

## Amish Cooperative In Second Year Of Business

By Nancy Leasman

When a mattress company went out of business and abandoned its factory in Bertha, Minn., Bob and Mary Larson saw the empty building as an opportunity.

"We didn't have the ways or means to do anything when the factory first closed," Bob says. But when Mary inherited some family money, they started to seriously consider the idea of turning the building into a place for local Amish farmers to market their crafts and produce. He was acquainted with several Amish farmers who came into his store. He'd seen them and their families selling baked goods and crafts from roadside stalls. He knew it was a struggle to be out there rain or shine.

Bob met with local farmer Amos Yoder, Jr., and kicked the idea around. Amos thought it could work. "We had an initial meeting with the Amish clans from Bertha, Clarissa and Staples," Bob says. He had sign-up sheets ready and the families, who had traveled up to 30 buggy miles to be there, formed a cooperative.

The Amish families rent display space

and determine their own pricing. The Co-op is staffed by three part-time non-Amish employees, as well as Bob and Mary. The enterprise opened August 5, 2010. By the time it closed at the end of the growing season, 50 families had profited from the cooperative effort.

"Twenty-seven families from five communities are selling now," said Bridget, one of the part-time employees, at the end of May. "We'll get more later in the summer when the vegetables are ready."

The Amish Country Co-op, as it's now known, sells everything from handmade spoons to complete bedroom sets; potholders to quilts; and pies and candy to pickles and potatoes. A greenhouse is the latest addition and Amish green thumbs have filled the space with hanging flowerpots as colorfully arranged as the pieced quilts.

The building has several rooms of display space as well as a community event center. "It's open to anyone for weddings, anniversaries and private functions," says Bob Larson. Folks in Bertha are happy to have a place to



Bob and Mary Larson turned an abandoned mattress factory into a place for local Amish farmers to market their crafts and produce.

congregate and the Co-op has increased traffic to the small community.

The plan is for the Co-op to be open from mid-April through the end of October each year. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Fridays and 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays. As is the Amish way, the store is closed on Sundays.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Amish Country Co-op, Bob and Mary Larson, County Road 23, Bertha, Minn. 56437 (ph 218 924-2520; www.amishcountrycoop.com.)



Amish families rent display space inside the building and sell everything from handmade spoons to quilts.



A Nevada company called Characters Unlimited specializes in custom-made, life-like robotic characters that can set a farm-based business apart.

## Custom-Made Robotic Characters

By Dee Goerge, Contributing Editor

A talking pumpkin or cow might be just the thing to make your farm-based business memorable enough that customers come back – and tell their friends.

Characters Unlimited is in the business of making an impression with hundreds of moving, talking characters to choose from.

"We specialize in electro mechanical animatronics," says owner Olaf Stanton. "They run on electricity, are affordable, and you can change the message. Or you can speak live to children through them."

He made his first characters with his stepfather, who sold them out of a truck to gift shops and other tourist businesses. Stanton combined that skill with a business administration degree to start Characters Unlimited in Boulder City, Nev., in 1986.

The company prides itself on creating lifelike characters and selling them at a reasonable price. Prices start at \$500 for inanimate characters, but 80 percent of sales are for moving and/or talking characters, Stanton says. For around \$4,900 they can create a character that talks when it detects motion, moves its eyes, head and arms, and comes with a two-way mike.

Stanton's website includes hundreds of

faces and characters available in a variety of themes: farming, Halloween, animals, people, dinosaurs, etc.

"Our most popular face is No. 69, the old timer Ernie," Stanton says. "He has a grey beard and is dressed up in a variety of ways."

Favorite critter characters include buffalo and moose heads – and the ever-popular talking chicken. Talking trees work well for orchards and nurseries.

Customers can record their own messages or Characters Unlimited can make pre-recordings for them.

"We do a lot of fortune teller machines like in the movie 'Big,'" Stanton adds. "People put in money for a card, or a business can have coupons or advertising or sell tickets." The animated machines sell for \$4,500 to \$7,500.

If you can't find what you are looking for on the website, Stanton says his workers are up to the challenge of making custom characters to fit any operation, whether it's a nut for a pecan orchard or a strange character for a Halloween spook house.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Characters Unlimited, 709 Foothill Court, Boulder City, Nev. 89005 (ph 800 489-1686; www.charactersunlimitedinc.com).



They have hundreds of moving, talking characters to choose from.



An old timer named Ernie has a grey beard and is dressed up in a variety of ways (left). The company's website includes hundreds of faces and characters available in a variety of themes, including farming, Halloween, animals, people, dinosaurs, etc.

