

Life-Sized “Yard Decorations” Are Great Sideline Business

“We started with a star on top of a grain bin. It soon became a second business and we’re still at it 30 years later,” say Gene and Shirley Wilson, who run the business on their farm near Elmwood, Ill.

Their custom-designed decorations are made from welded-together, 1/2-in. sq. aluminum tubing and include everything from tractors to cars, pickups, 4-ft. tall logos, and animals. The decorations are supported by steel posts and fitted with either rope lighting or taped-on miniature light bulbs.

“Over the years we’ve made 3 or 4 different kinds of cars, including a full-size 1959 Cadillac that’s 21 ft. long. We’ve also made pickups, a Longhorn steer, buffalo, deer, swans, eagles, Nativity scenes, stars and crosses, 2 different types of big Christmas wreaths, and bows,” says Wilson. “I try to show all 4 wheels of my tractors, cars and pickups in order to give them a 3-D look instead of just a silhouette.

“The customer tells us what he wants, and then I get a photo or drawing of it. I take the photo or drawing to a local shop where they use a computer to make a full-sized paper pattern of it. I set the paper pattern down on my workbench, place the aluminum tubing

above all the lines, and follow them as I start cutting with my radial arm saw. Once all pieces are cut and bent I start welding them together. I constantly have to put out fires in the paper caused by hot sparks from the welding torch. When I’m done welding, there’s not much paper left.”

Sometimes getting the pattern takes a little extra work. “I had to go to a local Deere implement dealer to get the measurements for my last tractor,” says Wilson.

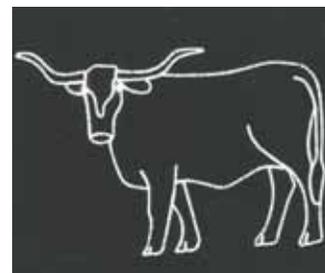
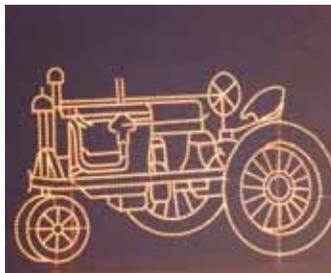
He uses rope lighting on anything that doesn’t require a lot of detail, and miniature lights on the full-size designs. “We may use 1,000 to 2,500 miniature lights to get the desired look,” says Gene.

Wilson says a lot of people don’t realize how long it takes to make such decorations. “I spend 2 weeks or more making some stuff, and the older I get the longer it takes. Sometimes I go to flea markets or craft shows, and if I see something I like I won’t argue with the artist on price. That’s because I know how much time he spent to make it.”

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For 30 years Gene and Shirley Wilson have run a sideline business on their farm making yard decorations – everything from tractors to animals and Nativity scenes.



Custom-designed decorations are made from welded-together aluminum tubing supported by steel posts and fitted with either rope lighting or taped-on miniature bulbs.

On-Farm Fiber Mill Takes Any Size Order

Margie and Jim Schafer recently opened their on-farm fiber processing plant with a promise to process every order separately, no matter how small. If you send in a fleece from 3 separate sheep as 3 separate orders, you’ll get 3 separate orders of washed and carded fiber back. Other processes like spinning require more than a single fleece.

“Our smallest order so far has been the fiber from a single rabbit,” laughs Margie. “Our primary customer base is small farmers and shepherds with a few animals. Our secondary market is fiber artists like hand spinners, weavers, knitters and crocheters. They may want a fleece from an individual animal processed separately. Unlike some big fiber mills, we’re set up to do that.”

Although the Schafers just opened the Round Barn Fiber Mill this fall, they’re already booked ahead 2 to 3 mo. with orders. They report that being booked ahead 9 mo. is not unusual in the business. They have heard of one mill that is booked ahead for 2 years.

“We have already added staff and will add equipment if necessary,” says Jim. “We want to keep the wait down. We are ramping up as fast as we can, but the amount of work we got just starting was amazing. We got into the market well after shearing and still have a thousand pounds of fleece to process.”

In fact, it was the long waits for processing that started them thinking about setting up a mill. “We bought our farm and started raising American Jacob sheep,” says Margie. “I visited a shepherd who also had a mill, and it fit with my interest in sheep and fiber arts and our interest in having a home-based business. There seemed to be room for more mills, so we started looking into it.”

The Schafers say they are in the business for the long run, having invested a quarter million dollars in new equipment. Jim



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acknowledges that margins are low, but their business plan is positive, in part because they recently sold another business. They had the capital to invest in new equipment, which gave them access to technical support.

“A lot of people buy used equipment,” says Jim. “However, the learning curve is so steep that without the extra help and support, I don’t know if we could have done it. Now that we’ve been through a startup, we might not be afraid of used equipment.”

Services offered include washing fleeces in a special machine or by hand if needed, in 175°F water to clean the wool and remove lanolin. Once the fleeces are dried, they go through a “picker” that opens the locks and prepares them for carding. The carding machine takes picked fibers and aligns them into parallel format and removes most remaining dirt or foreign material.

The carding machine can produce roving (long strips of carded fiber that hand spinners use), cloud fiber (more open and also can be spun), or batts (can be spun or used for quilts or felting).

For those customers who want their fiber processed even further, it can be pindrafted. Here, sharp metal combs convert roving into more parallel and longer fibers called semiworsted fibers.

Non-spinners can have their fiber spun into single strands that can then be plied together

into 2 or 3-ply yarn. The yarn can be run through a cone winder or a skein winder, depending on the end user’s preference. The final machine in the Round Barn’s lineup is a core-spun rug yarn maker. It is an attachment to the carding machine that makes coarse rug yarn, fiber that has been spun around a cotton core to make a bulky novelty yarn.

“The textile industry in this country disappeared as jobs went overseas, but I like to think it is coming back through small mills like ours,” says Jim. “We can’t compete with China as a commercial mill, but we can do okay providing a service for small farmers.”

Margie advises interested customers to visit the Round Barn website or call with questions. There is a lot of information on preparing the fleece on the website, as well as order blanks that can be downloaded.

Eventually the Schafers hope to sell finished product as well as services. “One of our goals is to develop lines of wool from heritage or endangered breeds,” says Margie. “If we can help the owners improve their returns, it may help the breeds as well.”

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Their carding machine takes picked fibers and aligns them while removing dirt and foreign material.