

WATERLOO / CEDAR FALLS

BUSINESS EDITOR: jim.offner@wfcourier.com

www.wfcourier.com/business



## Getting a lift

BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Staff Photographer

Workers test a 200-ton heavy-capacity wheeled transporter at Doerfer/TDS Automation's Big Rock Road plant in Waterloo.

### Doerfer Cos./TDS Automation rides new invention to success

By JIM OFFNER

jim.offner@wfcourier.com

**WAVERLY** — Doerfer Cos. recently accepted the Harold Brock Innovation Award from the Greater Cedar Valley Alliance & Chamber, but the company has a pedigree that dates almost to the origins of the region itself.

In 1854, New England entrepreneurs Alfred and Parley Williams, Charles Heald and Marvel White opened Williams, Heald & Co. and Moline Iron Works in Moline, Ill.

The seeds thus were sown for a company that eventually would establish deep roots in the Cedar Valley and develop a market for process automation products and services that now spans the world.

Doerfer's modern iteration dates to the 1960s. Officials there say its long history actually feeds its innovation, perhaps most notably represented by its newest product — the Wheelift Heavy Transporter, which enables customers to move heavy loads in relatively cramped spaces.

Based in Waverly, Doerfer Cos. is a culmination of a series of acquisitions of engineering companies that dates back decades. The company's

consolidation of the assets of Doerfer Engineering and TDS Automation in 2004 is the latest. That followed by a year the firm acquiring TDS from Waverly-based General Machine and Tool Co. and renaming it TDS Automation.

The company has two plants in the Cedar Valley — a 65,000-square-foot headquarters and manufacturing building in Waverly and a 45,000-square-foot facility in Waterloo that once housed Terex Corp. operations.

"Our customer base is for the most part multinational companies in the Fortune 100, and because we do a lot of specialized projects and proprietary projects for these larger companies, we do a lot under confidentiality agreements where we're the assisting and consulting firm for their processes and improvements for their positions," said Dave Takes, CEO of Doerfer/TDS Automation. "We have to kind of do a good job and do it quietly because it's part of the arrangement with our customer base a lot of times."

Doerfer/TDS reports yearly sales in the area of \$125 million, which is up exponentially in recent years, Takes said.

"Compared to 10 years ago, we would have been maybe \$50 million," he said.

The Wheelift Heavy Transporter, for which the company earned the award named after Harold Brock, one of Waterloo's pioneers in engineering, is both a cause and effect of that growth.

"This is the first major foray into our own product innovation," he said.

"It has been in development for about six years. It has really taken off for us the last two or three. We can promote that now because it's our own product."

Engineer Mel Terry developed the Wheelift for Doerfer, Takes said.

"Mel and I knew each other from trade shows and kind of hit it off," Takes said. "I hired Mel as full-time employee as business development manager for Wheelift. He actually lives in the Seattle area and travels all over promoting Wheelift."

It's a new approach to an age-old problem of moving heavy loads through assembly, packing or shipping processes. Mobility is a key to Wheelift's success, Takes said.

"It produces its own power; it's a little bit like a locomotive," he said.

The self-propelled units run on diesel, propane or gasoline and produce electricity. A generator is run by the engine and produces electricity for steering, movement and lift.

An electric hydraulic pump powers lift cylinders, and the apparatus lifts loads and pivots.

"That means you can drive under a load, pick it up and take off on a 90-degree angle," Takes said. "It's very flexible."

The Wheelift's maneuverability lends itself to uses like assembly of the shafts on submarines, Takes said.

"Obviously, those have to be accurately positioned and moved to fit into the bearings and things like that," he said.

"In the past, the only way they had to do that was with equipment that was stationary and immobile. Now, it's much more flexible."

It also is more cost-effective, Takes added.

"They're probably more expensive but much more efficient, so they save a lot of time, which equates to real value for our customers," he said.

See DOERFER, page D2

## Contest idea can pay off with more than cash

The big winner in the first Dream Big Grow Here Cedar Valley contest wasn't just Cedar Falls-based Adrenaline X Laser Tag, which won the \$5,000 first prize, or even second-place Broad Street Brewing Co. of Reinbeck — both new startups run by forward-thinking entrepreneurs with some very big plans.

In the large scheme of things, \$5,000 isn't big money; it's a nice bonus for some hard work and sweat that will pay some incidental expenses along the way.

The big winners are the Cedar Valley and the director of the contest, the Greater Cedar Valley Alliance, which is focused on building a vibrant regional business community one small business at a time.

The lessons learned in this first go-round will serve to strengthen the process further, as Alliance CEO Steve Dust recently acknowledged.

"First, we were very impressed with the number we got with the first contest," he said. "We were very impressed with the geographic spread. We were able to attract entrants from virtually all over our economic region, so that was great."

Twenty-five companies participated.

"Even beyond the number of entrants, people were interested," Dust said. "They were engaged in wanting to help small businesses take the next step to growth."

First experiences are always teaching moments, and Dream Big was no exception. Perhaps the contest's most glaring flaw was the vetting process, which rested entirely on the number of votes entries got. Participants could monitor their vote totals each time they went to the contest's website. That created some opportunities for some good-old-fashioned Chicago-esque "vote early and often" electioneering campaigns and even some publicity campaigns via social media and local news outlets.



Jim Offner is the Courier business editor. Contact him at jim.offner@wfcourier.com.

## Hybrid, compact car sales rev up as

By JIM OFFNER

jim.offner@wfcourier.com

**WATERLOO** — The current gas-price spike appears to be driving sales of hybrid and other fuel-sipping vehicles at Cedar Valley car dealers.

"We are seeing an uptick in demand on cars that get good gas mileage," said Bill Colwell, president of Bill Colwell Ford Inc. in Hudson. "We're really fortunate. We have several models, and we're seeing a lot of inquiries on



U.S. hybrid sales for April 2011

data from Hybrids

Model	Units	vs. March 2011	vs. April 2010	CYT0	vs. CYT0 2010

D2

## DOERFER

Firm honored by award given in Brock's name

From page D1

The company transcends the Wheelift, he said.

"We've always been in the custom-process automation business," he said. "We do everything from pharmaceutical production equipment to assembly and tests for Deere, 3M and automotive companies and large electri-

cal mechanical assembly. All of the typical large projects for custom industrial processing."

As for the award, named in honor of Brock, who died in January at age 96 and who worked at the arm of Henry Ford: "Actually it's a nice honor when you consider it's the first time under Harold's namesake," Takes said. "I think anybody would agree with that if they knew Harold and his background and history."

was a it was

ts raw

"The these

their ave an

, I like heard.

r story st way

errific. e, too, lay?"

veaked vote-

anel of a kind

i, Dust