

Mike Hilderbrand – Roto-Mix

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Getting the mix just right. That's vital, whether one is a cook, a chemist, a cattle feeder, a basketball team – or a business. Today we'll meet a Kansas company which has become a national leader in making mixers for livestock feed and more. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Mike Hilderbrand is President of Roto-Mix, a company with deep roots in rural Kansas. Mike has degrees from Southern Illinois University, Keller Graduate School, and a certificate in management from Harvard, plus years of experience in manufacturing. In 2011 he became president of Roto-Mix.

The company's beginnings go back to Ben Neier, who was farming in the 1950s near the rural community of Mullinville, population 267 people. Now, that's rural. Ben started a feedlot and was looking for a better way to mix feed. "Nutrition of feeder cattle is very important," Mike said. "Or maybe Ben just got tired of shoveling feed."

Anyway, Ben Neier devised an auger system for mixing feed for his cattle. It worked very well. He started a company and built a building in which to manufacture these mixers in Dodge City.

"It was the birth of an industry," Mike Hilderbrand said. "Other companies followed his lead."

During the turbulent economic times of the 1970s, the company's ownership went through transitions. Ben Neier left the business. Then Ben learned about a British company that had a patent for a new type of mixer which operated with a central rotor. He acquired the rights to this design and, with a friend named Bill Pullen, began a new company to manufacture these rotary mixers in 1984. The company would ultimately be named Roto-Mix.

In 1988, the company needed more manufacturing space and bought a building in Dodge City. Ben Neier knew the building well. It was the very same building where he had begun manufacturing his auger mixers two decades previously. The business continued to grow. Ben's son Rod Neier joined the company and became CEO in 2011, when Mike Hilderbrand was recruited as President.

Roto-Mix is a leader in the manufacturing of processing and mixing equipment for beef cattle and dairy feeding, plus waste disposal and compost mixing operations. "Our focus from the beginning was beef cattle feedlots and that is our core business," Mike said. "Now we are growing our business in the dairy cattle industry, which requires new products because of the high hay content of their ration. Interestingly, that has had extra benefits because those products are also attractive to cow-calf producers."

Another element of the company's business is the compost mixing operations. "This is the green side of our business," Mike said. As more state and local governments and others do increased recycling, this segment of the Roto-Mix business has grown. "Our mixers can take almost any kind of organic scraps or waste and mix into compost," Mike said. For example, a pair of Roto-Mix machines was recently placed in Los Angeles.

In addition to the plant in Dodge City, the company has locations in Scott City and Hoisington. Back in the 1990s, Roto-Mix contracted with the city of Hoisington and

remodeled an old railroad building into a manufacturing facility. “It has the tall ceilings which we need for our equipment,” Mike said. “We were able to save a one-hundred year old building and generate 50 jobs.”

Roto-Mix has grown to 125 employees. The company’s products are sold coast-to-coast and to 38 countries. Wow. The company was even named the Kansas Exporter of the Year. More information can be found at www.rotomix.com.

“This company knows its customers very well,” Mike said. “We have a core of long-term employees. We manufacture our products with high efficiency, but we’ve also tried to remain something of a job shop so we can customize products to meet customer needs. This is American manufacturing at its best,” Mike said.

Getting the mix just right. That’s vital for success. We commend the Neier family, more recently Mike Hilderbrand, and all those involved with Roto-Mix for making a difference by building a business with high quality mixing equipment. In the discussion of the best manufacturers in Kansas, this company is definitely in the mix.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.