Ore. family's billiard company a global name

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Of the roughly 45,000 pool tables sold in the U.S. last year, 5,000 were forged in Oregon using domestic raw materials in a family-owned shop.

As Terry Moldenhauer, sales manager at Golden West Billiards, gave a tour of the factory just north of Milwaukie one recent afternoon, U.S. and Oregon State University flags hung from the ceiling, capturing the national and local allegiances that have kept this family-run company alive for more than 40 years.

All of Golden West's handiwork, from woodcutting to final laminating, is done at 5505 S.E. Johnson Creek Blvd., where the company moved in 1992 after more than two decades in the Los Angeles area. But the privately held company's customers are spread across the globe, from Washington, D.C., to Saudi Arabia. They accounted for annual revenue that surpassed $1 million last year, according to Moldenhauer.

"We've sold tables to every movie star and big athlete you can think of," said Golden West's president, Don Brostoski. "In fact, we just made a real tall pool table for Randy Johnson," the 6-foot-10 retired major league pitcher.

Moldenhaur said Golden West tables have been in dozens of movies, purchased by scores of A-list celebrities and rented one time by the Rolling Stones.

The in-house craftsmanship comes with a hefty price tag, climbing all the way to $70,000 for antique restorations. The company sells some of its more affordable tables on Craigslist, starting around $1,500.

For comparison, the typical price of a prefabricated pool table from a chain retailer hovers just under $1,000. Those tables might be more economical, but Golden West says its cachet and big-name clients are a testament to quality. Even the tables it sells on Craigslist have customizable features, with variations in cloth, wood inlays and table rails. Assembly takes up to six weeks, depending on the order's complexity.

No matter how granular the wood detailing, all plywood is sourced from North Pacific Lumber in Portland. For hardwood, the company turns to Sherwood-based Hardwood Industries, which gets cherry, maple and pine from the East Coast. For exotic mahogany, Hardwood Industries imports from South America and Africa, adding a caveat to Golden West's homegrown approval seal for special orders.

Yet even in a highly specialized market, the economy has battered Golden West some; the company has halved its production workers, who make up about 80 percent of the company's employees, from 60 to 30.

The cuts have not put a damper on production efficiency: The company has seen demand decline over the past couple of years, notably among national dealers in states that have been hamstrung by debt and low consumer spending. But the company's staff adjusts with demand, said Jackie Stansgar, the company's sale representative.

Nearly all of Golden West's employees, who typically earn $15 to $20 an hour, migrated to the Portland area with the company 18 years ago. Jeff Snyder, 31, of Portland is one of the few local hires. On his way to apply for another job eight years ago, Snyder passed Golden West and then spun a U-turn.

"I walked in at the right time," he said, adding that Golden West hired him in the shipping department shortly after he applied. He has been the company's wood turner, carving table legs on a spinning lathe, for four years. "Seeing the whole chain of command right in one office is a pretty amazing thing," Snyder said.

In what was once an aircraft manufacturing plant, with metal bridge cranes still hanging on roof trusses, Moldenhauer drifted through clouds of wood chips and battled the earsplitting grind of industrial sanding machines and wood saws to underscore the company's determined resistance to outsourcing.

"Pool tables are like a mathematical equation; most people don't understand the geometrics involved. So big retailers turn to China and Vietnam to do the work," he said as he passed a wall sign that read "Import" with a diagonal strike through the word and "Made in the U.S.A." below the cross-out.

"We just don't mess with it," he said of offshore production. "Because once you start, even if it's for something really small, you end up sending more and more of it overseas. We might lose some money, but we're not about to compromise our integrity."

Moldenhauer and Brostoski met in junior high in the '50s in Southern California, where they both worked in Brostoski's father's pool shop and cleaned and repaired pool tables at local Elks clubs. When Brostoski was in his 20s, he started Golden West, which then specialized in small repairs and refurbishing antique pool tables. The company grew into an independent manufacturing shop about 20 years before its relocation to Oregon.

Don's son Robert Brostoski, 36, manages production for Golden West, and Don's grandkids offer a hand in the shop on occasion. Brostoski hopes to keep the company in the family and maintain all production on Johnson Creek.

Even with an international footprint, Golden West's local, mom-and-pop ethic and artisan approach have piqued the interest of many local players.

Randy Reynolds, 56, of Gresham, who opened Cross Bank Saloon there in March, bought four tables from Golden West to add sophisticated flavor.

"My patrons find them phenomenal," he said. "You're paying a price, but it's for a

piece of history. I tell it to everyone and anyone who comes in, and they're always impressed." He said four pool leagues have moved to his bar for the handcrafted tables.

Jimm Pierson of Tualatin bought his first pool table from Golden West 14 years ago and recently upgraded. "My dad grew up in pool halls in Detroit as a pool hustler, so when I built a house, I had to have a room just for shooting pool," said Pierson, 60, senior vice president at the Portland branch of MorganStanley SmithBarney. "These tables are touched by a lot of human hands. They're artistically unlike any other."

Glenn Dahl, 56, president of Dave's Killer Bread in Milwaukie, also plays on his second table from Golden West. He said the company customized a table that matched his quirks.

"It was solid without being ostentatious," he said. "Plus, they were local, and that means a lot to me."

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