

# Cutting Edge Art

BY JUDY HORAN

Which of the following is out of place:  
a) steel conveyors; b) steel ductwork;  
c) steel artwork; d) none of the above?

If you chose “d” go to the head of the class. You are correct. All are items produced at Millard Manufacturing — even the steel artwork.

Owner Ron Parks admits that the steel sculptures are not featured in the company’s catalog. The artwork is personal, even though his staff helps in its fabrication. The stainless steel sculptures are produced during the plant’s “down” time.

“My artwork does not compete with any profit-making job. It waits in line,” says Parks.

But he always has sketches ready to go when that down time comes. An employee in his company’s engineering department transfers the sketch to a computer software program, a complex program also used for manufacturing industrial food-processing equipment.

Before the full-size sculpture that can weigh as much as 12,000 pounds is crafted, a model is created. Some of Parks artwork can be seen on the lawn of Millard Metals, 10602 Olive St. More pieces are in a gallery inside the building.

Parks emphasizes that the sculptures are a collaborative process at his company. “As many as a dozen people touch that artwork along the way, drafting, assembling, painting, cutting, finishing.”

The tools Parks has to work with would make other sculptors salivate.

“The company just installed a large water-cutting machine, which pushes 50,000 PSI (pumps per square inch) of water through a small opening the size of a lead pencil tip,” he says, adding, “I once was asked to design a water-cutting machine to cut cakes.”

The 64-year-old Parks has been designing products since 1968 when he founded his first company, General Metalworks. In 1971, he merged with Millard Manufacturing.

His merger followed a study that



sitzmannfoto.com | Bill Sitzmann

indicated stainless steel, instead of the galvanized steel he had been working with, was the future in food processing. Millard Manufacturing had been working with stainless steel since the 1960s.

The employee stock ownership company, with Parks as the majority owner, enjoys a low rate of employee turnover.

“Our 50 employees are very important and their experience even more important, so we try to keep them and help them grow in their careers,” he says. “For

instance, we try to use the best computerization for job shop manufacturing. We designed the concept of being able to computerize parts.”

A single-unit job shop, Millard Manufacturing makes limited numbers of generally unique machines.

The same creativity Parks uses in his artwork has served him in his business. “I was thinking about how to perfect machines and got into cryogenic

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

machines manufactured for individual quick-frozen foods.”

He approaches marketing his artwork with the care he has given his business. Parks held an exhibition at the Creighton University Lied Art Center for one month starting August 12 and recently commissioned a 12-minute video, “A Conversation With The Artist,” that he intends to send to museum curators to encourage more one-man shows.

Images of some of the sculptures are on the Web site [www.clovervalleyart.com](http://www.clovervalleyart.com).

**Ron's Alter Egos**

Parks also is a boater, pilot, community volunteer and author.

Using his extensive business experience, he self-published a book, “Manager’s Mentor: A Guide for Small Business.”

There was one hitch when Parks decided to write the book. “I can’t spell or

write a sentence.” So he went in search of a writer — and also found a wife. He and his book’s co-author, Judy, married May 27, 1995. He remembers the date because 527 is the tail number of his single-engine Mooney passenger plane, which both he and Judy pilot.

Parks had his first lesson in 1956 and bought his first airplane in 1993. Judy is a commercial, instrument-rated pilot. They pilot more than airplanes. Both also are qualified to crew a 48-foot diesel boat and — over a 10-year period — have boated the entire inside passage from Seattle to Skagway, Alaska.

Many of the couple’s hours are spent in community work. He has served on the St. Luke’s Methodist Church board for 30 years and, for three years, has been chairman of the Nebraska Community Foundation. Ron serves on the board of trustees of the Nebraska Nature Conservancy where he and Judy have endowed research grants for post-graduate students.

The business executive has been intrigued by art since age 12. While a student, he painted theater sets at Pierce High School in Pierce County, Nebr. He has supported the arts as a patron and collector. For years, he has kept a sketchbook of sculpture ideas.

But his artistic interests were in the background until October 2000 when Parks had emergency angioplasty. At first he thought his pain was altitude sickness because he and Judy, both wine lovers, had just returned from a trip to Napa Valley and their airplane was not pressurized. It took electric shock twice to restart his heart after a rush to the hospital.

Earlier he had five years of chronic fatigue, which Parks believes was a sign of the impending heart attack. He had acute appendicitis two years ago at age 62 and surgery for prostate cancer in July.

Instead of slowing him down, his health problems inspired three appropriately named granite and steel sculptures: “Pain,” “Struggle” and “Stress” that now set on the company’s lawn.

“When we completed our building here five years ago, I told the staff I wanted to put an art piece out front. (The 10,000-pound sculpture, “Arrested Asteroid” still sits in front of the company’s building).

“After they stopped laughing, we did.” ■

**Great Steaks, Signature Martinis, Prime Views**

For a night of unforgettable food and fun, check out the 360 Steakhouse and Vertigo at 360 Lounge

- Over 50 signature martinis
- 100 premium selections on our new wine list
- Live piano, by request, Thurs. – Sat.
- An all-new menu at 360 Steakhouse
- Desserts by our renowned pastry chef
- Breathtaking view of downtown Omaha

For more information call 712-329-6000 or visit [www.harrahs.com](http://www.harrahs.com)

Must be 21 or older to gamble. Know When To Stop Before You Start.® Gambling Problem? Call 1-800-BETSOFF (In Iowa) or 1-800-522-4700. ©2004, Harrah's License Company, LLC. All Rights Reserved.