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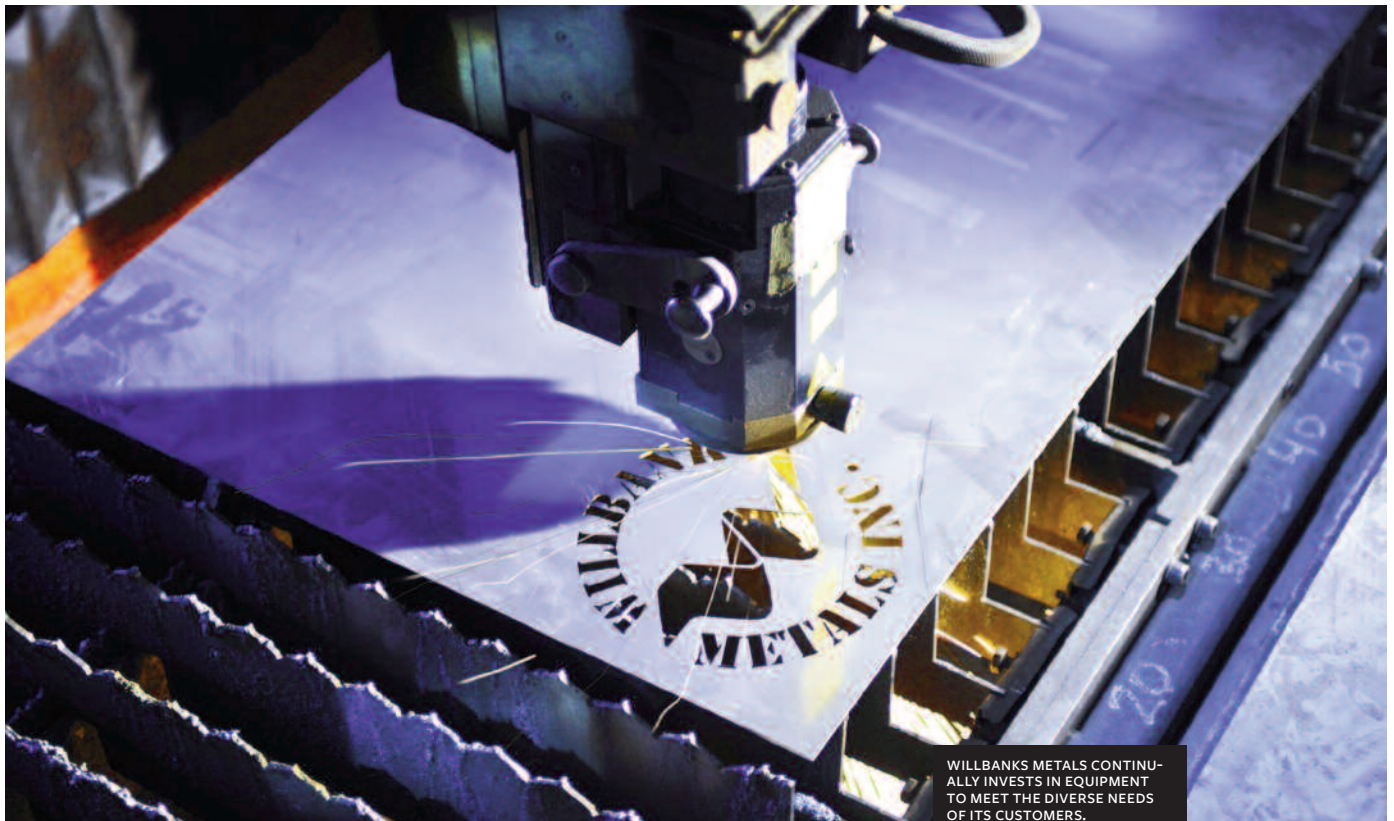
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EBBS AND FLOWS

Star Creations has overcome its share of challenges to become the leader in its industry. *page 60*

THE WAYS OF WILLBANKS

WILLBANKS METALS IS OVERCOMING THE RECESSION BY LISTENING TO ITS CUSTOMERS' NEEDS. **BY KATHRYN JONES AND LIBBY JOHN**



WILLBANKS METALS CONTINUALLY INVESTS IN EQUIPMENT TO MEET THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF ITS CUSTOMERS.

Poor economic conditions typically result in decreased demand, which has a devastating effect on the manufacturing industry as a whole. Those companies who are able to diversify and remain flexible throughout the recession will be among those who come out on top. Willbanks Metals Inc. of Fort Worth, Texas, intends to be one of those firms, according to Ryan Letz, vice president of sales. "The more we diversify, the less impact we feel in down markets," he says.

Willbanks Metals celebrates its 35th anniversary this year as one of the most diverse service centers in the southern United States, it says.

The company primarily distributes hot-rolled steel and offers a unique niche of value-added services such as laser cutting, plasma cutting, plate and angle rolling, forming, shearing, punching/drilling, oxy-fuel cutting and sawing.

It targets a variety of markets, such as transportation and energy, which enable it to remain successful. "Because we deal with so many industries, one industry may be really hot and the other may be cold," Letz notes. "We like to remain focused on keeping a good even keel throughout those ups and downs, and we think diversity has been the key to that."

INVESTING IN EQUIPMENT

John Willbanks and Fred Letz, Ryan Letz' grandfather and father, founded Willbanks Metals in 1974. The two had a modest start, making trailer parts for transportation manufacturers and structural fabricators in their small fabrication shop in Fort Worth. After the company acquired a cut-to-length processing line that could flatten steel coil to a specific length, it became large enough to buy its own coil from the steel mills and process that in-house. By 1978, Willbanks Metals was large enough to distribute flat sheet and plate, and offer a broad range of products to its clients.

“Over the years, we added different machines to add more value to our offerings,” Letz says. This includes press brakes, plasma torches, laser capabilities and plate rolls. In fall 2008, Willbanks purchased a Farley Laserlab XRP, a plate processing machine that enables the company to drill holes, plasma cut, bevel, tap and counter sink holes all in one process.

According to Letz, “It diversified us into new industries that we previously had not been a part of. It opened up a whole new revenue stream and profit center for us.” Additional profits were merely a bonus, however. “It comes down to listening to our customers and their needs,” he asserts.

“We also noticed that our market is requiring more drilled and tapped holes rather than simple plasma-cut holes. The tighter tolerances done at

the first stage of fabrication have become more common amongst the needs of our customers. We are finding that our customers now require their products delivered ready for assembly, therefore requiring us to hold tighter tolerances.”

Willbanks Metals upgrades or acquires new equipment almost annually to continuously find value for clients. “We’re getting to know our customers a little more and finding out what their needs are,” Letz says. For instance, the firm often tours customers’ shops to learn more about their industries and their various needs. “Some are more price sensitive whereas others are more sensitive to quality control,” he says.

Willbanks Metals created its own quality assurance program specific to its manufacturing process. “[ISO cer-

tification] wasn’t an efficient way to ensure quality, so we wrote our own manual through our experienced managers and found it to work just as good as the other ones,” Letz says. “We’ve been approved by most customers that typically only buy from ISO 9001 companies.”

Looking ahead, Willbanks Metals intends to continue adding value and expanding its services. “The market has shrunk, so when we have all of these different products and services to offer, we have an edge on most of our competition,” Letz explains.

Ultimately, the company intends to remain flexible and diverse, “which has been my granddad’s philosophy when he and my dad started the company 35 years ago,” he says. “They always believed in not putting all of your eggs in one basket.” **mt**

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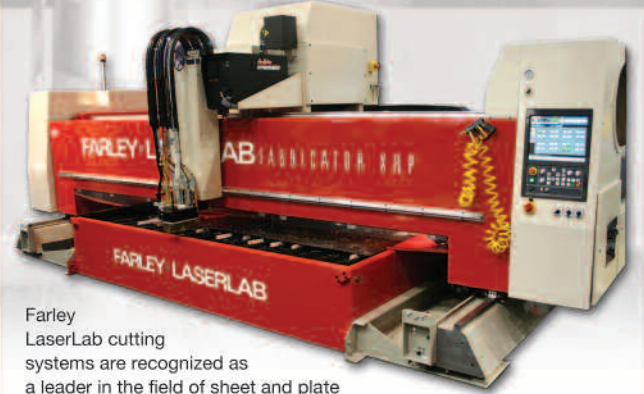
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