

PBS: Building a lasting legacy

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With a solid industry reputation and more than 50 years of experience, Woodburn's Pacific Building Systems looks to capitalize on strong sales with major expansion



INDEPENDENT PHOTO: TYLER FRANCKE - Pacific Building Systems employee Ken McClanahan uses a cutting torch on a custom-made I-beam at the company's Woodburn headquarters on Highway 99E last week.

Some people worry about their legacies — but not Rob Prince. The president of Pacific Building Systems said that if he ever wants to know what of value or significance he and his company are leaving behind for future generations, all he has to do is drive around a bit.

“Why I’m passionate about what I do is because of buildings like that,” he said, pointing to a large picture in his office of the Festhalle in Mount Angel, which has hosted the annual Oktoberfest — and countless other community events — since it opened in 2011.

“That is not just a beer garden,” he continued. “They host weddings; they host quinceañeras. They host something practically every weekend. That building has deeply impacted that community.

The Festhalle is one of many large local buildings whose steel structure and other components were designed and fabricated at PBS’ main facility on Highway 99E in Woodburn.

“We build churches. We build community centers

— structures that last and make a big impact on both their owners and their communities,” Prince said. “Tens of thousands of people are employed in our structures. I like being a part of that.”

Now, PBS does not literally “build” buildings — that is, it does not put them together. Not anymore. When the company started in 1962, as Truss-T Structures Inc. (which is still its official registered name), it handled all aspects of the contracting process, including installation.

But it got out of that business decades ago. Now, PBS is strictly a fabricator, custom-making pre-fabricated structures’ huge, highly engineered structures and components — also known as “kits,” though they’re a bit larger and more complicated than your typical model airplane — which are then shipped out and assembled on site.

Prince explained that it was the company’s decision to focus on the design and fabrication side of things that led to its assumption of its DBA (“doing business as”) name.

“We were going to our former competitors and saying, ‘Look, we don’t want to compete with you anymore. We just want to sell you the steel kits,’” Prince said. “We didn’t get very far. They said, ‘We’ve been competing against Truss-T for years. We’re not buying anything from Truss-T.’”

As it turned out, when the same salesman went to the same contractors six months later — but this time representing “Pacific Building Systems” instead of Truss-T — he was much more successful.

Truss-T was started by Prince’s father, Fletcher Prince, and three partners immediately following the Columbus Day Storm, which pummelled the Pacific Northwest, California and western Canada in October 1962, killing 46 people and causing upwards of \$280 million (approximately \$2 billion in today’s dollars) in damage.

Fletcher Prince and the other three were working for a small steel fabricator in Monitor when the storm hit, but were itching to strike off on their own. The so-called “Big Blow” provided the opportunity they’d been waiting for.

“My dad went to them and said, ‘Hey, now our chance,’” said Robin Prince, who was only 4 at the time.

So, they each kicked in \$1,000, and started Truss-T — a name they picked because, well, they made trusses, and were “trusty.”

Business was not exactly hard to find in the wake of the most powerful storm to hit the state in over 100 years, and Truss-T’s means of building its clientele was as simple as it was brilliant.

“They literally drove the county roads looking for evidence of storm damage,” Rob Prince said. “When they found a barn that had been knocked down, they would go up to the house and say, ‘Hi, we’re with Truss-T and we’re here to help.’”

He and his older brother, Jim, got their start sweeping floors at Truss-T.

Jim Prince, who worked for PBS 42 years, would eventually serve as its general manager, retiring in 2010.

Floor-sweeping notwithstanding, Rob Prince got his “official” start with PBS in 1987 as an estimator.

In 2005, he and three other longtime PBS employees bought the company and continue to share equal ownership in it today.



INDEPENDENT PHOTO: TYLER FRANCKE - Dave Johnson inspects an order of custom-built I-beams and other steel components at the PBS shop in Woodburn last week

In addition to Prince, the ownership group consists of Kailong Luo, PBS’ head of engineering and drafting, Fred Schindler, agricultural sales and special projects, and Don Branch, sales and marketing.

Over the decades, PBS has built a niche in the industry of pre-engineered steel buildings, being one of only two such fabricators still operating in the state of Oregon.

It’s very active in the agricultural sector — barns, warehouses, arenas, processing and storage facilities — etc., but also does a lot of work on commercial and industrial buildings.

PBS has designed and fabricated over 150 stores and other structures for Les Schwab Tire Centers. They’ve also done a lot of airplane hangars.

Another one of its clients, primarily for projects based in Alaska, is Trident Seafoods, which is not only the country’s largest seafood company, but also boasts the second largest fleet of ships —

after the U.S. Navy.

In 2008, the company expanded, open a sister site, The Purlin Mill, in Hubbard, which makes — as you might guess — “purlins,” a sort of catch-all term for the secondary structural components that go into the pre-fab metal buildings PBS produces at its main site.

That year was an “awesome” one for his company, Prince remembered, with strong sales and record employment (about 60 to 65 full-time).

Then came the recession.

“2009 was horrible,” he said. “We had to lay off about half our people.”

There were times, Rob Prince admitted, he was afraid he had just cashed his last paycheck.

“It was really touch and go for a while,” he said.

PBS survived by getting leaner and more efficient, while bolstering its sales department.

The company had never really advertised, having done just fine with word of mouth and referrals, but the desperate times of the downturn called for more than that.

Ironically, a large share of its business in the lean years were projects that would have been very familiar to the barn-builders that founded Truss-T.

“We were back to the little, small projects that could be financed basically out of someone’s savings,” he said. “The banks had stopped giving out construction loans.”

Fortunately for PBS and its staff, those days are now a fading memory. The company’s “very busy” again, and has reasserted itself in a market where it must often play the David to much larger national or international competitors.

“We don’t have the buying power that they do, so we go the extra mile with service and quality,” he said. “We want you to get exceptional service and get the building of your dreams.”

In light of the company’s strong sales (\$14 million last year, and on track to do at least that much this year), Rob Prince said the

ownership team is looking toward expanding again in the next 12 months.

Though many of the details are in process, he said the company could add another 20,000 square feet to its 45,000-square-foot facility in Woodburn, along with another 15-20 employees.

For more information about PBS and its work, visit www.pbsbuildings.com.

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