



O U T D O O R S

by Jason Jenkins
jjenkins@ruralmissouri.coop

Call them modern-day alchemists. Five days a week, from their shop just a few miles northeast of Kingsville, Brad and Jo Ann Alpert go about the process of turning ingots of lead — tons of them, in fact — into gold.

However, unlike their medieval counterparts, the Alperes are far from being unscrupulous charlatans. Their craft is no fraud. They truly have discovered the secret, and the process is on full display.

To make lead into gold, it must first be turned into bullets.

What began as part-time moneymaker on Brad and Jo Ann's back deck has grown to an enterprise that provides them and a dozen others with full-time employment. Now in its eighth year, Missouri Bullet Co. has become one of the largest cast-lead bullet manufacturers in the entire nation.

"We did \$2.45 million in sales in 2013 and sold 26 million bullets," says Brad, a member of West Central Electric Cooperative. "In the last year, we went from six to 12 full-time employees. Now, every day, we make 200,000 bullets."

At a time when shortages of popular factory-loaded ammunition are sending prices higher, more and more recreational shooters have taken up reloading. They buy the components — bullets, cases, primer and powder — to build their own rounds.

"There's a shortage, but it's a completely self-induced shortage," Brad explains of the situation that has left shelves bare at gun shops and sporting goods stores across the country. "There's more product being made than ever, but it's winding up in people's private hoards."

The Alpert's foray into making bullets began in 2006 simply as a way for the couple to supplement their income. At the time, Brad was employed in Kansas City, Kan., working in information technology for the Board of Public Utilities. While the money was good, he dreaded the 100-mile round-trip commute each day. He wanted to work from home, which Jo Ann did as a website designer and computer programmer.

A lifelong shooting enthusiast, Brad has been reloading his own ammunition since the 1980s. He used cast-lead bullets he purchased by mail order, so he was quite familiar with the product. He wondered if casting bullets could be a viable side business.

To begin their experiment, Brad and Jo Ann bought a single casting machine, which they set up on their deck. It required a 220-volt outlet, but there was only one of those in the house. And the dryer was connected to it. "We couldn't cast bullets and dry laundry at the same time. It was one or the other," he says with a laugh.

For lead, Brad scrounged junkyards and tire dealers searching for old wheel weights, which coincidentally are made from the same alloy of lead, tin and antimony as cast bullets.

"I made a few thousand, and they seemed to work and shoot and look great. I thought, this might be viable," he says. "So I huddled with Jo Ann and we decided to go ahead and bite the bullet, so to speak, and Missouri Bullet Co. began."

They ramped up production, constructing a small shop and buying more equipment. Brad would call Jo Ann when he was about halfway home from his job in Kansas City and tell her to start warming up the machines. When he arrived home at 6:30 p.m., they'd begin making bullets and work until 11 p.m.

That's the way it went for 27 months, working 12- to 14-hour days, plus Saturdays and Sundays. They'd sell their bullets on eBay and to local gun shops. Demand was strong, and soon, they overran their manufacturing capacity. Brad quit his IT job in



In 2007, Brad and Jo Ann Alpert started Missouri Bullet Co. to supplement their income, but it quickly grew past an endeavor for nights and weekends. The West Central Electric members opened a new manufacturing facility this year.

21ST CENTURY ALCHEMY

Kingsville's Missouri Bullet Co. turns lead into gold

March 2009 and became the company's first full-time employee.

Today, the Missouri Bullet Co. product line includes 75 different cast-lead bullets, more than any other company, according to Brad. They vary in size from a diminutive .25-caliber round to a .50-caliber handgun round known as the "Crusher." Prices range from \$25 to \$45 per box of 500, plus shipping.

While the growing popularity of reloading has undoubtedly spurred business, Brad says the company found its niche by offering something no other bullet manufacturer offers — bullets of identical size, but differing hardness. These "hardness-optimized bullets" help reloaders improve accuracy and reduce leading in their firearms.

"The standard alloy is 2 percent tin, 6 percent antimony and 92 percent lead. The tin reduces surface tension and makes the bullet shiny. The antimony



makes it harder," Brad explains. "That alloy is fine for high-velocity loads, but at lower velocities, you need a softer bullet with less tin and antimony, which we offer. We're the only ones doing soft and hard bullets."

The company prides itself on unparalleled product selection, rapid shipping and customer service, he adds. Through the company's website, which Jo Ann designed, bullets can be

purchased directly, and discounts are offered for law enforcement officials and active and retired military personnel, among others. Distributors, such as Graf & Sons in Mexico, Mo., also carry their products.

"They really do a good job for us and make a really good product," says Chris Bixler of Graf & Sons, which specializes in reloading supplies. "You can look at lead bullets as one size fits all, but it just doesn't work. What they've done — optimizing the hardness for the bullet's intended use — I think a lot of people have overlooked it."

From a single casting machine in 2007, Missouri Bullet Co. now keeps 17 casting machines and 15 lubrisizers running non-stop, requiring a delivery of 22 tons of lead alloy from the foundry every three weeks. Brad and Jo Ann moved into a new 4,200-square-foot facility earlier in the year, and still, demand outstrips supply.

"We can't keep the shelves stocked. They go out quicker than we can stock them," Brad says. "They go from the sizing department to shipping without ever kissing the shelf."

"We can sell every single cast bullet we can make. It's a good problem to have."



On an average day, 200,000 bullets are produced at the Missouri Bullet Co. facilities northeast of Kingsville.

For more information about the Missouri Bullet Co., visit www.missouribullet.com or call 816-597-3204.