

MANUFACTURING

Little big business

Swiss Tech makes small parts for products you know

By BRIAN WALKER
NIBJ Writer

Making tiny parts is big business for Swiss Tech Precision USA.

The Post Falls manufacturer, which makes metal parts for the likes of Fender Guitar, Buck and Gerber knives, Schlage locks, Colt guns and NightForce rifle scopes, had five employees when owner Chris Choate bought the company from founder Andy Schneider in June 2015.

Today, less than two years later, Swiss Tech has 14 employees with visions of more than doubling its workforce again during the next three years.

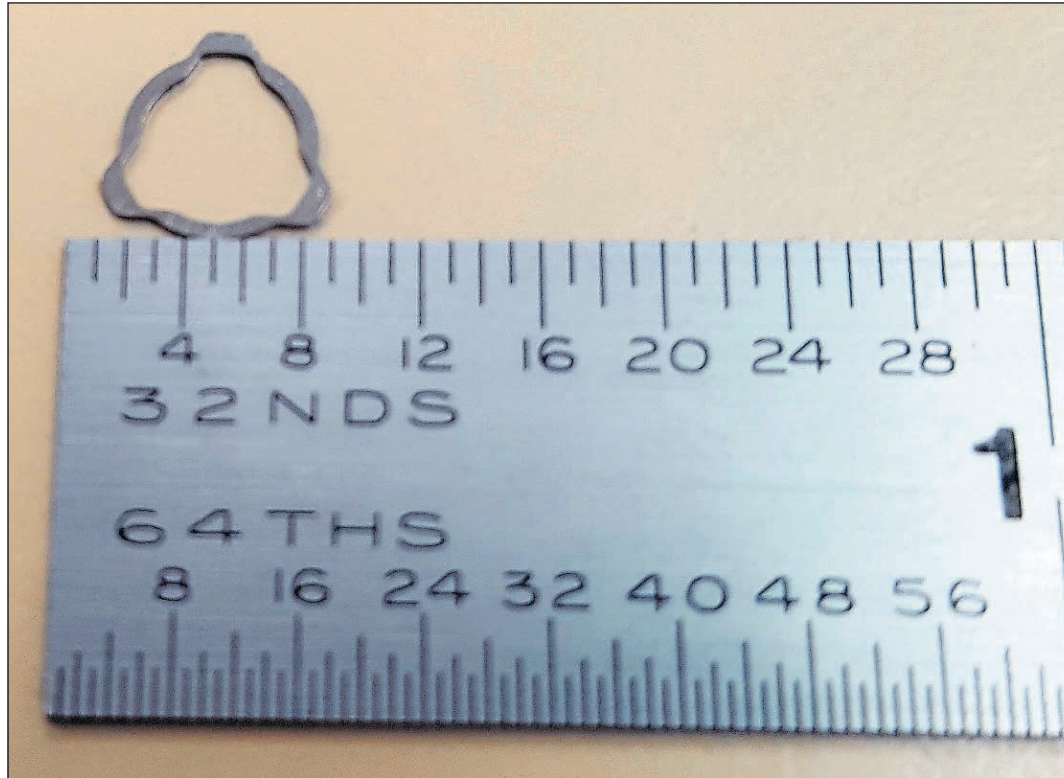
"We have successfully re-shored five projects for different (manufacturers) whose projects were originally scheduled to be sent to Asia for production," said Scot Frazer, vice president.

Frazer said Swiss Tech has attracted new customers with its faster turnaround on products and lower product failure rate despite stringent contracts companies have with overseas manufacturers.

"It comes down to quality and customer service," Choate said. "If you have a problem, you can come right into my office and solve it faster."

Swiss Tech uses a specialty type of metal stamping called fineblanking that allows it to make massive amounts of intricate parts that can have complex shapes and holes.

The process can achieve part characteristics such as flatness and a full-sheared



Courtesy photo

The smallest part that Swiss Tech Precision USA makes at its Post Falls facility is a component of an endoscopy scope for a German medical manufacturer. It is a quarter of an inch in diameter. More than 1,000 of the parts fit into a sandwich-sized bag.

edge to a degree that is nearly impossible using a conventional metal cutting or punching process.

Its products are stainless steel, brass, nickel, silver, aluminum and titanium.

"There's only five companies in the United States that do what we do," said Frazer, adding that most of such work is done in Europe.

The smallest part that the company makes — a component of an endoscopy scope for a German medical manufacturer — is a quarter of an inch in diameter. More than 1,000 of the parts fit into a sandwich-sized bag.

Swiss Tech is also working on an aerospace project for a Montana State University lab.



LOREN BENOIT/NIBJ

Swiss Tech Precision USA, out of Post Falls, makes small parts for Fender Guitar, Colt guns, scopes, knives and more. Products are stainless steel, brass, nickel, silver, aluminum and titanium.

"The components will be the mounting piece for the

mirrors the satellite will use to research the sun," said

Frazer, adding that he could not provide any further details.

The company also makes knife blades for Gerber.

Working with diverse customers makes his job intriguing, Choate said.

"We've been working with Fender Guitar for 30 years, but we also have contracts for pacemakers, aerospace, locks, firearms and cutlery," he said.

Two years ago, the company had one fineblanking press. Today, it has five presses in its 37,000-square-foot facility in Riverbend Commerce Park. The presses are precise and fast, operating at 30 to 160 strokes per minute.

"We made more than six million parts in 2016," Frazer said. "Our facility now has the production capacity for 2.6 million parts per month."

Choate said a minimum yearly run of 30,000 parts is needed for a return on investment with fineblanking.

Choate said the company had about \$1.5 million in sales in 2016, up from around \$400,000 two years ago.

"It's been a matter of regrowing the customer base," Choate said.

Frazer said Swiss Tech has partnered with Employer Support for the Guard and Reserve (ESGR), Idaho Department of Labor and area colleges to develop a worker pipeline as the company creates jobs.

Schneider, who founded the company 35 years ago in Huntington Beach, Calif., is from Switzerland. The company also takes pride in its "Made in the USA" products and hiring veterans. Hence, the words "Swiss" and "USA" are in the company's name.

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Carving out a living with tattoos in Cd'A

By RYAN COLLINGWOOD
NIBJ Writer

To pay for his tuition at the Savannah College of Art and Design, Jacob Redmond moonlighted as a tattoo artist.

Redmond was already a proven commodity in the industry, but he figured structured portrait-painting courses would sharpen his craft.

Since then, his services have been rendered in 12 countries, his stops ranging from France to Barcelona and Hong Kong, all while using a handheld tattoo machine he built himself.

Redmond, who has a tattoo shop in Portland, has also carved out a steady business selling his machines.

During a trip to his wife's hometown of Coeur d'Alene last year, Jacob saw fertile ground for their level of work and got to thinking.

"The tattoo scene in Portland is crazy," said Caitlin Redmond, Jacob's wife and a 2008 graduate of Coeur d'Alene High School. "It's really over-saturated so we thought 'What if we had a shop here?' The town is changing and growing so much."

After formulating a business plan, they opened Heart

City Tattoo in December, located at 204 N. Fourth St.

Redmond brings 20 years of tattoo experience to a business which dubs itself 'Coeur d'Alene's most upscale tattoo shop' on its website, heartcitytattoo.com

Caitlin, whose maiden name is Nolan, has artistic acumen herself.

A former Nike employee, Caitlin studied at the Art Institute of Portland, where she studied fashion and marketing. While her husband's focus is traditional tattooing, she does cosmetic tattooing, including eyeliner, eyebrows, lips and minor removals.

With over 20 tattoo businesses in a county of only 150,000 residents, the Redmonds believe their shop's cleanliness will catch customers' eyes.

"We know what makes a good tattoo and we want to set a standard for the area," Caitlin said.

Caitlin said Idaho's tattoo shop regulations are essentially non-existent compared to Portland's stringent policies.

"We want to keep that standard that's the highest in the U.S.," said Jacob, who has also worked in Boston, Georgia and New Mexico.

Their Coeur d'Alene shop, which had its grand opening on Feb. 10, has the space to fit up to seven artists.



Above: Jacob Redmond finishes Lauren Grove's tattoo at Heart City Tattoo on Fourth Street in Coeur d'Alene. Jacob and his wife, Caitlin, recently opened the downtown shop which specializes in traditional and cosmetic tattoos.



Right: Lauren Grove gets a tattoo at Heart City Tattoo.

Photos by LISA JAMES/NIBJ



Photos by LOREN BENOIT/NIBJ

Swiss Tech Precision USA employee Anthony Pangallo collects and inspects knife blades inside the Swiss Tech warehouse in Post Falls.

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"Veterans have the ability to learn and think in the heat of the battle," said Frazer, who served with the Army in Afghanistan. "There's a lot of leadership skills you learn in the military that also apply to civilian life."

Choate, who owned a different manufacturing company in Spokane called Western Systems, was introduced to Schneider through a mutual friend when Schneider was preparing to retire partially due to medical issues. Choate then bought the company nearly two years ago.

"The company was probably six months away from locking its doors," Choate said. "I like to build companies, so I bought it and started reorganizing. It's been fascinating."



Nguyen Minh watches closely as a machine stamps parts. Swiss Tech Precision USA uses a specialty type of metal stamping called fineblanking that allows it to make massive amounts of intricate parts that can have complex shapes and holes.