



108-year-old Mills Machine Co. embraces technology changes



Jim Stafford
INNOVATIONS

SHAWNEE — The first impression you get of 108-year-old Mills Machine Co. as you approach the manufacturing complex here in Shawnee is that this place hasn't changed in 50 years.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Mills Machine Co. produces specialty earth-boring tools and accessories for the water, mining, construction, utility and environmental industries. It sells to end users and distributors across the U.S. and in 70 international markets.



Chuck Mills

"We work to stay two or three years ahead of our competition and let them continue to chase us," said Chuck Mills, the third-generation leader of the multi-million dollar business that employs 20 people. "We are always thinking and listening to customers and what is needed out there."

Mills Machine was founded in 1908 by Chuck Mills' grandfather, W.H. Homer Mills, as a repair shop in the central Oklahoma community that was a railway crossroads with a growing industrial base. W.H.'s son, David, acquired the company in the early 1970s, with Chuck purchasing it in the 1980s.

A graduate of the University of Central Oklahoma, Chuck Mills owns a U.S. patent and four international patents for an innovative Milclaw drilling bit. And he has led the company's substantial expansion into global markets.

A mix of old-school, manually operated milling equipment and high-tech machines dominate the landscape of the Mills Machine production floor. Skilled craftsmen make custom tools using the manual milling machines to fit customer specifications.

"Mills Machine Co. sets a great example for all Oklahoma businesses by incorporating advanced technology into production processes that had been unchanged for decades," said Michael Carolina, executive director of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology. "And its global marketing vision is helping the state's economy by bringing revenue into Oklahoma."

However, it's not just the machinery or markets that have evolved at Mills Machine Co. Chuck Mills himself has embraced a personal agenda with a much broader horizon than his own company's market and products.

Mills is on a mission to grow Oklahoma by engaging business with education to prepare our kids for a successful career and future.



Mills Machine Co. in Shawnee produces augers in multiple sizes for various uses. [PHOTOS BY JIM STAFFORD, FOR THE OKLAHOMAN]

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Go to oklahoman.com and enter the code to see a video about Mills Machine Co.

He's also pushing the state's small and rural businesses to develop international markets for their goods.

A former Shawnee mayor, Mills serves on more than a dozen boards and organizations, including the Governor's Council for Workforce and Economic Development, Oklahoma Works, Governor's International Team, the State Chamber of Oklahoma, Oklahoma Business Roundtable and the Globalize Oklahoma Initiative.

"This goes back full circle," Mills said of his workforce and global business agendas. "I'm focusing on the supply and demand side. The demand is 'let's grow our businesses to need more people by exporting products globally.' Then let's help educate our kids to be employees in those businesses that are expanding."

On the day that I rolled into Shawnee along with a pair of colleagues from the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology, Mills had just returned from an elementary school speaking engagement. There, he pitched

the value of entrepreneurship and operating a business to a group of students who are running their own mini-ventures through a program called Economic City.

"Whether you are ever going to be an entrepreneur or own your own business or not, you need to understand how business works," Mills said. "Some of these kids really got it. I was like 'wow! I told them when I was in the fifth grade I had no idea.'"

It's a message the educators need to hear, as well, he said.

"Educators understand what they are doing is not working," Mills said. "It's not their fault and the business community must step up to help them. Students are just being dumped out at the end — if they don't drop out — and they are not ready. Many of them lack the proper skills or certifications. Businesses can bring resources that schools desperately need right now!"

Just as Mills Machine Co. has embraced high-tech machinery and international markets, Chuck Mills is working to create a better equipped workforce while opening new markets for all Oklahoma businesses.

"My job is to go out and open doors and inspire others to come join me and be a part of the solution to help us all grow," Mills said. "I'm just trying to do my part."

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology (OCAST).

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