

INSIDE

DAVID NICKLAUS

Company's goals are no pipe dream

If you think manufacturing is a thing of the past in this area, what's going on in a former cornfield in St. Charles might change your mind.

Next month, in a new 65,000-square-foot factory along Truman Boulevard, Trinity Products will begin turning steel coils into large-diameter pipe.

Not only is this small company placing a big bet on the future of manufacturing, it's investing \$10 million in some of the most gargantuan metal-bending equipment you'll see anywhere in the St. Louis area.

A 200-ton forming head will shape the pipe, in sections up to 36 inches in diameter, and a 40-ton crane will move it around the building. The plant will have its own rail spur, along with a 50-ton loader for stacking finished product.

This heaviest of heavy industry also is high-

tech. The pipe-making process is run from a console with three TV screens and two joysticks. The welding equipment uses an ultrasonic scanner to detect microscopic flaws in a pipe's seam, giving Trinity a quality advantage over firms that use older technology.

Behind this show of industrial muscle is a company that most St. Louisans have never heard of, unless you were paying close attention last year when baseball fans couldn't see around the new Busch Stadium's foul poles. The Cardinals turned to Trinity with a rush order for thinner poles that would meet

Major League Baseball's stability requirements.

For a small company, that was a pretty good 15 minutes of fame. But it was all in a day's work for Trinity President Robert Griggs. "I'm not really a salesman at all," he said. "I solve problems for my customers."

Trinity, currently based in O'Fallon, Mo., was founded in 1979. It started as a distributor of pipe, mainly to the construction industry. Since 1986, it has been a fabricator, which means it doesn't make the pipe but bends, welds and coats it to customers' specifications. Besides the foul poles, its high-profile projects include the Big Dig in

Boston and the Freedom Tower in New York.

In both the distribution and fabrication businesses, Trinity competes mostly with other small businesses. Pipe manufacturing, on the other hand, is dominated by a few large companies.

Griggs, though, sees plenty of customers with problems that need solving. In fact, he brushes off the notion that a new pipe mill is a high-risk venture.

"I went into one meeting with a banker who knew me really well," Griggs recalled. "He said, 'Robert, why are you rolling

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Trinity started out as a distributor of pipe

“the dice like this?” I said to him, “You don’t understand. Rolling the dice is the opposite of what I’m doing right now.”

Remaining dependent on other manufacturers’ production schedules would be a risk. Losing employees because the firm couldn’t grow would be a risk. Building a \$10 million plant is a challenge — Trinity acted as its own general contractor, and its employees did much of

the work — but Griggs doesn’t see it as risky.

Trinity had sales of \$20 million last year, and Griggs says that will double to \$40 million next year. The new mill will add about 20 people to Trinity’s 50-person work force.

That won’t begin to replace the 1,300 factory jobs being cut at a DaimlerChrysler plant in Fenton, not to mention the 64,000 other jobs the St. Louis

area has lost since 1990. But if an entrepreneur like Robert Griggs says manufacturing has a bright future here, you have to believe.

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