

Steel

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"They came through the Panama Canal last week and they are in Seattle now waiting to be shipped," Cam-Plex General Manager Don Barks said.

When the German beams arrive at Roscoe Steel, workers will bolt and weld them together to finish the trusses.

The general contractor, Groathouse Construction, has been building in Wyoming for 30 years, Barks said.

"And these are the biggest steel beams they've ever handled," Barks said. "It's fascinating to me."

You can go home again

With his deep baritone voice, Roscoe could be a singer, a radio announcer or an actor. Instead, he's a financial numbers and a steel fabrication man who largely credits his father and grandfather for the company's success.

"They opened a lot of doors for me because they were both good guys," he said. "If you come from a family that's capable and constructive, you can count on that helping you."

Jim's father, Bill Roscoe Jr., started Roscoe Steel in 1953 with two other Billings men, who eventually were bought out. At first, Jim Roscoe wasn't interested in the family business.

After earning an accounting degree from Carroll College back in the 1960s, Roscoe finished a master's degree in management and finance from the University of Denver.

In 1969, when his father invited him back to Montana, Roscoe and his wife, Lin, agreed. Hunting and fishing was part of the lure.

The couple now owns the privately held company that employs 200 people with an annual payroll of \$10 million and runs four plants in three cities.

Roscoe Steel offers health benefits, 40k investment plans with a company match and quarterly bonuses.

Chasing change

Not many men get to move their grandpa's bridge and build a new one.

Pointing to a photograph on the wall, Roscoe showed a 1950s bridge over the Bighorn River outside of Hardin that his grandfather built.

Employees slid the old bridge sideways over onto a service road so a new steel bridge could be erected. The two bridges sit side by side in the photo before the old bridge was recycled.

Despite a long family tradition, Roscoe has brought in outside management and has been willing to make major changes to what has been a successful business formula.

"Some of it is definitely luck, but a lot of it is good hard work and trying to look into the future and anticipate the problems and not waiting for them to hit you in the head," he said.

Running a privately held company that doesn't have to answer to Wall Street expectations every quarter also helped build the businesses, he said.

Two years ago, Roscoe hired Bill Lundberg, who was working at a steel company in Minneapolis/St. Paul. Lundberg serves as president and chief operating officer and manages the day-to-day operations.

Roscoe embarked on more major changes after attending a lean-enterprise seminar a couple of years ago.

"We cut \$3 million out of our working inventory," Lundberg said. "We freed up the company to reinvest by using the right inventory at the right time of year, so our customers can count on our being on time delivering orders."

Vice President of Operations Alan Sherbo said the past couple of years have been full of management changes.

"It's been very challenging, but in the 24 years I've been here, they've been the most rewarding," Sherbo said.

The company encourages community involvement for bosses and workers. Half a dozen employees have served or are serving as Rotary Club presidents.

Lundberg credits his boss, Roscoe, with being innovative.

"One of the biggest attributes he has is that he can let go of his own creations and that allows the company to move on," Lundberg said.

Bridges are the hot deal

The company sells steel buildings across the Western U.S., but the hottest products are the pre-engineered bridges made in Missoula.

"That's our big growth business," said Lundberg. "Installation can be done in a matter of hours for 100- to 200-foot bridge."

The single-span pedestrian and car and truck bridges are sold largely to the U.S. Forest Service, timber and mining companies and private developers from Idaho to Minnesota.

The bridges are made of Cor-Ten, a U.S. Steel product that is chemically designed to oxidize for a while and then stop.

"It doesn't weather like a Pinto car," Sherbo said. "It doesn't turn orange or green, but an aesthetically pleasing brown that fits into forest scenery."

Roscoe Steel also specializes in complex fabrication, Lundberg said, including seismic welding.

"That is welding done in a fashion to withstand earthquakes, so the building doesn't come tumbling down," he said.

Steel can be recycled, making it an economically wise building material, Lundberg said, and the company has other products designed to be environmentally friendly.

Culverts can be manufactured large enough for animals to cross under highways safely, and Roscoe Steel can weld in passages for tiny animals as well.

"We added a little tube so small that harmful animals like voles can cross," Lundberg said. "I love this product."

Even though Roscoe Steel doesn't buy or sell products to the Far East, successful change means keeping up with the global marketplace.

Consolidation has taken the U.S. steel mills from about 50 operators down to about 10 or 11 mills today.

And in early 2000, China built new enough steel mills to rival the entire U.S. capacity in just 1,000 days.

Yet despite growing foreign competition, Roscoe said that these are good times for steel mills and fabricators like his company because demand is expected to jump in coming years.

China now uses half as much industrial steel per capita as the U.S. does. Japan uses one-third as much.

And India is becoming another major consumer of steel, although its infrastructure lags about a decade behind China's, Roscoe said.

"If they ever get economic development to the point the U.S. is at, it's going to be darned hard to get steel," Roscoe said.

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Roscoe Steel Spotlighted (continued)

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Fri, Apr 17, 2020