Florence & Greater Pee Dee

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Double A Body Builders
Ken, Sammy and Jimmy Ard

Jimmy, Sammy and Ken Ard

Photo by Steve Roos

HOME GROWN BUSINESS Has Long Reach

by Glen Dwinnells

It's a typical day in central Florence County. Cattle graze in some fields, while others are in various stages of readiness for the next planting. Farm equipment sits beside barns and sheds. And a truck loaded with 40,000 pounds of steel rolls down Highway 52 toward the sleepy town of Pamplico.

No steel towers rise from the Pamplico skyline. No obvious grand construction is underway. Yet nearly every week, year-round, about 40,000 pounds of steel rolls into town.

The destination is Double A Body Builders, an unobtrusive company where a different kind of building boom has been going on for nearly 40 years. Here in what they proudly describe as their "no-frills" facility, Jimmy Ard, his two sons Ken and Sammy, and their crew turn out about 30 custom-built truck bodies a week.

Early on, Jimmy discovered in himself the ability to fix things. He earned his living keeping the equipment running at a local sawmill. He and his brother also built some of that equipment in a 40x40 garage their father had used to repair farm tractors.

A Little History

One day in 1963 a local farmer came calling and asked Jimmy if he could modify his 1959 1-1/2 ton Ford truck so he could haul grain. Jimmy, who had mastered welding among other things, was up to the task. When the job was done, the farmer was happy and Jimmy Ard had an idea for a new business. "I knew from that day that this is what I wanted to do," he says.

That first job grossed Jimmy Ard just $380, but it launched what is now an $8 to $10 million-a-year business.

His next step was to go calling on other farmers. He figured they could reap the same benefits from having their truck bodies modified. He was right, and for the next few years, still working his job at the sawmill, he turned out about five or six trucks a month for farmers all around the area, working on the trucks when he got off his regular job.

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A confirmed dog lover, Jimmy finds time to spend with Jake on Double A's front porch.

"He was surprised when he saw that I was manufacturing truck bodies out of a 40x40 building. He said to me: 'Jimmy, if you are willing to take a chance and manufacture truck bodies in such a small town, then I am willing to take a chance and sell you hoists for your truck bodies.'"

Upon getting established with Peabody Galion, Jimmy began calling on truck dealers and construction companies. And Double A continued to grow. Jimmy's brother Laverne (the other A in Double A) was still working at Marsh Lumber and decided to commit himself totally to that job, so Jimmy became sole owner of Double A Body Builders.

During the late sixties, Jimmy's staff consisted of himself and just three other workers. "We worked long hard hours," he recalls. In 1969 he expanded the workplace, moving into a 7,200-square-foot building. At the same time, he added municipalities to his growing customer profile.

Tough times came for Double A when the gas shortage of the early '70s hit. "I did not know if we would stay in business," says Jimmy.

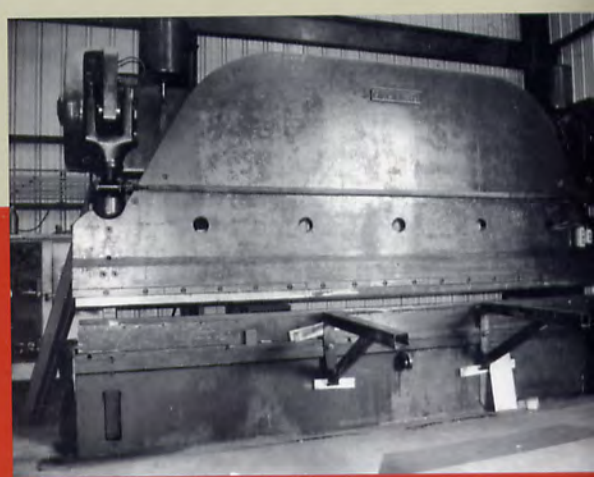
Finally, in 1976, business took a turn for the better and Double A increased its workforce. Growth came at a fast pace and in 1978 Peabody Galion flew the man from the little South Carolina town to St. Louis to be inducted into the "Top 25 Club" as the eighth largest of 300 dealers.

As the business grew in size, it also began to widen in scope, as Jimmy decided to add dump trucks to his product line.

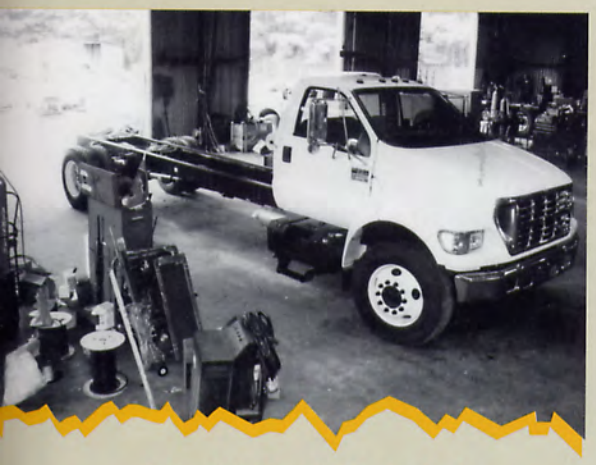
"In 1965," he says, "I called Peabody Galion to see if they would sell me hoists so I could build truck bodies that could dump." A short time later, a representative of the hoist maker traveled from Ohio to Pamplico to visit Double A.

Present Day

Now, says Jimmy, Double A Body Builders manufacturers all the parts for the truck bodies except the pumps and the cylinders on the dump trucks. That explains the 40,000 pounds of steel rolling into Pamplico about once a week.



Sammy and Ken Ard oversee sales and every aspect of the company's production on a daily basis. Ken (right) demonstrates how Double A's press brake works. It bends cold steel to prescribed forms and is one of the largest of its type on the East Coast.



A Ford F350 waits for its body

Armando Hernandez operates the shear, a machine which cuts metal to size.

Cheryl Poston is known as "The Boss." She oversees all administrative functions and keeps tabs on Jimmy Ard's other business operations including a restaurant, land development and 800 acres of working farmland.

Once an order is received, Jimmy's older son, Ken, specs the necessary materials to do the job and Cheryl Poston, who runs the office, shops for the best source and makes certain everything arrives at the plant on time. Steel comes mostly from Charleston and Columbia, with some specially ordered 3/16" thick 8x20 foot sheets coming from Cleveland. With steel prices up due to new tariffs, careful purchasing is even more critical.

Most of the steel used in Double A's production arrives flat and goes through a process of shearing and braking (cutting and bending) as truck bodies are built and assembled.

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Double A Body Builders *continued from page 11*

"We've purchased a lot of machines and equipment in the last ten years in order to increase production," says Jimmy. His pride and joy is an 18-foot press brake, which can bend cold steel about as quickly and effortlessly as Superman. "It's the biggest one on the East Coast," he says.

A Local Success Story

Double A Body Builders' location affords the company little, if any, local visibility, but according to Barry Tomlinson, project manager with the Florence County Economic Development Partnership, it's important for people in the Pee Dee to be aware of such local success stories. Existing industry, he says, accounts for most of the job base in the county and across the state. Tomlinson, who visits such businesses around the county nearly every week, says Double A is a great example of a strong, family-owned industry leader. "We're always looking to shine the light on good existing industry," he says.

Tim Goodman (left) and John Myers mount a hoist kit. They have been with the company eight and eleven years, respectively.

With Double A for 26 years, Bobby Isgett oversees the installation of utility beds and truck bodies.

The Design/Build Process

In custom manufacturing, it is not unusual to get an order which requires a new or unusual part. But at Double A Body Builders, the design process for satisfying those needs is definitely unusual. "I can't draw a part," says Jimmy. "But I can visualize it and from that picture I can build it." And that's the way it works at Double A.

Jimmy builds a jig from his mental picture, then the jig is used to manufacture the part. Hoist frames, rear hinge assemblies, special headboards, sides and tailgates are all manufactured right at the plant in addition to the truck bodies themselves. According to Jimmy, they have even built snow plows and salt spreaders on more than one occasion.

In addition to manufacturing about 30 truck bodies a week, a separate company, Double A Truck Sales, Inc. sells about 300 used trucks annually. The spin-off company has gained a following as truck users have discovered they can count on Jimmy to provide a reliable vehicle. "We've sold used trucks to people as far away as Nebraska and Missouri," he says.

The company also offers drive-through service for people needing emergency or minor repairs.

Jimmy Gordon, who has been with Double A for 25 years, and his son John work together as a team in mounting a winch to the front of a truck.

Glen Collins makes headboards for truck bodies.

Happy Customers

No private company enjoys consistent growth unless they have happy customers. Conley Smith is just one of those customers. Smith is fleet and inventory manager at Ken Wilson Ford/Sterling in Canton, North Carolina, and has been doing

business with Double A Body Builders for about ten years. "Jimmy offers a product we use a lot and his work is high in quality in both appearance and functionality," says Smith.

The dealership, just west of Ashville, purchases both flatbed and contractor dump trucks, utility and service bodies and special applications of all types says Smith. "Jimmy will fabricate anything I need to my specs and do it promptly," says Smith.

Smith, whose company orders about three to five units a week from Double A, says he and Jimmy have become good friends over the years as well as business partners. "You get to know a man well in that time," he says, "and Jimmy is easy to work with and easy to be with."

Unbeatable Staff

A stable and able staff is another advantage Double A has given itself over the years. From the hardworking staff of three in the early sixties, the company has grown to nearly 40 employees today.

"I have some employees who have put their hearts into this business," says Jimmy.

Production worker Victor Gonzalez welds the body for a Ford F650 dump truck.

Jimmy Gordon has been with Double A for 26 years and now has two sons working for the company as well. Another production worker, Bobby Isgett, has also been with the company for 26 years and yet another, Glen Collins has been there for more then 16.

Double A Body Builders *continued on page 14*

If You Think You Would Hate Sales,
Consider This

Sales is not
- Bugging people
- Taking their money
- Getting the best of them
- Imposing on them

Sales is
- Making long-term friendships
- Meeting interesting people
- Learning about their products
- Teaching and explaining your product
- Earning a very good income

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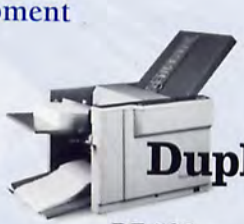

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In the early 1970s the entire Double A Crew consisted of just five workers. Here they pose with Sen. Tom Smith, who, at the time, was campaigning for Lt. Governor. Pictured are Van Finklea, Sen. Smith, Bobby Ard, Gerald Hutchison, John Coleman and Jimmy Ard.

"God has blessed us with great employees," says Ken Ard. "To me, that is the most important part of our success."

Cheryl Poston, who has run the financial administrative side for eleven years says the employee loyalty thing cuts both ways. "Jimmy's been good to me and he's taught me great ethics," she says. "He would never turn his back on his employees. He has a heart of gold."

These days, Ken and his younger brother, Sammy, are left to run the business on a daily basis as Jimmy spends more and more time in new endeavors (see related story on page 16). Both men joined their dad at the business on a part-time basis in their teen years, and although both are totally committed now, it wasn't always quite that clear to Ken.

"I had other things on my mind," he recalls. "I love sports and I thought I might go into coaching or broadcasting. Later on I realized this business was my best option and I learned from my father that if I was going to do it, I was going to do it right."

Sammy had no such hesitation. "This is all I ever wanted to do," he says.

Ken and Sammy are both well versed in every aspect of the business. "We both do anything that needs to be done," says Ken, who says he probably spends more time in sales than his brother. But he looks to Sammy for more expertise in the design area.

Future Expansion Possibilities?

Just as their dad did, Ken and Sammy each have two children, and they realize the business must grow to support a growing family. Although this year's soft economy slowed business a little, Sammy feels it is picking back up and envisions the day when Double A will have to expand its plant to accommodate growth.

The way to do that, says Ken, is to keep the customers happy. "I think we jump through more hoops than anyone else," he says. "In this business it's all about 'When can I get it?' We're price and quality conscious and we find a way to get it done. That's the best sales pitch I can give."

Kevin Dineen would agree with that description. Dineen is commercial sales manager for Bob King Pontiac/GMC in Wilmington, North Carolina and has been buying bodies from Double A for about three years, with a major increase in the past year. "Commercial customers want it yesterday," he says. "They are upset that they have to replace a vehicle in the first place and they tend to wait until they really have to. If I can get their order filled quickly, I can relieve some of the pain. Double A is dependable and they treat you the way you want to be treated."

The perfect recipe for growth.

Double A Body Builders *continued on page 16*

A finished quad axle dump truck awaits delivery

Double A Body Builders *continued from page 14*

The Many Sides of Jimmy Ard

by Glen Dwinnells

One morning, as he tells it, Jimmy Ard woke up with a vision. He wanted a circular house, sitting high atop a pole, made primarily of metal, and he wanted to build it himself. Taking whatever time he could get from running his business, Double A Body Builders, he did just that. Situated just off Pamplico Highway, the house, a hexagonal structure, perches atop a shaft which houses an elevator. It satisfied Jimmy's initial vision, but it started his interest in building more homes. He has since constructed similar homes in Georgetown County and in North Carolina.

The North Carolina home, which features fine wood floors and other interior woodwork made with purple-heart mahogany and other exotic woods, has been featured on the program Extreme Homes, seen on the HGTV cable channel.

Jimmy owns or has owned restaurants, a catfish farm, 800 acres of working farmland, among other enterprises. His current project is to build a number of single-family homes on the side of a mountain he purchased in North Carolina. The homes, he says, will reflect his personal love of fine woodwork.

Wayne Russ checks out a new shipment of wood bound for the cabinet shop in Pamplico where he and Jimmy Ard have set up shop to much of the fine wood that will grace the interiors of the new homes Ard is building in North Carolina.