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## *Carrying the Torch*



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Reprint Edition



# Carrying the Torch

By Jim Wilder  
Undercar Digest Editor

“Huth is a torch that keeps on burning. It’s been passed on a few times, but it will be here for a long time.”



The new 2600 HD model is designed to bend heavy-wall round, square and even some rectangular tubing. Shown is a 2-inch square tube with a  $\frac{3}{16}$ -inch wall.

Those are the words of Joe Becker, who along with longtime business associate Tom Hechimovich bought Huth from Midas Corp. in April 2005.

Now known as Huth, Division of Hartford Benders Inc., the company has the manufacturing and accounting expertise of its predecessors along

with the flexibility of a small business. The company continues to improve upon its hydraulic tube benders and expanders that have been the backbone of muffler-shop business. In addition, the company has been developing new equipment for other markets including agriculture, HVAC, furniture, off-road industrial, over-the-road trucks and portable carports.

Becker was plant manager at Huth when he received word that the parent company planned to spin off its manufacturing divisions. Hechimovich, owner of a precision machining company that had performed contract work for Midas for many years and had even designed bender prototypes for Huth in the early '80s, also heard of the pending sale. He asked Becker whether he wanted to be his partner and buy it.

“I told Tom that I really wasn’t interested,” Becker said.

He figured he’d just stay on as plant manager for whoever bought the plant. Shortly afterward a light bulb went on – chances were high that Huth would move out of state if someone locally didn’t buy it. More than 200 workers at the Midas muf-



Co-owners Tom Hechimovich (left) and Joe Becker pose with the new Huth Model 2600 HD heavy-duty bender.

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fler plant across the street already were about to lose their jobs, and Becker didn't want the same to happen to the dozen highly skilled and experienced employees at Huth.

"Once I realized what was really going down I gave Tom a call," Becker said. With the help of a local bank the purchase was a "done deal."

Huth benders have undergone numerous changes since Gerry Huth founded the company in the late 1950s and then sold it to Midas in 1966, but Becker noted that the Huth name still stands for quality.

"Over the years we've had more than a dozen bender models," he said. "Right now we have it narrowed down to three models for about 95% of our business. The HB-10, which comes with a complete die package and operates with manual knee activation, is a great entry-level unit. Model 2806 and Model 2008 benders are designed for high-volume shops that need quick, precise bending and end finishing."

Both benders come with automatic depth-of-bend selection, meaning the operator can select the degree of bend, such as 37°, and the bender does the rest. The 2806 is popular with both shops and the agricultural industry for making gates and portable fences. The top-of-the-line 2008 unit includes an industrial hydraulic cylinder that has the highest life expectancy. It also has an auxiliary on/off switch on the swager side as well as the standard switch on the opposite side. Other features include a deluxe tool tray for dies and back shoes, and an additional tray for swager parts.

Another model growing in popularity is the 2600 HD, especially designed for production work that involves heavy-wall tubing. It comes with hardened bushings and heavy-duty gates.

"All of our benders can perform the same operations for shops," Becker said. "It's just a matter of how it gets done and what types of cylinders and motors we install on those models."

Becker estimates that more than 20,000 Huth benders are in use today. More than 5,000 of them have



**Debbie Daley (left) of accounting and Mary Rusch, office manager, usually are the first individuals to greet customers calling or visiting the plant.**

been produced since 1996, when Becker started work at the Huth plant. This doesn't mean Becker has a mere 11 years' experience with the bender; he worked for Midas for 35 years, starting at age 19 in the muffler assembly plant.

"In the mid-'70s I went into product engineering as a technician," he said. "I used a Huth bender to build all of our prototypes, so I fell in love with that machine. It was a good learning experience for me. I would be the guy who would make some changes and pass it on to Huth, such as the cutouts to the gates to make the bends closer. I remember to this day taking a power hacksaw, cutting the corner off of that gate to show them. The bends on foreign cars kept getting tighter and tighter, so we made some modifications.

"Probably the biggest change we've had is in the early 1990s, when 3-inch diameters came



**David Rohlinger of accounting and purchasing joined Huth from Midas Corp.**

about," Becker said. "We had to change our philosophy on the design of our dies. Tubing is almost all aluminized now, where it used to be cold-rolled AKDQ.

Aluminized presented some friction problems, but we made some changes on the dies to compensate for that. We changed compression between the radius dies and the back shoes and even the dimensions on the radius of the back shoes."

Becker noted that bender and parts sales remain strong and that, because of a changing exhaust industry, he sees future growth. Because the stainless-steel systems last so long, many suppliers aren't keeping some of the older-model inventory.

"If you get a vehicle that's 10 or 12 years old, some just don't stock the parts, so what are your options? The IPC/Huth program cards, which I own, include about 8,000 applications. They follow the original equipment as close as possible. That's the only way you're going to put something pre-1980 back to original. We have data going back to the Model T's and Model A's."

With that, Becker notes that the vehicle-restoration industry also is getting interested in his bender and bend-data cards.

"When I was in engineering back in the '70s and



'80s, when I visited a muffler shop everybody in that shop knew how to use the pipe bender. Today every town has a "Johnny" who is an expert at pipe bending, but these fellows don't want to share their trade. Now the craft seems to be coming back. We're helping that happen. We've put out an excellent training DVD that we will send out to anyone who wants one."

"With a little bit of experience, it's amazing what you can do," Hechimovich said. "The DVD not only shows you how to use a program card; it shows you how to pattern-bend and some tricks of the trade – how to make a 180° bend, or to stop crushing from using a half shoe. Plus, it covers all the end-finishing techniques."

Huth has changed with the times, the biggest change in recent years being its inventory management. Huth has become a just-in-time supplier to its warehouse distributors. The company stocks an average of a dozen HB-10 benders at all times, along with a wide assortment of parts and other popular models of equipment. When a shop orders a bender, Huth normally drop-ships it directly to the shop in a special crate that can be taken apart with only a 9/16-inch wrench.

"Delivery is where Huth shines," Becker said. "We're all about getting a call here at 4:30 Friday afternoon from a guy in California who needs a special die or a part to finish a job Saturday morning. Mary takes the order, we take the part off the shelf, pack it and ship it, and the guy has the part Saturday morning. He's happy and we're happy. Our UPS driver picks up about 4:30 p.m. Central time, and we've got such a good relationship with him we might ask him to

wait a few minutes or ask him to come back an hour later – and he does. We have everything on our shelf to do all the end finishing. We keep up with that: female ball, male ball, flare, flat flare; we've got everything covered in the exhaust business. Many times we can help someone repair a competitor's bender."

The company also takes pride in its tech support.

"I always tell people, when you call here for technical support you may very well be talking with the same person who built your bender. If there's a highly technical question they page Mark Purman of R&D or Joe Takacs, team leader in our assembly department, and Bob Lechner, team leader in the machine shop, is used for special tooling requests."

Over the years, Huth's WDs and their customers have become the R&D sounding board for enhancements to benders and ex-

panders, Becker said. "Everybody has their ideas on what to do with the benders. We've come up with tooling they've requested. If it takes off, we'll put it in our inventory as a stocking item."

Becker personally meets with his distributors and is available to assist them with any of their open-house activities when schedules allow.

Helping out local manufacturers has also helped Huth expand its business.

"It gives us an opportunity to use our own equipment and make improvements that can be passed to our customers, such as new tooling design and faster cycle times, which are critical in the manufacturing business," Becker said. "Recently, the local radio station had some damage done to a very expensive telescopic antenna. We designed some special segment sets and made an extended shaft that al-



Mark Jeffords welds a sequence-valve mounting bracket onto a bender frame.



A swager box is welded robotically at the plant.



Tony Kreuser picks parts from a wide selection of inventory. Products are shipped as late as 4:30 p.m. Central time – and sometimes even later.



Lathe operator Jason Graef's duties include machining collet holders.



Huth has more than 8,000 bend-data cards dating as far back as the Model T.

lowed us to expand deep into a tube. This technology can now be used in the repair and/or manufacturing of heat exchangers.

"We've done a lot in the end-finishing areas, from our simple hand-held expander that runs on shop air to an expander that's capable of expanding up to 10 inches ID for industrial use.

Recently, we designed a swaging machine for a header manufacturer that makes header collectors.

"The durability of our bender is number one," Becker said. "It's nothing for us to get a call from a



Swaging equipment is designed to expand from 1- to 10-inch tubing.

guy who has a machine that's 25 to 30 years old, and we still have the directional valve or die that he needs to keep it working. We have tooling, whether your machine was built in 1960 or 2007 – they're interchangeable. They may have to drill and tap an extra hole, but we can fix any bender out there from day one. That's what we are all about. Our plans are to grow and to continue to serve our customers." **UD**



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