts, and more. These are especially useful for drywall stockers and construction workers.

The company's shop carts became so popular that the Halseys created a sister company called Shopcarts USA. These carts are especially useful for woodworkers.

Adapa and Shopcarts are selling their products all across the U.S. and Canada. “Our products and our designs lead the industry,” Scott said. “But we started as a family business and we’re still a family business,” he said. “Mom still works here.”

Paul Halsey passed away in 2010. One of his ingenious designs was a side-loading trash cart. “This was modeled after a grain cart that he saw unloading feed for dairy cows on farms where he worked,” Scott said. Mr. Halsey grew up working on farms near the rural community of Viola, Kansas, population 212 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to www.adapausa.com or www.shopcartsusa.com.

Do you have hang-ups? Those wire hangers were one of the first products produced by Adapa which is now a leader in the shopcart and materials handling industry. We commend Scott Halsey and all those involved with Adapa and Shopcarts USA for making a difference with innovation and entrepreneurship. With that, I guess I’ll hang up.

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