

MANUFACTURING BALDWIN

by Bob Luder, photos by Steven Hertzog

Baldwin businesses involving machinery continue to thrive even through the COVID pandemic because the need has remained steady.

Baldwin City's handful of industrial-based businesses share a commonality that would make Archie Bunker smile.

When it comes to owning and operating companies that make, sell and/or service large machinery—mostly used for agricultural purposes in this part of the country—it appears to be all in the family.

Hey Machinery Co. Inc. was founded by William Hey in 1929 and today is owned and run by his great-grandson and fourth-generation proprietor Brian Hey. While Bryan Rice might be the first-gen owner of Rice Precision Manufacturing over the 22 years of the company's existence, just about every member of his immediate family has played a hand in its operation and successes. Same can be said for Custom Mobile Equipment Inc., which was started 28 years ago by Gary Dick and today includes several family members among his 30 employees. And while Heritage Tractor has exploded into its own conglomerate, expanding to 21 locations in three states, the company started near the turn of the century as the family-owned business of Ken Wagner.

"I started working summers here when I was 14 or 15 years old," Brian Hey says. "I've always been interested in the business. If you grew up in our family, that's just the way it was."

The four Baldwin City industrial businesses have something else in common. They all appear to have come through the COVID-19 pandemic just fine, if not better than ever. Though the pandemic interrupted great swathes of the U.S. and world economies, the world moved on and needed machinery, both heavy and small, to do so.

"Our business is as good as ever," Bryan Rice says. "The sky's the limit. It's just up to what we want to do as a group. We want to be the very best. We have to believe and execute that we can make the best quality parts at the best price when the customer needs it."

"That's what we've done, and it just keeps going, going and going."

Hey Machinery, Custom Mobile Equipment and Heritage Tractor also strive to be the best in their fields and regions, and as the country begins its recovery from COVID, each seems poised to be as good as ever.

HEY MACHINERY

Hey Machinery, which often goes by the more accurately descriptive name of Hey Wheel, has been manufacturing and reselling wheels, rims, centers, tires and other off-highway products since 1929, when the company was started by William Hey. Hey was soon joined in the business by his sons, Bill and Lester, and the company has remained in the family through four generations.

In its early years, Hey Machinery did many different things, but William quickly found that producing wheels that worked with used or rejected aircraft tires was profitable when sold for farm use.

Specifically, the company manufactures what's known as a "bolt-together" wheel, a two-piece wheel fastened together by anywhere from 20 to 32 bolts. These sturdy rims can be used to anchor disregarded-yet-heavy-duty airplane tires and used for feed wagons, grain carts, manure spreaders, tractor fronts, brush mowers, scrapers, skid loaders and other uses.

The company sells its bolt-together wheels to original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and distributors, and directly to customers in need of sturdy tire solutions for harsh environments and heavy-duty applications. Business is steady, Hey says.

"Everything we do is for farming, agriculture vehicles," he continues. "Probably 80 percent of what we do gets shipped out the door."

"Thirty years ago, we started selling tractor and implement wheels," Hey adds. "But we don't make them, we just sell them."

Baldwin City has undergone many changes and much growth over the years, and Hey says nothing speaks more loudly to that fact than when he gets approached by someone who has no idea what or where Hey Machinery is.

"Baldwin has grown," he says. "It used to be everyone knew who and where we were. But now, so many people have moved in who didn't grow up here, there are a lot who don't know us."

That's OK, he says, as long as farmers keep needing wheels and tires.



Brian Rice, owner/operator of Rice Precision Manufacturing



RICE PRECISION MANUFACTURING

Rice Precision Manufacturing was established by Bryan Rice as sole proprietor in 1999. Today, the company employs 23 full time inside a 14,000-square-foot facility that specializes in precision machining of various materials as well as welding and fabrication of assemblies large and small.

In simpler terms, it creates parts for large machinery.

Rice Precision engages in a wide variety of services that include new part and assembly design, welding and fabrication, and reverse engineering, which allows it to quickly and efficiently produce replacement parts at pricing that is more competitive than typical OEM suppliers.

“We work with clients that need to outsource their manufacturing needs,” Rice says. “We deal mostly in single parts but some assembly, as well.”

Rice says his clientele is very diverse, but much of the parts the company manufactures and sells goes to the food industry.

“Schwan’s has a facility in Oklahoma that makes pies,” he says. “The machinery used to make those pies have parts made by Precision.”

Rice says the company also deals heavily in the oil and gas industry, and is looking at getting into the medical field.

Being headquartered in the Baldwin City area has had its advantages and disadvantages, he explains. The city welcomed the company with open arms 22 years ago and has remained a good partner since. However, finding employees can be challenging.

“A disadvantage definitely is a limited labor pool,” Rice says. “There are no classes in high school that teach this anymore. We try to recruit from our area. A lot of kids around here work on their own cars.”

“If I can just get them through the door, I can show them what we do, show them there’s an avenue here for them where they can make \$30 an hour.”

And Rice Precision is very much a family-run business. Bryan’s wife, Cheryl, is the company’s chief financial officer. Brother Duane is its head of procurement. And daughter Bailey also is a full-time employee.



Custom Mobile Equipment Inc.

CUSTOM MOBILE EQUIPMENT INC.

Back in 1993, Gary Dick had an acquaintance who lived in Coffeyville, Kansas, who was unhappy with the bulky forklifts he was using and wanted a more smoothly operating specialty fork lift for his business. Dick designed and produced that fork lift for his friend, Jim Taylor, and soon after, started fielding requests to custom-build more forklifts, especially for machinery-moving contractors.

Dick trademarked his creation, the Versa-Lift, and Custom Mobile Equipment Inc. was born. The Versa-Lift is a unique forklift in which the frame extends to achieve greater capacities and is equipped with a removable hydraulic boom. It is designed specifically for moving heavy machinery smoothly and safely on solid surfaces.

What started in '94 in a small, rented space in east Lawrence today is a 60- x 100-foot, 40,000-square-foot building on 4 acres in a Baldwin City industrial park.

“We outgrew our space (in Lawrence) and moved to Baldwin City in '97,” Dick says.

Today, Custom Mobile employs 30, an increase from just Dick and two part-time helpers when the business started. Over the years, Dick and his team have upgraded and built larger Versa-Lifts so that now, the company sells seven models, including two electric-powered, in five sizes, with the largest having a 140,000-pound load capacity.



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On average, Custom Mobile builds between 80 and 90 built-to-order Versa-Lifts a year and ships them all over the world, including to South Africa, Europe, South Korea and China.

“Demand has stayed steady through COVID,” Dick says. “The future looks good. I don’t see any problems on the horizon.”

And yes, Custom Mobile sources some of its parts for its Versa-Lifts through Rice Precision.

“It’s good to have a machine shop nearby,” he says.

Like his peers at Rice, Dick’s business also is a family affair. Gary’s son, Nathan, has been working with his dad since getting out of college and handles sales. Brother Greg runs the shop. Another brother, Keith, has been the company’s longest-running employee. And a nephew, McKinley, handles purchasing.

HERITAGE TRACTOR

Heritage Tractor isn’t recognizable today from its humble beginnings near the end of the 20th century.

An uptick in agricultural equipment sales in the late 1990s led tractor-producing titan John Deere to seek to add a new dealership somewhere in the fertile rural ag market of northeast Kansas, close enough to also tap into the Kansas City marketplace. Baldwin City was selected as the location, and Ken Wagner was approached for advice and leadership on the project. He jumped in with both feet as owner of the original facility, which sits on a 17-acre property just outside town.

Leap forward to today, and Heritage Tractor has 21 locations in Arkansas, Kansas and Missouri. But Baldwin City is still the company’s hub.

“It was decided there was a need for a dealership with agricultural ties for Baldwin City and surrounding cities,” says Jessi Ganoung, marketing manager. “From there, Heritage either bought or acquired other dealerships.”

Ganoung says there are three major components to Heritage’s business: sales, parts and service, with the bulk of business going to the latter two.

“We’re very appreciative of farmers who keep food on our tables,” she says.

In addition to tractors, combines and other large implements, Heritage sells small mowers, both residential and turf lines, walk-behinds and stand-ons. Also, small, commercial construction equipment like skid steers and mini excavators, as well as Stihl chainsaws, trimmers and blowers, and Honda push mowers and generators.

It also sells all-terrain vehicles most commonly known as “Gators” for farmers and municipalities.

Include Heritage Tractor as a Baldwin City-based industrial business that was not affected by the global COVID pandemic.

“This time last year, we were holding our breath,” Ganoung says. “But (an economic downturn) never happened. New homes are going up every day, breaking new ground. When customers move into those homes, they need to buy mowers to mow their yards.

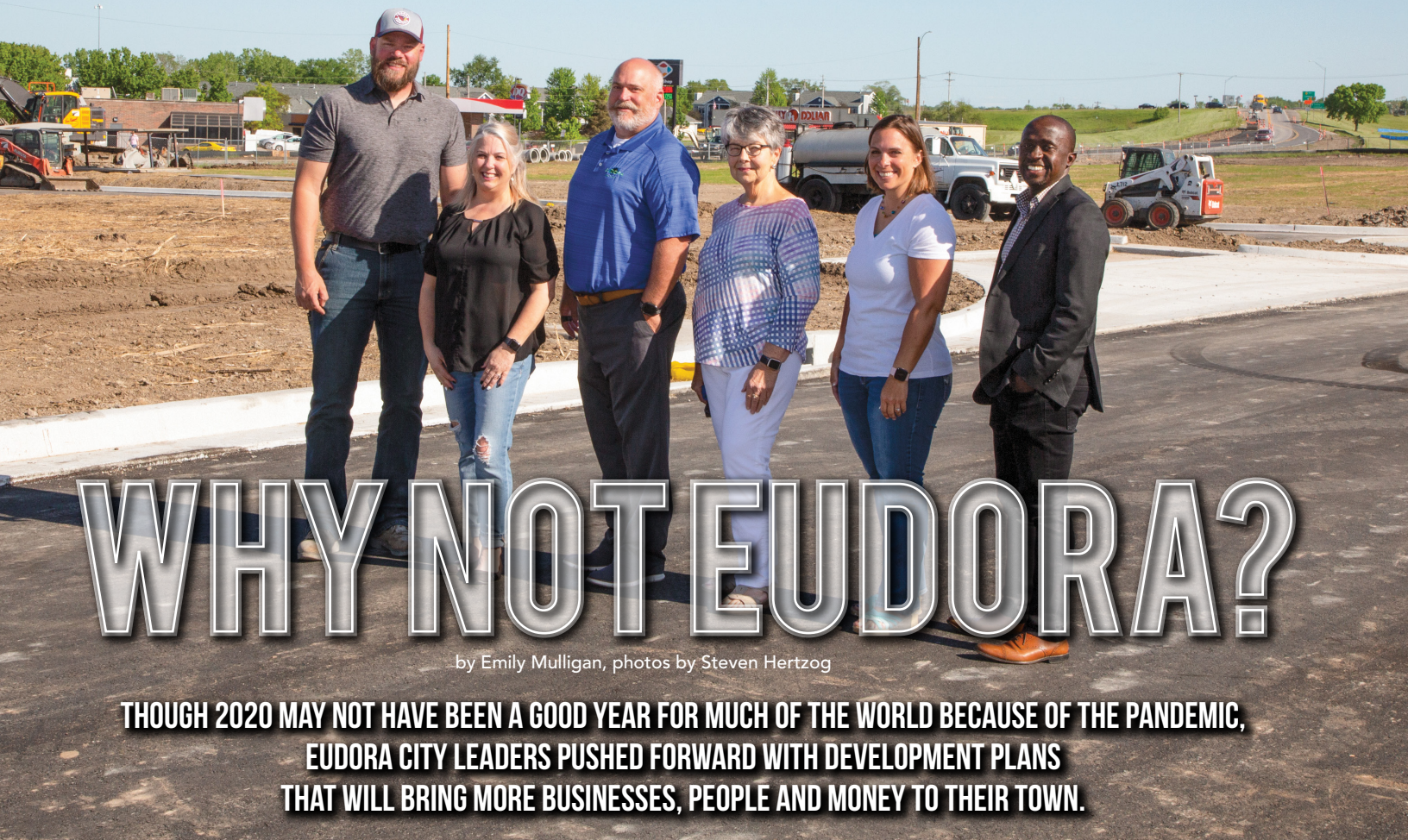
“It never slowed down. We’ve been proactive in keeping our inventory up.”

Though Heritage Tractor dealerships now can be found throughout a three-state area, the company never forgets where it all started.

“Baldwin is a leader of the pack,” Ganoung says. “We do a lot of parts business, and the service is close behind.” ▲



Commissioner Tim Bruce, Commissioner Roberta Lehmann, Mayor Tim Reazin, Vice-Mayor Ruth Hughs, Commissioner Jolene Born and City Manager, Barack Matite at the site of the future Nottingham Center



by Emily Mulligan, photos by Steven Hertzog

THOUGH 2020 MAY NOT HAVE BEEN A GOOD YEAR FOR MUCH OF THE WORLD BECAUSE OF THE PANDEMIC, EUDORA CITY LEADERS PUSHED FORWARD WITH DEVELOPMENT PLANS THAT WILL BRING MORE BUSINESSES, PEOPLE AND MONEY TO THEIR TOWN.

For more than 10 years, Eudora's city leaders have been strategizing how best to develop and grow the town. During the pandemic, as other cities and towns struggled to cope, much of that planning came to fruition, as Eudora inked agreements and even broke ground on what are sure to be the town's biggest-ever economic developments.

"We are lucky, because last year was probably one of our best years. You would think everything would be at a standstill, but we keep moving forward. We don't want to slow down," says Eudora City Manager Barack Matite.

Developing a large parcel of long-vacant land to vary the town's tax base and attracting a successful Canadian company, Modern Manufacturing, to the In-tech Business Park as its United States outpost are things that any town the size of Eudora (population 6,400) would celebrate. Landing those deals while the country was basically shut down from the COVID-19 pandemic makes it all the more remarkable.

NOTTINGHAM CENTER

Exiting Kansas Highway 10 (K-10) at Church Street and driving north of the highway these days, drivers are greeted by construction fencing to the west and a vast dirt field with some strips of stark black asphalt, dotted with just about every type of construction vehicle imaginable. That 15 acres of land, the former site of Nottingham Elementary school, is transforming into the future "gateway" of Eudora: Nottingham Center.

High 5, a unique family entertainment center that includes bowling, miniature golf, an arcade and a full-service restaurant and bar, is the anchor tenant for Nottingham Center. With two locations that are both in Texas, Eudora is the first place that High 5 has chosen to locate and expand its reach. Also for the first time, Eudora will have something Kansas City does not, which means it will be an attraction from around the metro area. Wendy's restaurant and

Casey's store and gas station also will be part of the development, which will have additional retail space, restaurant space and a green space called the "village green." The entire development will connect with the Eudora Community Center to the south and existing park space, and there will be walking paths for exercise and access that reach Main Street and Eudora's downtown.

When the final school bell tolled at Nottingham Elementary in 2008, the city did not have a plan of what to do with the school building and the land it occupied near the unofficial entrance to Eudora from K-10. Ideas and proposals came and went over the years as the building and grounds were used by the community for various purposes. The city council became the city commission, when Eudora's form of governance changed to a commission-manager model. City commissioners entertained proposals from developers, but longtime city commissioners Tim Reazin, now the mayor, and Ruth Hughs, now vice mayor, agree none of the proposals embodied long-term benefits nor the right tax revenue for the town.

"Our ability as a commission to look at a 20-year and 30-year plan is fantastic. The commissioners that came through here have understood that we have a bigger vision," Reazin explains.

The commissioners wanted more for the site and the town, and they had a vision they knew would take time. When Matite was hired as city manager in 2016, he took on the vision, as well.

"The city did a marketing study to find out what made us unique. Our location close to Kansas City, Lawrence and Topeka is an asset. We also have a road network with K-10 and I-70, access to railroads and small-town charm for families. We could tell developers to not just look at Eudora but look at the whole area and attract people from there," he says.

The city commission five years ago, which included Reazin and Hughs, decided to purchase the site from the school district so it could have more involvement in what happened at the Nottingham site, which became a TIF (tax increment financing) district in 2017. Commissioners wanted the developments to be cohesive and have a good chance of success over the long term.

"The city could make sure that the gateway was adequately preserved as a gateway. It should represent Eudora and growth and possibility," Hughs says. "It has gone slow, but I think by taking our time, it has given the public the chance to really catch the vision."

So the city is the developer and can sell sites and parcels of land, while also overseeing the appearance and purpose. Casey's, which will build a larger store and gas station to replace its current location closer to downtown Eudora, was the first to join the development. Wendy's and High 5 have followed suit, and Matite says conversations are ongoing for other potential businesses at the site, including serious negotiations for a regional fast-casual restaurant.

High 5's attraction as a regional destination is what makes this development unique to the K-10 corridor.

"I'm really excited about High 5 because we are bringing something to our state and area that is nowhere else. You know people will come here, and that is a thrill," Hughs says.

Reazin, who has four school-age sons, already can envision how locals will enjoy High 5, as well.

"It's somewhere you can go to spend the day. And teams can get together after a game or at the end of the season and celebrate," he says.

High 5 likely will be open for business in 2022; Wendy's and Casey's could be in operation by the end of this year. Infrastructure, including grading, sewer lines, water lines and curbed roadways, began this spring. The site pads were sold to Wendy's and Casey's in May, so they can pursue their building construction. Other areas of Nottingham Center will be built as agreements are reached.

Once the development is complete, it will be the site for the weekly Eudora Farmers' Market. The village green will allow for food-truck parking and other community events. A long-term ideal is for a brewery/restaurant to take the location adjacent to and overlooking the village green.

Eudora won a KDOT grant of \$1.1 million for the trail that will connect Nottingham Center to downtown, which could break ground later this year.



Renderings for the development of Nottingham Center

MODERN MANUFACTURING

Modern Manufacturing is a division of Stacy and Witbeck, a Canadian collection of companies that specialize in construction and management of complex rail and transportation projects. As its name implies, Modern Manufacturing is the construction arm of the company, fabricating steel structures that hoist signals and span railroad tracks, as well as steel buildings to house trackside equipment and electronics.

The company bought an existing building in Eudora's Intech Business Park, which it has retrofitted for its factory, as well as acreage to the north and east of the building for future expansion.

Some of its specialized equipment has been delayed in arriving, likely because of the pandemic, City Manager Matite says, but Modern Manufacturing already is hiring for what will initially be 40 to 50 positions and eventually should top 70 jobs. Most of the positions available will be for welders and computer-assisted construction jobs for its specialized equipment.

The company hopes to draw from home-grown local talent to outfit its workforce.

"They want to bring in kids from the high schools and Peaslee Tech to be part of learning and growing. Kids could grow up and work in their hometown at a good-paying job," Mayor Reazin says.

Matite believes the reasonable price of land in Eudora plus having room to grow was part of the appeal to Modern Manufacturing. Vice Mayor Hughs says the small-town attributes of Eudora also helped lure the company to town.

"They have jumped right in and are just all about being part of our community," Hughs says. "They want to lock arms and say, 'Let's make this the best place to live.'"

Modern Manufacturing choosing to locate in Eudora also will put Eudora on the map as a potential location for other companies, and there is more space available at the Intech site.

"We're excited to have them there. Because of their clout and network and connections, we're hoping they can help recruit more businesses," Matite says.

The city does not own the land in Intech but rather serves as a promoter of sorts in the interest of economic development. The business park is home to several long-term locations for businesses, including Air Filter Plus, which recently completed a 3,000-square-foot expansion to its building, Matite says.

DIVERSIFYING THE TAX BASE

Developing the Nottingham site with restaurants and retail businesses, and attracting large companies like Modern Manufacturing will greatly diversify the tax base in Eudora. There also is the potential for sports tourism as the city develops athletic fields and facilities at the middle school and high school, south of K-10. Those facilities are within 25 miles of Garmin Park, in Olathe, Reazin says, and could be used as alternate venues for tournaments.

Matite and Reazin agree Eudora needs that expanded tax base in order to repair and upgrade the town's basic infrastructure, including water service and installing curbs and sidewalks in neighborhoods. The city has a $\frac{3}{4}$ -cent sales tax for parks and recreation, so with retail and restaurant growth, parks facilities and green spaces can be maintained and upgraded, as well.

2020 always will be known as the year that Eudora came into its own, with Nottingham Center and Modern Manufacturing. Somehow, Eudora rose above the COVID-19 pandemic year and set the tone for establishing its unique identity and presence in Douglas County and around the Kansas City metro area.

"I never want to be called East Lawrence. I want to make sure Eudora stands on its own and is well planned out," Reazin says.▲

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