

Light industries help Norton grow

By Carolyn Plotts

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Manufacturing companies in Norton County range in size from New Age Industrial Corp. with 127 employees to a family-owned business like Brooks Manufacturing or Otter Dozer Blades, both out of Clayton.

But, their combined economic impact on the county and northwest Kansas is impressive.

New Age is a custom builder of aluminum products which specializes in shelving, carts and tables. Mick Miller, one of the owners, estimated the business's monthly payroll around \$130,000. He said New Age provides an incentive program for its workers, a bonus program that returns part of the profits to employees every six months. Mr. Miller said the employees are the ones that get the product done and out the door.

A strong work ethic and the reliability of the work force is part of the attraction of keeping the company in Norton. Mr. Miller said close to 90 percent of the workers at New Age are homeowners. That indicates their commitment to their jobs and the area, he said.

It's a two-way street, because Mr. Miller said the management is committed to keeping the company in Norton. Other owners are President Larry Nelson, Vice President Tom Sharp, Secretary/Treasurer Jim Sharp and Bill Sharp, Brock Miller and Collette Miller.

That sentiment is echoed by Greg Otter, co-owner with his brother Frank of Otter Dozer Blades.

"We considered moving the business someplace else," he said, "but not for very long."

He said he and his brother like having the business near their father, Marion Otter, began in 1958, stay right on the family farm about nine miles south of Clayton. Otter manufactures custom-built and standard dozer blades. He cited low overhead in Norton County and it's close to their other interests of farming and raising cattle.

The company employs three full-time workers and two part-timers. You can learn more about Otter Dozer by going to their website at: www.otterdozer.com.

Gail Boller of Natoma Corp. had a vision of making precision parts for the aerospace industry. Mr. Boller gave his No. 1 reason for moving his business to Norton — Bill Sharp.

"If it hadn't been for Bill Sharp, Norton Development never would have gotten started," he said, adding that several other businesses became a reality due to Mr. Sharp's efforts.

He said that Norton provides a good atmosphere for manufacturing and the town believed in what he was doing. He said because of the tax incentive from Norton County, Natoma has been able to expand, create more jobs and remain competitive with out-of-state firms.

Now, Natoma employees 55 full-time workers and several part-timers with a monthly payroll of over \$100,000, he said. The company has expanded several times and now, in addition to the aerospace industry, Natoma manufactures precision component parts for the medical field, laboratory instruments and the environmental

Norton County

- **Money spent** for economic development in Norton County in 2006 — \$62,459.
- **Population** today 5,584; in 2000 5,953; in 1990 5,947; in 1980 6,689.
- **People working** in 2004 2,577; in 2000 2,585; in 1990 2,851; in 1985 3,004.
- **Economic Development Director** — Wade Carter, less than a year; Diane Becker starts Aug. 15.
- **EDC office** at 117 N. Norton, Suite B (as of Aug. 1). Phone (785) 874-4816.
- **Median Family Income** in 2000 — \$37,036.

industry. Mr. Boller said he thinks the Midwest work ethic is great. He estimates that about 65 percent of his workers are home owners.

Don Brooks founded his company, Brooks Manufacturing, in 1976. His business in Clayton employees three full-time workers, all of whom are home owners.

Brooks builds metal frames for commercial and residential buildings. Mr. Brooks said he subcontracts work through Bainter Construction in Hoxie.

He said he has never considered moving his business anywhere else.

"I was raised here," he said. "I like the small area."

About 10 years ago, John Milnes went out on his own and started a small manufacturing company called MilTech Machine Corp. The company manufactured precision parts for avionics and medical laboratory instruments.

"I had offers to go other places," Mr. Milnes said. "Phillipsburg and Atwood both would have liked us to come there, but we had family ties and friends here."

"We like Norton and we were willing to invest in Norton," added his wife, Elaine,

MilTech recently underwent an expansion and now employs about 25 people, he said. He said about half of his workers are home owners.

"Don't forget," he added, "renters generate money, too."

These five companies, alone, employ over 200 people with a combined monthly payroll of almost \$300,000. They contribute to the economic stability and growth of the area.

"We have taken an active approach to the recruitment and retainment of industrial manufacturing jobs to Norton County," said Wade Carter, outgoing director of Norton County Economic Development. "We have worked on projects that have led to expansions and increased job growth, and we have many more projects slated that will be announced in the coming months."

"Norton County is a leader in northwest Kansas."

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