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Agriculture breeds machinery

Staff Report

If you cut Erik Olson, he bleeds nuts and bolts and machine oil. He can't help himself. He is one of several generations of Olsons who have built heavy equipment in Racine, Wisconsin, home of Case New Holland—the parent company that owns the Case New Holland plant in Fargo, ND.

“We supply international markets from here, depending on the need of our dealer network and customer demand,” remarks Olson, who arrived in Fargo as general plant manager in 1994 and has been here since, directing the efforts of 800 employees in the production of tractors and wheel loaders for agriculture and the construction industry.

“The trend we see in agriculture is the continued consolidation of farms in America, driving demand for high horsepower tractors and fewer small tractors,” he says. “Large farms and corporate farms are more particular about innovations, technology, and reliability and comfort. However, we still supply lots of owner/operators, so they still like the extras for their ‘offices’ on wheels. GPS applications like auto pilot and accu-steer are also becoming important to agriculture.”

Producing numerous models of loaders and tractors under the Case and New Holland banners, Olson says, “We have an excellent workforce. They're very good and I can't say too much about them.”

One of America's other mythic names in manufacturing, John Deere, has found a home on the Northern Plains, with operations in Fargo (at the two Phoenix International electronics facilities in Fargo) and a plant in Valley City that produces air seeders. The labor pool and central location on the North American continent helped drive their decision to manufacture here, according to Steve Detrich, production manager for air seeding systems.

“Our first year of production at Valley City was in 1998,” recalls Detrich, who divides his time between North Dakota and the company's headquarters in Moline, IL. “The labor market has been extremely good, with about 230 people on the payroll. With

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the volume of small grains grown in this region, we've got a good fit here as we help growers optimize yields by seeding and fertilizing at the same time to reduce passes and soil compaction.”

Exports from the Valley City plant typically go to Canada, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Australia. Detrich acknowledges the importance of residue and moisture management, which favors higher sales in the drier western regions.

“Price pressures on fertilizers and anhydrous ammonia should help sales, so we've got to build on that fact,” Detrich says.

Vince Tomlinson, president of Phoenix in Fargo the last two-plus years, says his wholly owned subsidiary of Deere & Company has added over 100 employees in the last year to keep up with demand for the electronic components and systems that Phoenix produces for all John Deere equipment.

“We've got a very dedicated workforce with excellent personal and social values,” he says. “They are very productive, and our location near a pool of engineering talent from NDSU and others in the Red River Valley Research Corridor is significant.”

Another fabled name in heavy equipment, Butler Machinery, is building its agriculture base by offering benefits with its tracked and wheeled Caterpillar tractors, ranging in horsepower from 20 to 575 HP. Harold Slinden, vice president of ag operations in the Fargo office of Butler, has spent eight years helping to grow the company and its territory in the Dakotas, western Minnesota, and eastern Wyoming.

“Our long term goal is to build a loyal customer base through advances in technology and a real drive towards exceptional service utilizing technology applications like wireless communications from remote locations,” Slinden says. “We've added a new facility in Aberdeen (SD) to bring our total number of offices up to nine, supporting 25 sales people and a full complement of service technicians. The Caterpillar name has made growth easier, but parts and service support helps us sustain that growth.”

Closing in on its 50th anniversary in 2008, Bobcat is the largest manufacturer in the state of North Dakota and undoubtedly the world's market leader in small loader technology for agriculture and many other markets. With headquarters in West Fargo and manufacturing facilities in Gwinner and Bismarck, Bobcat has taken a concept brought to life in a small machine shop in Rothsay, MN and turned it into an industry which it continues to define to this day.

Scott Nelson, named president of Bobcat North America last fall, is based in Fargo, overseeing one of five business units owned by the Ingersoll Rand Corporation and one of its most rapidly growing units, up nearly nine percent in the fourth quarter of 2005

with quarterly sales of \$657 million.

Another international manufacturer with Fargo roots—and roots in the Melroe Bobcat tradition—is Amity Technology, a solid firm that traces its beginning to a legendary brand in the air seeder business ... Concord Manufacturing.

Brian Dahl, vice president of operations for Amity and brother to Howard Dahl, president/CEO, says Amity just celebrated its 10th anniversary, which also marks the years (1996) when Concord was sold to Case IH by the Dahl brothers. From that base, Amity has become the world's leader in sugar beet planting and harvesting equipment.

“Our sales into Eastern Europe are nearly three times what we sell in North America,” Dahl admits. “We also perform marketing for Wil-Rich Manufacturing (based in Wahpeton, ND), selling tillage equipment in Europe.”

The versatile Amity team of manufacturers produce soil testing equipment and also contract manufacturing, but sugar beets is where their main market lies ... about 75 percent of all beet harvesting equipment in North America came from Amity during the last five years, according to Dahl.

An interesting manufacturer born in the fertile soils of the region is now finding markets beyond the agriculture that launched it.

Dakota Micro in Cayuga, ND is the creator, manufacturer, and marketer of AgCam systems. Launched in 2002 by Dave and Charissa Rubey from their farm home, Dakota Micro now has 15 employees in a shop on their farm, producing miniature cameras and flat screen monitor systems designed to provide farm equipment operators with a view to the rear without having to constantly turn around and look.

“We’re viewed as the ‘Lexus’ of mini-cams,” says Charissa, a southern California native who jumped at the chance to move back to her husband’s family farm in 1994 and raise a family. A back surgery that threatened her husband’s farm career also gave birth to the ‘agcam.’

“Dave’s brother was CEO of an Israeli company that produced a miniature camera called the ‘pillcam,’ which is swallowed by patients for internal images, so that’s where we accessed much of our knowledge about weather proof miniature cameras,” recalls Charissa. “Now, we’re sold worldwide through 12 distributors and 370 dealers. Our systems are being tested by AgCo and John Deere and we’ve our team of local employees working in a new building partially financed by the North Dakota Development Fund.”

Asked if they ever consider moving the business for the right money, Charissa is adamant: “No way. I don’t need a new car; I

need a good community to live in. I can't tell you how much it's worth to us to look up from work and see our kids returning from school."

With over 10,000 units already in operation, Dakota Micro might just be the next Amity or Case or John Deere or Bobcat ... making life better on the Northern Plains.

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Prairie Business Magazine
205 4th Ave N
Fargo, ND 58102

Phone: 701.232.8893
Fax: 701.280.9092
info@prairiebizmag.com
[Contact Web Master](#)

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