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A real tin man

He helps people restore old tractors, and that's a rare thing indeed

By Amanda Dyslin Free Press Staff Writer

GOOD THUNDER — Greg Lillo never imagined he would acquire fame by working with his dad in their quiet metal shop in rural Good Thunder.



John Cross

Greg Lillo of rural Good Thunder custom makes tin tractor parts for vintage tractors that are being restored. The service is so rare, he said, that he's one of the only people in the United States who does it. Lillo runs his business, Midwest Tractor Tin, out of the same shop his dad runs, a metalsmith business called Timeless Images in Metal.

Not "fame" in the sense that everyone in America knows Lillo's name and trade. But those in tractor-restoring community — whether they be in Wisconsin, Florida, Pennsylvania or even Germany — probably have heard of the rare service he provides.

"I thought this would be a hobby," Lillo said. But just two and a half years after his experiment of replicating a grill and side panel on a vintage tractor for a man working to restore it, Lillo's "hobby" has turned into a full-time career. And a lucrative one, at that.

"I found there was more work than a guy could believe," he said.

Lillo knew he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his dad, Arnie Lillo, and become a metalsmith since he was 11 years old. He grew up watching his dad do sheet metal work in the shop behind their home, where the two still work today.

Lillo worked in the sheet metal business for years and was employed at Jones Metal Products in Mankato when a customer requested he fabricate a couple replacement parts for his old tractor.

"It looked like a challenge, and I'd never done something like that before, so I thought I'd try it," he said.

The project turned out to be more difficult than he imagined and took about four months to complete. Measurements of the old parts had to be taken, the tin had to be bent and pounded to look just right, and paint had to be mixed to match the right shade of red and applied to the new pieces.

"It takes a real talent and a lot of time," he said.

The end product matched the tractor so well that word of Lillo's talent spread. Calls started coming in from area residents requesting side panels and other framework for their old tractors.

Lillo learned from his customers that while it's difficult to find original vintage tractor parts when restoring tractors, it's even more difficult to find a metalsmith who custom makes replicas of those old parts. Lillo thinks he's one of the only people in the United States to provide the service.

"Nobody else is making these," he said.

Orders started to back up for months. After he established a routine and set up a computer program to help with measurements and cutting, it took just a handful of hours to make a part such as a side panel. Still, the number of requests were more than he could handle while working a full-time day job at Jones.

Eventually, Lillo had enough job security in his private tractor tin business, which he named Midwest Tractor Tin, to quit the day job.

Currently, Lillo's so busy he has to skip his annual fishing trip to Alaska with his dad. About five months of orders are backed up, including a 1953 John Deere 620 Orchard tractor from Wisconsin that needs an entire new frame.

And Lillo refuses to rush the work.

"The quality of work is priceless," he said. *"I will spend whatever time it takes to get it right."*

Lillo's done tractor parts for about 35 kinds of vintage tractors from the 1920s through the 1950s. He owns hundreds of tractor books to learn more about his craft and to assist him when working on a type of tractor he hasn't dealt with before.

The cost of parts vary, but usually run between \$250 to \$500. He'll charge about \$2,500 for the 1953 John Deere Orchard frame.

All he needs to replicate a part is a model, which means he gets old bent-up rusted grills and panels sent to him weekly from all over the country.

Lillo's work can be seen at antique tractor shows "everywhere," he said. He's also considering doing work for an Iowa historical society next summer.