



Mike Pivonka, CEO of Flame Engineering, talks about the bell of one of the torches manufactured at the company in La Crosse.

# Steady

story by juno ogle  
photos by jolie green

# FLAME

**L**A CROSSE — The ups and downs of the oil and agriculture industries reaches throughout northwest Kansas, but a home-grown company demonstrates that, when well-tended like its namesake, business will remain steady and even grow.

For 58 years, Flame Engineering has produced propane torches for farming, industrial and roofing applications, and has even branched out into products for homeowners.

Branded as Red Dragon, its products can be found in wholesalers across the country like Ace Hardware, True Value and Orscheln Farm and Home, and 28 countries including Australia, Brazil, Chile,

Costa Rica, Poland and South Africa. Sales Manager Mel Limon recently returned from a trip to El Salvador.

With approximately 30 employees at its

facility on the north side of La Crosse, the company has a diversified customer base across the world that helps it withstand the ups and downs of the markets, said CEO Mike Pivonka.

"We're fortunate in that we sell to hardware stores, ag stores, pipeline, oil patch," he said.

"We don't have all our eggs in one basket. We're pretty diversified in people that use our product," said Linda Miller, human resource manager and an employee since 1990.



SEE **FLAME, B3** Greg Pfannenstiel welds together parts at Flame Engineering.



Tyson Pivonka, grandson of Flame Engineering CEO Mike Pivonka and the fourth generation to work for the company, works on one of the manufacturing floors at the factory.



Flame Engineering is located at 230 W. Highway 4 in La Crosse.

# FLAME, FROM B1

Starting with a hand-held torch Pivonka and his father, Ralph, devised on the family farm to clean weeds from irrigation ditches, the company now has a catalog of more than 100 items including row-crop torches, torches for homeowners and roofers, propane heaters for construction sites and patio lights. They also do custom work, such as fire service training equipment, movie special effects and custom agricultural pieces.

They even create eternal flames for memorials, such as those at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Sept. 11 Memorial in New York City's Battery Park.

The company's mission statement holds two likely keys to its success — safety in its products and manufacturing, and American-made quality.

Safety is a high priority at the company. The message board at the company headquarters boasts of more than 5,000 days — nearly 14 years — without a loss-time accident. With several welding and machining stations throughout the shop area, the potential for injury exists. The company takes a pro-active approach to accident prevention.

Miller is in charge of the company's safety committee, which consists of at least one person from each department and meets monthly. Every employee is mandated to serve on the committee at some point. The committee conducts quarterly safety walks with a representative from the company's insurance provider to help identify potential safety hazards and makes sure safety training is conducted on schedule.

The committee also conducts investigations in "near-miss" reports, when a non-injury accident occurs.

"We see if there was something wrong with the machine, if it was operator error and we need to change some training, whatever we need to do so that it doesn't happen again and result in an accident," Miller said.

In 2000, Flame received certification in the Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program, conducted by the Occupational Safety Hazard Administration and the state. The SHARP certification has to be renewed every two years, and allows the recipient to be exempt from unexpected OSHA inspections.

"We are the oldest company in Kansas to have that," Miller said.

"It's a pretty extensive program. We were just looking at this year's, and there's been some changes, so we'll have to make a few changes and re-educate a few people. But it's good to keep safety up," Pivonka said.

The Red Dragon products also are certified by CSA International, an organization that tests gas, electrical, mechanical and plumbing products against Canadian and U.S. standards.

"We took the extra step to have our torches certified by an independent company for safety and quality," Miller said of the CSA certification. "We're the only company that I know of that has that."

"They come in quarterly and review our facility. They



Darren Volkel paints a row of torch bells in the painting room at Flame Engineering in La Crosse.



LouAnn Legleiter boxes up a Weed Dragon torch kit at the factory.



A pile of tubing for torch kits sits in the factory.

do random checks on our torches to see if they maintain the same quality that we submitted when we won that certification. And we are still meeting that criteria," she said.

The majority of the production work is conducted at its La Crosse facility, but even the work farmed out doesn't go far. Powder coating is contracted with Dechant Manufacturing in WaKeeney. Some assembly work is conducted by Sunflower Diversified Services, a Great Bend nonprofit that provides services to the developmentally disabled.

At its La Crosse facility, several of the 27 employees have been with the company for several years and are drawn from La Crosse and surrounding communities including Hays, Victoria, McCracken and Great Bend.

Mike Cheeley, Bison, who was welding metal tubes for torches Thursday, has been with Flame for 22 years and said he's done just about every job but shipping.

LouAnn Legleiter, Liebenenthal, also has been with the company for more than



Workers fabricate various parts at the factory.

20 years. She was assembling and packaging the Weed Dragon, a torch designed for home and garden weed control.

"I just like the people," she said of one of the reasons for her longevity.

Donnie Basgall will retire next month after 32 years at Flame.

Flame has even encour-

aged the development of another home-grown company as one of its suppliers. Precision Turning began when Flame had trouble in the 1990s of finding good quality valves for its torches on a timely schedule. Employee Troy Engel and others approached Pivonka about making the part in-house. He suggested they do

it on their own.

"He kind of pointed us in the right direction," Engel said.

"Part of it is we just didn't have the room," Miller said of the reason to encourage Engel to branch out on his own.

"Space is always an issue. We found if you build more space, we tend to fill it up

quickly," Pivonka said.

Precision Turning's home office is in La Crosse, although much of the production work by its five employees is done in Missouri. In 2001, Precision started with one CNC lathe and started producing valves for Flame in 2002.

"In a good year, we'll produce over 100,000 valves for Flame," Engel said.

"As capabilities increased, we started doing other fittings for them out of steel, stainless steel and brass. It's kind of developed into other customers. Flame is still our No. 1 customer," he said.

Keeping production at home is an important aspect to Flame's business, even though it might cost a bit more. Pivonka said he receives catalogs from Chinese companies that have identical products to what Flame offers.

"They want to sell them to us. We could actually buy them for what our material costs are, let alone our labor and everything else. But we sold our business on being made in the USA," he said.

"It's tough to compete that way, so we have to have quality, we have to have customer service. We're very crazy about quality. Some of the offshore stuff, the imported stuff is pretty poor quality."

Flame is a company that also listens to its customers. The roofing products came about after roofers asked if the torches could be adapted for work on flat roofs. That line also offers bitumen applicators and dryers.

One surprise best-seller is a result of the company's change to online marketing. Flame offers dollies for carrying propane cylinders to feed its torches.

"It's a pretty simple device — a two-wheel cart like almost everybody has. This one's kind of specific to the gas containers. For years we just made a few of those," Pivonka said.

"We were really on the verge of just getting rid of it."

But customers saw it on Flame's website and began asking for it from retailers.

"Now it's a major product for us," he said.

Although customers can order from the website, Miller said Flame encourages people to buy Red Dragon products through retailers.

"Actually the customers can get our products cheaper going through the big box companies than they can directly with us because we won't compete with our distributors," she said.

Pivonka said while the company doesn't expect huge growth, the future for Flame Engineering looks good. President Donald Trump recently reauthorized construction on the Dakota Access and Keystone XL oil pipelines.

"We're kind of thinking that may help us," he said. "If the oil starts coming up again, that will help too."

Likewise, taxes on imported goods, such as the identical torches from China, could be a boost to Flame's sales, he said.

"We've had good years where our sales come up, and then we tend to maintain that level. We're kind of a slow-grower and pretty boring," he said with a laugh.

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