



Wednesday, February 22, 2012

Salvage yard cleans up with metal recycling

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Editor

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THEN:

Nick Tommer of Ephrata's Tommer Construction bought Moses Lake Iron and Metal in 2005.

Business was good, with plenty of sources for scrap metal in the Moses Lake area - farming, processing and industrial equipment ready for the scrap yard, and individual customers looking to recycle aluminum cans or other household metal goods.

Tommer soon started looking for some other opportunities.

He found one in the Wenatchee Valley, where he saw a need for a full-scale, state-of-the-art recycling and salvage yard, handling everything from aluminum cans to heavy equipment.

In 2010, he and Kevin Running, who had been managing the Moses Lake site, started building a brand new salvage yard on 3.86 acres in the Batterman Industrial Park in East Wenatchee, next to J&K Earthworks, H2Precast and Columbia River Steel.

They built a scale house, added a scale and put up the 120-foot-by-80-foot processing building, which took about seven months and, according to the building permits, about \$350,000, before opening the gates in September 2010.

Running, splitting his attention between East Wenatchee and Moses Lake, brought in Christina Warren as metals specialist and office manager, with the duties of handling the office, checking and setting prices each day, helping customers and answering questions.

She had started at the Moses Lake metal yard about five years before that, working the torch, cutting large bulk metal into smaller pieces, and then taking on other duties. Her experience makes her a key component of the new salvage yard, Running said.

Within two weeks of opening at Wenatchee Valley Salvage and Recycling, the four employees on the payroll were strapped to handle demand.

"Word spread and it didn't take long. Within two months, we were inundated," Warren said.

Running added a second cutter in the first two weeks. By the end



Christina Warren and Kevin Running keep tabs on the metal scrap pile at Wenatchee Valley Salvage and Recycling at 295 Urban Industrial Ave., East Wenatchee. The company, which opened in September 2010, pays customers for scrap metal — from aluminum cans and screen doors to old bicycles and washing machines. Before long, Wenatchee Valley Salvage and Recycling will add car crushing to its services, which should keep the crew even busier if the waiting list is any indication.



A cutter takes the torch to cut the metal into pieces that can be loaded and shipped for recycling at Wenatchee Valley Salvage and

of the first month, the crew had grown to about 10.

NOW:

What is now a 12-person crew is processing between 100 and 150

tons of metal a week, a combination of bulk ferrous scrap metal and the more valuable non-ferrous metal (copper, aluminum and brass).

Recycling, which has been staying very busy since it opened in fall 2010.

"It's remained pretty steady. It's been good that way. We haven't had to lay off anyone because it was too slow," Running said.

Warren, recently promoted to assistant manager, said she is enjoying the work.

"I didn't anticipate enjoying it as much as I do," she said.

The process for customers is similar to taking garbage to the transfer station, the vehicle is weighed when it comes in and weighed when it goes out, and the difference is how much the transaction is worth. At the salvage yard, though, rather than the customer paying to drop off their garbage, they are being paid the market value of the metal. That metal, then, is processed by the salvage yard crew - cut into pieces that are then loaded on a truck and shipped to the Seattle area.

One of the best parts is explaining when customers ask how much they have to pay to get rid of their metal, Warren said.

"No, we pay you," she tells them, which typically is welcomed with a smile.

The checks written can range from a few dollars to a couple hundred dollars.

Despite being open more than a year now, she said that is still one of the most common questions. The other, of course, is the going rate.

Answering that depends on the type of scrap metal and the market value that day, which is determined on the global market.

Warren checks the price list each day with the company on the west side of the mountains that accepts shipments from East Wenatchee.

"We send a load every day," Running said.

In November, the price suddenly dropped 30 percent - which created some concerns.

"We were worried people would just wait until the prices came back up," Running said. And business did slow down, but not as much as it could have.

"We were forewarned it was coming," he said, but it still hurt. "We didn't pass all of the loss on to our customers. Fortunately the prices are creeping back up now."

Running said he works closely with his neighbors, including Waste Management of Wenatchee, which operates the landfill just up the road.

"We have bins there that people can put stuff into. And we take stuff to them," he said. "I love the idea of providing a service. We take a lot of pride that we are contributing to cleaning up the valley. We have put lots of smiles on peoples faces. We've been pumping gobs of dollar bills into the community."

And customers continue to roll in at a steady pace, with new customers mixing with the regulars.

On the nonferrous side, some of the salvage company's biggest customers are electricians, plumbers and construction companies hoping to recoup costs by recycling old wiring and fixtures from remodeling projects. The price paid for copper and brass is higher than the ferrous scrap metal. While that's good for customers, it presents temptations to others interested in selling some "found" items to turn a quick buck.

Because of that, Warren said, she has local law enforcement departments on speed dial - and calls them a couple times a month, though sometimes it's more like a couple times a day.

"We work hand-in-hand with law enforcement. We're on a first-name basis," she said.

"Christina has a rapport with the Douglas and Chelan county sheriff's offices," Running said. "We don't take anything that's stolen. We run a clean operation. If we suspect something is stolen, we call and they come up." And that holds with the contractors as well.

"The electrical outfits in the valley all bring us their scrap copper. If something comes up missing, they call us and describe it and we keep an eye out for it," he said.

The more typical items being scrapped, though, include rebar, lawn mowers farm equipment, washers and dryers, hot water tanks, bicycles. The biggest thing he recalls coming in to be scrapped was a D-8 Caterpillar. The crew also has cut up pieces of an old bridge.

The salvage crew also goes on the road when necessary, taking their cutting torches and modified log loader used to load metal into the truck. They have helped clean up farmer's scrap pile and an old Entiat warehouse. "I like to think we're 100 percent full service," he said.

The strangest items that have gone through scrap yard include two metal coffins - used.

"We didn't ask," he said, "but I think they were just used for display."

They also had a 1928 printing press, which they set aside for several months thinking someone might want to buy it. Eventually, though, it went the way of the rest of the scrap metal.

They do retail some of the metal, for those interested, but it hasn't been something they have promoted much, Running said. Sometimes regular customers will ask for them to keep an eye open for a particular type of metal for a particular project they're working on, he said.

The next big step, which will make the salvage and recycling center truly full service, is the addition of the car crusher, which is expected in the next couple of months.

The license and permitting is underway, waiting for the completion of the location to handle the vehicle prep work, as well as the paperwork associated with checking titles.

"We're working closely with the Washington State Patrol on that," he said.

But it won't happen until everything is ready.

"I expect when we kick open the doors on accepting cars, we'll be very busy. We are scared," Warren said. "We could have cars stacked to the top of the hill."

With 4 acres of space, storage is limited, so the concern is making sure everything is in order to get the crushed vehicles shipped out as fast as they come in.

"I have a notebook of names," she said, of people with cars ready for the crusher. "It won't take long for them to start stacking up."

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