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Meadowlark does photonic research, design in Frederick

A lark in a meadow grows over long haul to diverse optics firm

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In 1979, researcher Tom Baur began working late into the evenings in the spare bedroom of his rural Longmont home.

Baur's work at the National Center for Atmospheric Research on a project measuring the magnetic fields in the sun's spots led him to design a device called a Pockels cell. He soon realized that other astronomers had a need for the polarization equipment.

"Since other people seemed to want them, I decided it would be fun to start a commercial venture," he said.

So he did, working out of his house after his daily duties at NCAR were done.

The business grew quickly, so Baur expanded into his barn and eventually into the chicken coop, all the while adding staff and products to the company's roster.

It was the business's surroundings, and its chance beginnings that gave it its name.

"It was in a meadow and it was a bit of a lark," Baur jokes.

It was in the days of the chicken coop expansion that Baur decided Meadowlark Optics needed someone with more of a business background to guide it. Not only had Baur never run a business before, he also had never worked for a for-profit business entity. His work history included stints as a teacher and a researcher, but never a president or CEO.

In 1995, retired IBM manufacturing director Garry Gorsuch joined the company to serve as president. He accepted the job despite the fact that his office was in a converted chicken coop.

"Garry's been key to our success," Baur said. "There were a lot of things about how companies are organized that I was struggling with."

With Gorsuch at the business helm and Baur guiding the technology research, Meadowlark Optics has grown into a photonics company with 30 employees, a worldwide client base, revenues of \$3.5 million and recognition as the 2005 Bravo! Entrepreneur Awards winner in the Outlying Areas category.

From coop to high tech

In 1997, Meadowlark moved to a 20,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art manufacturing and research facility in Frederick.

The decision to buy the land and move was an easy one, as was the transition into other optic technologies. Baur said the jump from Pockels cells to wave plates and polarizers was a simple one.

What was more difficult was determining who needed which technologies for what applications.

"I started with very little knowledge of the commercial needs in the marketplace," Baur said.

He likened the company's attempts to expand its market to fishing — just throw



Kristen Bastian, Northern Colorado Business Report

ON A LARK — Meadowlark founder Tom Baur, right, and President Garry Gorsuch moved the company to its Frederick facility in 1997. The company was started in Baur's spare bedroom and grew into a barn and chicken coop prior to the move.

in the hook and see who would bite. The method worked; the technology industry bit. The company's clientele expanded from astronomers and other researchers to high tech companies, especially in the semiconductor segment and tests and measurements sectors.

Meadowlark's transition into the high-tech market rocketed the company's revenues, but also made it susceptible to the technology bust.

"The market swings affect us a lot," Gorsuch said.

The bust hit the company pretty hard. Prior to the lost revenue, the company employed about 50 and had to make some cuts.

"The hardest part was surviving," Baur said.

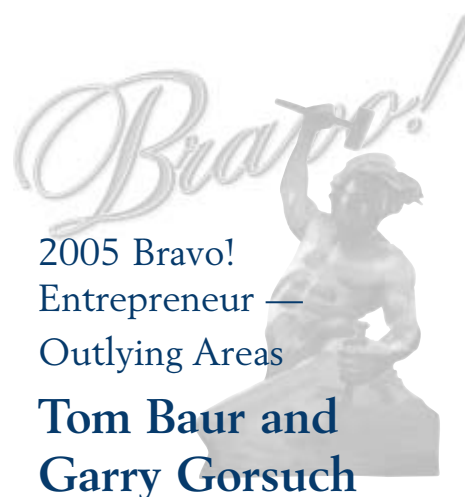
The company is internally funded aside from a small loan through a state-run small business program, and both Baur and Gorsuch were determined for it to remain as such.

Rather than just cut back on everything during the bust, the company took advantage of the situation.

Previously, the company was so busy doing jobs for its clients that there was little or no time for internal research and development. As technology customers cut back spending, though, Meadowlark was able to refocus on developing new products.

The result was new photonics equipment and expanded markets.

"We're better positioned from a products standpoint," Gorsuch said.



New markets opening

With the emergence of biotechnology and biomedical companies and research, Meadowlark has found a promising new market for its products, as components for equipment with a variety of applications, such as determining cell structure and diagnosing glaucoma.

For Meadowlark's executives, the market possibilities are endless.

"Anything that involves light involves photonics," Gorsuch said. "If you include all that, it's a huge industry."

The company has not entirely rebounded from the technology bust yet, but both Baur and Gorsuch agree they are on track to get back to that level of activity. Meadowlark has survived more than two decades and is positioned to continue that through measured growth.

Finalists

Finalists for the Outlying Areas Bravo! Entrepreneur Awards included:

- Larry Wexler, Ecomshare — Estes Park
- Chauncey & Christy Taylor, Johnson's Corner — Johnstown

Past Bravo! winners in the outlying areas have little in common as far as what they produce — ranging from milk to paper products to lawn mowers:

■ 2004 — Mark Hopkins, Peak Industries, Frederick. Founded in 1996. Bought by Delphi Medical in 2004.

■ 2003 — Tom Gray, Gray Oil Co., Fort Lupton. Founded in 1937.

■ 2002 — Israel "Izzy" Salazar, TSN Inc. Founded in 1990. Bought by London-based Bunzl Plc in 2004.

■ 2001 — Joe & Bob Raith, Morning Fresh Farms, Platteville. Founded in 1979.

■ 2000 — Max, Bob and Dean Walker, Walker Manufacturing Co., Timnath. Founded in 1959.

■ 1999 — Louis Lucio, Armadillo Restaurants, LaSalle. Founded in 1972.

■ 1998 — Bill Coleman, Colorado Greenhouse Holdings, Fort Lupton. Founded in 1992. Filed for bankruptcy and sold to Sunblest Management LLC in 2000.

Meadowlark joins this list as a company with long-term staying power.

"We're not a flash-in-the-pan kind of company," Baur said.