

Modern Metals®

The magazine for metal service centers, OEMs and fabricators

www.modernmetals.com

A TREND Publication February 2010

oem report ELECTRONICS 2010

INSIDE

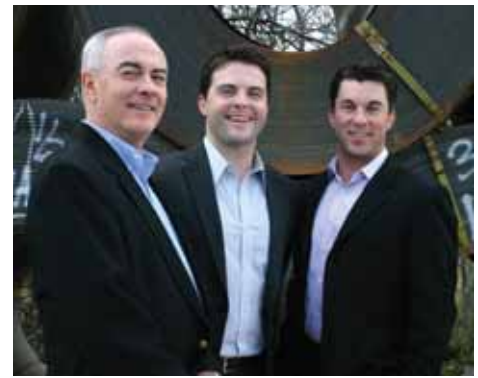
Service Centers:

Family-owned **Willbanks Metals** finds success with strong values, myriad services and cutting-edge equipment

Worldwide demand for easy-to-use, reliable communication inspires innovative technologies



servicecenters



Left to right: Fred, Eric and Ryan Letz

Willbanks Metals distributes steel, but it was founded on value-added services, such as forming. Today, the co-founder's son-in-law and grandsons own the company.



Family-owned **Willbanks Metals** finds success with strong values, myriad services and cutting-edge equipment

BY LISA RUMMLER

Grandparents always pass down something to their grandchildren. For some, it's a physical characteristic, such as brown hair or blue eyes. For others, it's an inherent talent, such as the ability to carry a tune or throw a football.

But in some families, the legacy of earlier generations goes beyond flesh and blood, manifesting in a family business.

Such is the case with John Willbanks Sr.

In 1974, he and his son-in-law, Fred Letz, co-founded Willbanks Metals Inc., Fort Worth, Texas. Today, Fred Letz owns the company, along with his sons, Ryan and Eric. They serve as executive vice president and COO, respectively.

However, Willbanks can trace his involvement in the metals industry even further. As a young man, he worked on a press brake in Southern California.

"That's how our family got into steel," says Ryan Letz. "Then he moved back to Fort Worth, and he worked press brakes for various companies all over the city. He developed years of experience and knowledge."

Willbanks Metals started as a small fabricator with just one shear and one brake whose focus was custom fabrication jobs.

"They grew the company big enough to where they could continue to add on machinery, with more brakes and shears," says Ryan Letz. "They eventually got into burning parts, and then they decided to get into the cut-to-length business and processing."

In 1978, Willbanks Metals acquired a cut-to-length line capable of processing coils up to 60,000 pounds, 96.5 inches wide, and a gauge range of 0.065 gauge to 0.5 inch. This purchase opened the door to further diversification.



“It went from just providing fabrication services, and then that grew into distributing steel,” says Ryan Letz. “Eventually, that led into distributing long products: angles, beams, channel and tubing.”

Now, as the third generation is at the helm, this evolution helped make Willbanks Metals into the company it is today.

“Instead of starting with just steel distribution and then adding on value-added services like a lot of our competitors have done, our company was founded on the value-added services, and then we added distribution to it,” says Ryan Letz. “This gives us a leg up when it comes to experience on the fab end of things.”

Breaking it down

Willbanks Metals comprises four divisions: cut-to-length, mill plate distribution, struc-

tural product distribution and value-added fabrication services.

These include laser cutting, plasma cutting, oxy-fuel cutting and plate processing (such as drilling, tapping, milling and beveling), as well as plate rolling, angle rolling, forming, shearing and sawing.

Of all these value-added services, Willbanks Metals is most known for its expertise in forming, according to Ryan Letz, which is a throwback to the work his grandfather did before co-founding the company.

He also says having expertise in all the fabrication services—and in one place—further distinguishes Willbanks Metals.

“Some customers may have 10 phone calls to make to get all their parts in with many other companies,” says Ryan Letz. “With us, it’s just one. It goes with our theme of being focused on diversification

in products and services.”

In regard to steel products, Willbanks Metals offers a large variety, from floor plate to smooth flat-rolled A1011, A36, A572-50, A572-65 and A871-65. The company cuts lengths from coil 4 feet to 55 feet. For mill plate, Willbanks Metals offers most of the same grades, along with A514, AR and A588-50 and stocks up to 5 inches thick.

The company is spread out over 13 acres and consists of several buildings, including a 30,000-square-foot structural warehouse. There, Willbanks Metals stores hundreds of different-sized structural products, such as angles, channels, I-beams, tubing and various kinds of bars.

Accordingly, Willbanks Metals serves the structural fabrication industry, as well as transportation, farm equipment and en-



Willbanks Metals' employees feed 0.25-inch steel into a 600-ton, 20-foot-long press brake.

ergy—and not just oil and gas.

“We have wind and solar customers,” says Ryan Letz. “I would say that two or three years ago, we probably didn’t have one. Now, we have several.”

Helping hand

Beyond the equipment and services on the shop floor, Willbanks Metals takes pride in its employees reaching their full potential. Eric Letz says this stems from the strong belief in God that he, his brother and their father share.

“We focus on creating a family environment here,” he says. “We look at every single employee as a member of a larger family, and we treat them in that way. We [also] put a lot of emphasis on maintaining high ethics in everything we do.”

One example of this is Willbanks Metals’ use of Marketplace Chaplains USA, an on-site employee assistance service, that includes counseling, helping with personal needs and officiating funerals and weddings. Eric Letz says turnover has dropped dramatically since the ownership changed and the new culture was implemented.

“For the last 20 years, we would do random drug tests typically twice a year, and we would always lose about 10 percent of our employees [on the shop floor],” he says. “Since we took over ownership three years

ago, added the chaplain service, and took on more of a role in being engaged in our employees’ lives and having a sincere care and concern for every aspect of our employees’ lives, that number went down to next to nothing. Our people are staying with us.”

Additionally, Willbanks Metals is considering other programs to help its employees, such as providing daily corporate lunches to promote healthy eating.

“Our No. 1 focus is how the ownership can make decisions that benefit our employees, customers and suppliers,” says Eric Letz. “We try to do everything we can to take care of all of our people.”

Looking ahead

In the last six months, Willbanks Metals made several large investments, including a new cut-to-length line and a new plate roll.

“The line takes our cut-to-length distribution to an entirely new level, providing higher-yielding grades and a flatter, memory-free product,” says Ryan Letz. “The new roll will put us into thicker plate and make us able to roll up to 4-inch-thick hot-rolled steel.”

Eric Letz says these improvements were made with growth in mind, and they will pave the way for a larger and even more successful business.

Willbanks Metals also recently started a trading division focused on specialty-

grade material (specifically, quenched and tempered, abrasion-resistant material) for distribution in the western half of the United States.

In the next few years, Willbanks Metals hopes to add a fifth division to its operation, one that would focus entirely on exports.

“That just goes with the theme of changes in the global economy and the weakness of the dollar and a stronger Mexican, as well as South American, market for manufacturers,” says Ryan Letz. “That’s something we’ve been taking advantage of, and we want to continue to put more of our focus on it.”

Whatever way Willbanks Metals evolves, and no matter what investments the company makes in equipment or technology, all three owners will continue to keep the big picture at the forefront, according to Ryan Letz.

“There are certain reasons people wake up and go to work,” he says. “For most people in the business world, it’s profit, which absolutely is important—we have to have profit to be successful and thrive. But whenever you change your perspective and really look for your employees’ benefit at the company, it all works itself out.” ■

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