



**IOWA INNOVATION:** The Van Wyk family of Pella started LDJ Manufacturing as a side business to their farming operation years ago. Loren and Jean Van Wyk (right) started the business. Sons Luke (left) and Chad are key members of the management team today.

# Ag roots lead to new business

By DARIN LEACH

**F**ROM customizing their own no-till planters and cultivators in the late 1970s, to modifying old pickups with three-point hitches and lifts to make jobs easier around the farm, the Van Wyk family near Pella has always been known as innovators and true wizards with a welder and a cutting torch.

"This spirit of being on the cutting edge and always thinking about ways to improve our farming operation is engrained deep into our family's culture," says Luke Van Wyk, the oldest child of Loren and Jean Van Wyk.

During the past 17 years the Van Wyks have successfully taken a metal-working side business that provided a supplement to their farming income into a growing business that now has more than 60 employees, sells products all over the country, and is known for innovative fabrication techniques.

A big break happened back in 1995 when Loren Van Wyk was awarded a contract to build freestanding display cases to showcase Pella brand windows and doors in stores such as Menards and Home Depot. Working on the Pella project was basically a way to keep the Van Wyk's farmworkers busy in the off season once the family stopped its farrow-to-finish hog operation, liquidated its cattle feedlot and sold off the cow-calf herd.

## Reputation grew business

Over time the manufacturing business on the farm continued to evolve and grow. Neighbors, farmers and businesses from central Iowa were constantly asking the Van Wyks to build things for them.

No doubt the biggest impact on the company happened in 1999 when Loren decided to purchase a corn-burning stove for use on the farm. "Dad has always been interested in renewable fuel sources, and the corn-burning stove concept really intrigued him, especially with corn down around \$2 per bushel," Luke recalls.

After some research, development and planning Loren decided to get into the business of making and selling corn- and pellet-burning stoves. In 2000, the first

## Key Points

- LDJ Manufacturing of rural Pella began selling corn-burning stoves in 2000.
- Market changes a few years later forced the company to explore new products.
- Family turned to farming roots to develop next chapter in company history.

stoves from LDJ Manufacturing were on the market and business was taking off. Dealer networks and supply channels were established across the Midwest, and the business was moved to a family farm located on Highway 163 outside of Pella for better transportation access.

During this growth stage, LDJ Manufacturing was assisted through a USDA Rural Development economic development loan that was awarded to Pella Cooperative Electric Association and passed through to the company. "Loans through our business programs fit perfectly with companies such as LDJ Manufacturing who are helping to create jobs and economic opportunities in rural parts of the state," says Bill Menner, USDA Rural Development's state director in Iowa.

This chapter in the business's history continued to grow and reached its peak in fall of 2005, when the cost of fuel skyrocketed as Hurricane Katrina struck oil drilling rigs off the coast of Louisiana and caused historic damage all across the eastern half of the United States. Corn was still around \$2 per bushel, and winter was on the horizon.

"Sales of our corn-burning stoves remained very strong throughout 2006 and into 2007 as we expanded markets in the eastern U.S.," says Luke, general manager at LDJ Manufacturing. "Then corn and other commodity prices started to jump, and burning corn as a fuel source lost its appeal."

These market changes meant a new chapter in the company's history needed to be written.

## Adapt to changing times

Not surprisingly, the Van Wyks turned again to their deep farming roots and can-do attitude to solve a problem they noticed when farming. They were wasting

too much time carrying fuel to their tractors and combines as they worked their farming operation of around 3,000 acres. "The more acres we farmed, the farther we had to drive our equipment and the larger the equipment was becoming," Luke says. "We hauled fuel in a 1,000-gallon tank on a cart we built from a set of old running gears."

This fuel-hauler worked for the Van Wyks' needs, but not well, and they knew there had to be a better way. The high-profile fuel tank did not have baffles and could not be pulled more than 30 miles per hour. Even at that slower speed, the truck would be pulled all over the road.

The Van Wyks began designing what it would take to get fuel delivered to farm equipment in the field faster and safer. "We see farming through the lens of manufacturing," Luke adds. "We are always looking for ways to find new efficiencies in our operation and lower our risk."

They came up with a trailer design that had a low profile, baffles, a strong frame and suspension, capable of driving at highway speeds, with good brakes and lights. The final requirement was finding a pumping system that would move fuel from the trailer's tank into the tractor or combine faster. In 2009 the first fuel trailer manufactured by LDJ Manufacturing was brought to the market.

## Making good ideas better

During the past three years the company has continued to redefine its trailers. "While we have maintained the basic feature, which is to haul fuel, we now have a full-service station concept on board one of our trailers," Luke notes. "The trailers offer a safe and organized way to haul everything you might need when your equipment is away from the shop, including special compartments for diesel exhaust fluid, oil, hydraulic fluid, and places to organize grease guns and tools."

The trailers also can be equipped with an air compressor, welder and generator making them essentially a shop on wheels. Perhaps one of the best features is that the trailers are equipped with a system that can pump 40 gallons of fuel per minute, which compares to normal pumps, which

## USDA Rural Development

**H**ELPING community leaders and businesses identify ways to improve economic opportunities in rural America is a leading emphasis at USDA Rural Development.

"Through a variety of job-creation programs, USDA partners with private and community-based organizations to create and preserve quality jobs in rural communities," says Bill Menner, state director for USDA's Rural Development agency in Iowa.

One example is USDA Rural Development's Business and Industry, or B&I, guaranteed loan program that helps provide protection and incentives to lenders. In turn, businesses benefiting from a loan guarantee have a better chance of receiving the financing and terms they need to thrive.

The Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program, used by Pella Cooperative Electric Association to assist LDJ Manufacturing, helps rural electric and telephone cooperatives in their efforts to improve the rural economy.

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pump at 10 to 15 gallons a minute. This can cut nearly 20 minutes off the time it would take to fill a 500-gallon tank, common on today's larger farm equipment. Indeed, a design born from the Van Wyk's farming roots, the trailers offer a safe alternative for hauling fuel and are essentially a farm shop on wheels.

For more information about LDJ Manufacturing and its brand of Thunder Creek Equipment, visit [www.ldj-products.com](http://www.ldj-products.com), [www.thundercreekequipment.com](http://www.thundercreekequipment.com) or call 866-535-7667.

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