

MAKING IT
IN NORTHERN
MICHIGAN**GTAMC**

Who Knew They Made it Here?

BY CLARK MILLER

A natural curiosity about welding has paid off for Darin Fetter, owner of North Shore Iron Works.

In his teens he restored lamps at his father's Traverse City shop, Lamps and More. That gave him experience in basic soldering and wiring.

In his twenties, he studied welding at Northwestern Michigan College while working on large structural projects at Jacklin Steel. Then he picked up a very different type of skill – precision welding – at TS Tool.

“I learned a lot at all of those places,” Fetter said.

Still, he wanted an even wider experience, so in 1998 he attended commercial diving school in Mississippi and then got a job on a 200-foot-long dive boat in the Gulf of Mexico.

“It was fantastic work – excruciating, exhilarating, and I loved every minute of it,” he said.

But things changed when life events unfolded and the physicality of the work took its toll.

“It’s pretty hard on your body, and I was gone 300 days a year, which is not good when you’re planning on getting married,” he said. “Also, I missed my dad.”

Fetter returned to Traverse City in 2001 to start a custom welding business. He began with a few simple tools and a client who wanted a fancy handrail.

“Dad had some space in the back of his warehouse,” he said. “After that first project, it’s been nonstop.”

These days, Fetter works with architects, engineers, home builders and interior designers, most of whom deal with (very) high-end homes. North Shore Iron Works has an impressive website, but now, after nearly 20 years in business, most projects come to him through referrals.

Handrails now account for about 30% of his business. Meanwhile, custom kitchen hoods make up approximately 60% of North Shore’s work. Occasionally, Fetter is called on to make intricate driveway gates, fireplace hardware and sconces.



Asked what business practices have helped him, he said it was a combination of old school finances and conservative purchases.

“I did things the old way for years. I paid cash for everything. I didn’t buy a tool unless I could pay for it right then,” he said. “For the most part, that was wise because if there’s a downturn, no one is going to come and take my tools.”

Recently, he diverged dramatically from that cautious approach by constructing a 4,000-square-foot workshop in Williamsburg. It’s outfitted with in-floor heat and replaces the former site, which he described as a “leaky old Quonset hut.”

Fetter has developed a specialized niche within the construction sector.

“My particular skill set is fairly rare,” he said. “That’s helped me get into a good spot.”

He avoids distractions by getting help with the paperwork shuffle that bogs down most business owners.

“I’m a strong believer in hiring help to manage all the paperwork that comes with owning your own business, for instance. That way I can spend my time doing what I do best,” he said.

Over time, Fetter has honed an aesthetic that allows him to adapt his work to craftsman, American traditional, or ultra-modern styles, for instance.

“I do whatever the project demands,” he said. “Sometimes architects and other folks come to me with very specific design ideas in mind, but I also have clients who more or less write their notes on the back of a napkin.”

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