

These manufacturers of trucks and trailers

think small

STORY & PHOTOS BY TROY SMITH

The folks who frequent cattle and horse shows, rodeos and other livestock events tend to be admirers of handsome trucks and trailers. Catering to that clientele are two Nebraska entrepreneurs whose line of livestock-transportation vehicles reflect buyers' preference for big, fancy rigs. Compared to most dealers, however, Riley Oxford and Troop Bennett have a small product line.

Small is the operative word here because Oxford and Bennett design and manufacture miniature trucks and gooseneck trailers. The scaled-down trucks are patterned after body styles by Ford, General Motors and Dodge, while stock- and fully enclosed horse-trailer styles mirror several popular makes.

What these little outfits lack in size they make up for in appearance. Trucks can be dressed up with options, including bucket seats, running boards and clearance lights, while trailer extras include customizing with laser-engraved names or livestock brands.

A partnership like that of Oxford and Bennett might only come together in a small town like Sargent, Neb. This community of about 700 people is home for Logs 'N More, where Oxford's family manufactures decorative birdhouses, shelves and a variety of novelty products fashioned from wood. Along with hiring out for day work on area farms and ranches, Oxford works in the wood shop. A year or so ago, he decided to develop a product of his own.

"I started building little trucks for kids' toys," he says, grinning, "but

as I added more and more details, they kind of turned into big-boy toys."

Meanwhile, across town and unknown to Oxford, Troop Bennett had made a little gooseneck trailer that his young son could hitch to a toy pickup. A farrier by trade and handy with woodworking tools, Bennett put considerable effort into making the toy look like the real thing. Bennett's wife, Paula, happened to be working in the Oxford shop at that time, and she saw some of Oxford's trucks. Recognizing an attention to detail similar to her husband's, she suggested he and Oxford join forces.

Enjoying the modest but growing demand for their handiwork, the partners have continued to refine their products. Unlike early projects of pine and paint, they began fashioning their vehicles from oak, trimmed in contrasting black walnut, with a natural finish.

Except for dowels and prefabricated wheels, the individual pieces used to build each truck and trailer are cut, sanded and finished by hand. The average truck includes 40 pieces, and trailers include 30 or more. It's time-consuming work, requiring at least two (and sometimes more than



The details on this flatbed dual-wheeled pickup include running-board lights, headache rack, tool-box and handyman jack.



Troop Bennett (left) and Riley Oxford (right) display an assortment of their miniature trucks and trailers. Also pictured is Bennett's son, Lane, who serves as their consultant.

four) hours of assembly time for each vehicle.

"The extended-cab pickups are most popular, but we make the four-door models, too, with long or short boxes or flatbeds. Dual-wheeled rigs are pretty big," Oxford says.

Variations on trailer features, including slotted or solid sides and window treatments, are limited only by the customer's imagination. All have working endgates and escape doors. Bennett says people like details, especially personalized lettering. That option really broadened sales opportunities.

"As toys for kids, most people around here consider these outfits to be too pricey (the base

price for a truck and trailer is \$180), but the detail work and personalization has made them more attractive to adults," Bennett explains. "For a while, a lot of our customers were grandparents that ordered rigs for new grandkids and wanted a baby's name and birth date engraved on the trailer. Now, some adults buy for themselves, but most order gifts for others.

"A lot of gift orders now come from wives wanting an outfit personalized with their husbands' ranch name or brand. A truck-and-trailer outfit makes a neat prize or trophy when organizers of a cattle show or roping club are looking for an alternative to belt buckles or wall plaques. It's something unique."

Theirs is a niche market, but

one that both men hope to expand. Oxford, who grew up in a woodshop, views the manufacture of miniature trucks and trailers as a way to apply the lessons he learned in the family business to help him

realize his personal business goals. Bennett has goals, too, though mostly long-range.

“I like shoeing horses, and that’s still my main business; but I might not be able to do it forever,” he admits. “It might be time to get something else going, too.”

If you fancy a new truck and trailer with all the bells and whistles, but you’re unable or unwilling to pay the price of a full-size rig, think small. These miniatures don’t run on fuel, however. You have to push ’em. So you might want to drive them on short trips only — distances you can cover on your hands and knees.



This rig, fashioned from oak and trimmed in contrasting black walnut, features personalized lettering — one of the details that broadened sales opportunities for the business.