



LEADING EDGE STRUCTURAL STEEL FABRICATOR

Ben's Structural Fabrication was founded in 1959, when skilled blacksmith Benjamin Schwartz opened up shop in Minnesota. Now, the Waite Park, Minnesota based business has entered its third generation of family leadership, employs 40 people, and serves clients all over the United States.





Written by Samita Sarkar

Ben's Structural Fabrication offers estimating, detailing, structural fabrication, and miscellaneous metal fabrication services to architects, engineers, and other contractors all over the United States, customized to suit their projects.

"We pride ourselves on honest communication and treating people fairly along with providing a high quality product to our customers, all under the umbrella of doing it safely and efficiently," says Craig Miller, Vice President of Business Development.

Ben's Structural Fabrication has completed a number of large-scale projects recently, building a nationwide reputation as it helps to build industrial, commercial, government, and health-care facilities. It is currently working on a performing arts center in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, a venue that will feature rehearsal rooms and two large performance theatres.

Last year, Ben's completed an event center in Watford City, North Dakota, constructing two hockey rinks, a field house, a gymnasium, an indoor pool and waterslide, a gymnastics center, and meeting rooms.

Another one of Ben's project highlights occurred in the winter of 2012–2013, when Ben's worked on a project for South Dakota State University. The firm built an indoor football practice

facility with extremely large trusses fabricated in its facility for a 280-foot clear span, which were a whopping 14 feet tall.

The full service structural steel firm has a unique company history. When it first opened its doors in St. Cloud, Minnesota, it was known as Ben's Tool and Iron Works. It focused on the granite industry, repairing tools used in local quarries. In the 1960s, Schwartz expanded his product line to include ornamental handrails for residential customers.

In the late 1960s, Gary Schwartz of the second generation joined the business fulltime. Ben's started to take on more commercial iron work, such as railings and stairways for business use, and cemetery flowerpot holders. By the 1970s, the business entered its current niche in the structural steel market, and in the 1980s, moved into a new, 7,200 square-foot facility in Waite Park. Gary Schwartz's eldest son, Rob Schwartz, joined the business fulltime in 1989, with a focus on aggressive growth in the structural steel market, the team—which then consisted of seven employees—added a 5,000 square-foot addition to the building.

Throughout the 90s, the firm grew quickly, and the team expanded its facility three additional times. Rob and Gary Schwartz bought the final stocks from the original owner, Ben ▶



► Schwartz. In 1992, the current company President Ann Schwartz took on a CFO role to manage the business' finance. Five years later, in 1997, the company bought its first automated beam line—an important addition that greatly increased the company's efficiency and enhanced customer satisfaction of those who chose their materials to be "Built by Ben's."

But it wasn't completely smooth sailing from there. Just after 2001, when Ben's Structural Fabrication (then known as Ben's Tool and Iron) moved to its current location, a 36,000 square-foot facility built for efficiency in product flow, an economic dip in the industry led to a 30 percent decrease in sales. By 2003, Ben's went from employing 15, to once again employing seven. The team knew that measures would have to be taken to help the business to flourish once more.

In 2002, Rob Schwartz was named as President, the company then hired Craig Miller (currently Vice President) to attract new customers to the experienced business, allowing Gary Schwartz to solely focus on estimating. The business began to grow again, reaching 11 million in annual sales. Due to the increased volume, the company hired three detailers in Romania through Steel Plus Network, a national association. Those skilled detailers remain with the business to this day. Rob Schwartz and his younger brother Ben Schwartz (of the third generation) bought out Gary Schwartz in 2007, and set a new long-term goal of reaching \$15 million in sales.

Ben's Structural Fabrication added its first fully automated layout marking machine called the PeddiWriter a few years ago, becoming the first and only structural steel fabricator in the state of Minnesota to possess one. The PeddiWriter does the work of a team of layout personnel, removing the traditional length of time associated with manually laying out a profile. With its dual torch design, parts flow through the machine one after another at rapid production rates. The one-of-a-kind machine is the first to combine layout marking with CNC automation strictly for the production of structural steel profiles.

Ben's Structural Fabrication eclipsed that \$15 million-dollar sales goal in 2015. Earlier this year, Ann Schwartz was promoted to the President's position, and Jason Hansen joined the team as Vice President of Operations.

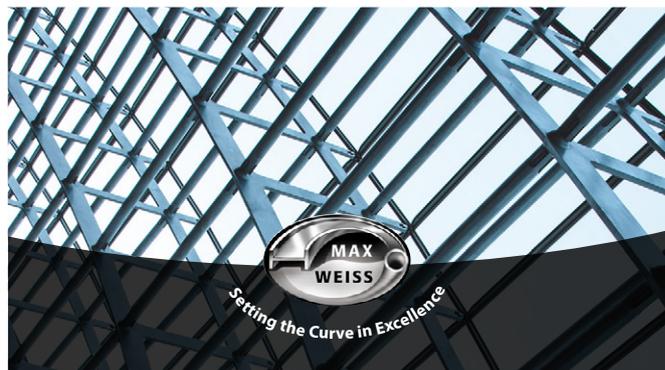
"Customers continue to trust Ben's again and again because they have come to depend on the firm's commitment to safety."

“Our people are what make this company great. From our owners, who have a commitment to reinvesting in the future, to our VPs—both Craig Miller and Jason Hansen—who have a grand sense of the big picture and the rest of our over 40 employees who come to work each day committed to put out a quality product. There is a great sense of pride that is evident from the top down. Our people are key,” Ann Schwartz, President, tells Construction in Focus.

“Ben’s was one of the first companies in the region to be integrated between detailing and production software.”

Now, the business has set its sights on a sales volume of over \$20 million dollars. With its new facility and state-of-the-art equipment, this goal is projected to be reached in three years.

“The current facility is vastly different in the way that the product moves efficiently through the building. Our product material handling is automated, and our flow of product essentially comes in one end of the building and goes out the other in a linear, efficient fashion,” says Miller. ▶▶



Max Weiss Company started in **1946** as a small black smith shop. **Seven decades** and **four generations** of family ownership later, **Max Weiss Company** is a market leader in large metal forming, with proprietary equipment for large rolled structural steel products, and hot-formed and fabricated metal shapes.

They are well known for forming metals to the tightest radii in the industry, with minimal distortion and maximum consistency. They also offer value-added services as being a one stop shop with complete fabrication and welding capabilities.

www.maxweiss.com

 University of North Dakota



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“Ben’s Structural Fabrication added its first fully automated layout marking machine called the PeddiWriter a few years ago.”

► Efficiency is not the only quality that has given Ben’s Structural Fabrication its staying power throughout the decades it has been in existence; customers continue to trust Ben’s again and again because they have come to depend on the firm’s commitment to safety and quality of fabrication. Ben’s uses Triple Check Redundancy Procedures, keeping its error rate at a minute level while maximizing the safety of the team, the clients, and the end consumers who will end up frequenting these facilities that Ben’s helps to develop.

“Basically, Triple Check Redundancy means that everything that happens in our shop is looked at by three different people at three different points in time. This is to make sure that it was made correctly and leaves our facility in the right condition to be put together in the field. We’ve got multiple sets of eyes looking at a piece that gets loaded on a truck to deliver to a job site,” explains Miller.

Also speaking to Ben’s desire to ensure the quality of its team and customers is its AISC (American Institute of Steel Construction) certification, which it has maintained for the last eight years. Established in 1921 to serve the construction industry,

the AISC is a non-profit technical institute and trade association that sets the quality standard for the U.S.’s structural steel sector with the mission of making it the material of choice.

“We first achieved AISC certification in 2009, and that was a huge accomplishment for the company. We have an annual audit with an independent team that comes and measures our plant against that standard. It’s a continual process in quality management system,” says Miller.

Ben’s is further distinguished from its competitors by its own in-house detailing department. This allows the firm to be quicker and more responsive for customers and get involved in projects earlier on. The department uses high-end software to create infrastructural designs. This allows Ben’s to help customers with conceptual real-time estimating based on an architect or engineer’s conceptual design. Ben’s can import that particular design into its system and provide clients with real-time cost modeling analysis to let them know whether the project should proceed, or if they need to make changes.

Always striving to be on the forefront, Ben’s was one of the first companies in the region to be fully integrated between



detailing and production software. The firm uses Tekla Structures as its detailing software and FabSuite as its production software, which handles estimation, purchasing, production control, barcode labeling, inventory, project management, and drawing control. "Those two softwares are mutually compatible, without human hand keying and interfacing. Information transfer is automatic, which reduces time and potential for errors," Miller adds.

Going forward, as Ben's continues toward its goal of \$20 million dollars in revenue, the people at Ben's, who always operate with the customers' needs in mind, also plan to continue to improve the company's processes and automate its miscellaneous metals department in addition to structural steel. Customers can look forward to Ben's adding a three-dimensional laser layout to the facility to make it all the more efficient in stairs and railing work as well.

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"The focus of the company, especially now in the third generation of ownership, is to be more and more efficient with the machines that we purchase, and have more capital investment go back into this company to make some of the hard work easier, and even safer," remarks Miller.

Institutions that require structural steel solutions are welcome to contact Ben's Structural Fabrication at www.builtbybens.com. ■





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