

Young Entrepreneur Grows Parts & Equipment Business

As a kid growing up on a small Iowa farm, Ethan Zobel says he always enjoyed building things and tinkering with machinery. In 2013 he started building hayracks and repairing running gears for area farmers, even though he was just 13 years old. "That went really well for a couple years, so I started buying old tractors to repair, refurbish and re-sell for extra spending money," Zobel says. "Within a year I had more than 2 dozen parts tractors and I realized there was quite a bit more potential in parts than in tractor repair."

Just 4 years later Zobel is a hyper-busy 20-year-old, running EZ Equipment Sales with a huge stock of tractor parts, several hundred salvage tractors, with 4 or 5 more coming in every week, and enough work to keep 4 full time and several part time employees busy.

Zobel says his focus initially was on Farmall H, M, MTA and CIH tractors and parts because that's what he grew up with. In the past year he's expanded by adding more Deere, CIH and New Holland tractors. "There's not a huge need for heavy parts like rear axles and bull gears, but we have more than 600 rare and many less common parts that are in much higher demand. A good example is an M&W cast aluminum oil pan for several CIH models including 806, 1206, 856, 1256 and 1456. We also have stoker crankshafts and are now re-manufacturing parts that are in high demand," Zobel says.

One of his recent projects is producing

and selling a pto compression tool which he has made by an Iowa manufacturer. "It's a simple \$100 tool that makes it easier for a mechanic to rebuild a pto without using a bulky press, and it's not available from CIH," Zobel says.

EZ Equipment has refurbished used tractors for sale and the parts lineup includes cleaned and rebuilt carburetors that are set to factory specifications. His price is \$150 with a core or \$250 without. The shop rebuilds IH hydraulic parts such as clutch assists, hydraulic valves, coupler boxes, MCVs and more. Pricing varies so Zobel recommends calling for information and inquiries about re-built Farmall and IH engines.

After graduating high school in 2018, Zobel attended college for one semester. "It was a great experience, but I couldn't run the business and go to school at the same time. I decided the business was more important, and I don't regret it." A frequent customer says the fact Zobel doesn't have mechanical training or a business degree doesn't bother him a bit.

"My brain absorbs knowledge like a sponge when I visit with customers, friends, neighbors and family members," Zobel says. "Those people along with industry people I've met and know have a lot of experience and knowledge, and I'm picking up on that as fast as I can."

Zobel says his business has grown because "I'm committed to finding, stocking and supplying rare tractor parts that other salvage yards haven't seen or don't deal with on a regular basis. We buy salvage tractors



Ethan Zobel grew up using Farmall and Case IH equipment on his family farm. Now the 20-year-old runs a business that sells parts along with rebuilt and restored tractors.

from all over the continental US and even a few from Canada, with some traveling more than 1,000 miles to get here," Zobel says.

The business reputation has also spread because of an excellent website that draws inquiries from across the country. "It's a never ending job to add parts, prices, pictures and descriptions, but that's really helping us grow," he adds.

As if he doesn't have enough to do already, Zobel continues to expand. Recently he and

his father bought a crop insurance agency that ties nicely into his equipment business because the majority of customers at both businesses are farmers. "I've got a passion for agriculture, business, numbers and my local community and I have no intention of slowing down," he adds.

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Horseradish Business Needs More Growers

In the early 1930's, Harry and Lena Tulkoff started a small grocery where they ground fresh horseradish for customers. Now, 90 years later, the business is still going strong under the leadership of their grandson Phil Tulkoff. In fact, thanks to previous careers in engineering and computer consulting, Phil has expanded the company to include co-packaging for a number of popular grocery brands. Many of the copacked items include non-horseradish products such as mayonaisse, garlic spread, BBQ sauce and Bloody Mary mix.

Sourcing horseradish from dependable contract growers is a key part of the business. Phil says growing horseradish is labor-intensive and a challenge because equipment for growing, harvesting and processing horseradish doesn't exist. As a result, the industry has had to modify machines used to grow and process other crops such as potatoes and sugar beets.

"Some growers use modified potato diggers to harvest the root, which can grow to 3 ft. long. In our plant, the washer we use for cleaning roots was adapted from machines used to de-stone potatoes and clean sugar beets," Phil says.

Tulkoff processes about a half-million pounds of horseradish per month at its Baltimore plant. Historically, most of the roots have come from contract growers in Illinois, but recent excess moisture in the Midwest has reduced supply, so the company is looking for additional growers, ideally in the East Coast states of Maryland, New Jersey, Virginia and Delaware. "Shipping costs from the farm to our plant will be reduced if we can find dependable growers in these states," he says.

Harvested horseradish is shipped by growers to the Baltimore plant in stretch-



Horseradish isn't a very attractive plant growing in the field, but yields produce decent financial returns per acre, say Harry and Lena Tulkoff.

wrapped "cubes" placed on pallets in refrigerated trucks. It's stored in freezers maintained at 28°F and then washed before being processed.

Phil says, "one appeal of growing horseradish is that the income/acre can be considerably higher than that from corn, soybeans or other commodity crops. We pay about 50 cents a pound for root and an average yield is 8,000 pounds an acre, so gross revenue can be \$4,000 an acre. And that price stays pretty steady year-to-year, and will most likely increase gradually."

The company is seeking growers who can supply at least 250,000 pounds of root per year. "One approach that may appeal to some growers is to join forces and share equipment," Phil says. Prospective growers can get more information by contacting Phil at: ptulkoff@tulkoff.com.

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Kenny Hochstetler custom builds everything from machined parts to this mini-grader he designed for ATV's and zero-turn riding mowers.



Custom Fabrication Leads To New Business Creation

When Kenny Hochstetler does a custom metal fabrication job for someone, he never knows where it may lead. A kayak user had an idea for a collapsible frame to hold 2 kayaks behind his vehicle. Hochstetler built one, then another, and a business took off.

"We started making 10 at a time, then 25, and then 50," says Hochstetler, D.A. Hochstetler & Sons. "Now he orders 100 a month, and www.vertiyak.com is a full-time business for him and his wife."

Hochstetler does custom machining of steel, aluminum, brass, and plastics. The company is equipped for all types of machine work and fabrication. While they can work from prototypes or photos, Hochstetler prefers blueprints.

What began as a one-off fabrication has turned into repeat business for Hochstetler. A customer came in with a video of a skid steer-mounted grader he had rented.

"He wanted to buy one, but couldn't find one anywhere," says Hochstetler. "We made one for him, and we ended up making 5 more and selling those. The next year we did 20, then 100. This year we sold 180 in the first 5 months."

Hochstetler does his own design work and has come up with a new best seller, a 130-lb. mini-grader for ATV's and zero-turn mowers.

One customer uses it with a horse to level his driveway.

The mini-grader is 4 ft. wide with 2 leveling blades. The side rails are 6 in. high with a runner made from AR235 hardened steel. The cutting bars are made from the same hardened steel and bolted in place.

"They can be adjusted up or down," says Hochstetler. "The lower they are, the more they dig into the roadway. When they do wear down, just turn them over for a new edge."

The expanded metal top keeps gravel from flying off the roadway. It's also a handy place to stack concrete blocks or sand bags if additional weight is needed.

"We made 20 of them, and they were sold before they were finished," says Hochstetler. "Now we are making another 50."

The only downside to the increasing demand for products made at the shop is less time for custom fabrication. "At the moment, we aren't actively looking for custom work," says Hochstetler. "We warn new customers that they may have to wait."

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