Boat company succeeds without any coast around

By Ron Wilson

director, Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University

The sun glistens upon Lake Havasu in Arizona as a boat comes

flashing by. The boat is beautiful and fast, going a hundred miles an hour.

Where do you suppose that boat was built? Would you believe, in much further from a coast than Hill City, but this is the true story of a boat company that built a home there.

Tony Poore lives in Hill City, gar Custom Boats with Berney Shumate. Tony is also the economic development manager for Rural Telephone Service Company of Lenora. He works in the Hill City office.

Tony explains that two guys in Canada started Cougar Custom Boats back in 1972. Their specialty was high speed, high performance - i.e., fun boats. They built one of the first modified tunnel boats and broke all kinds of speed records. By thirty years later, the two men were in their mid-60s and the time had come to sell their company.

Tony came across this company while doing economic development research for Rural Tele-

They identified a building in Hill City that could house the company and organized a proposal to buy Cougar Boats.

After months of work, suddenly one of the key investors backed out to do another project. Tony turned to Berney and said, "Do you think you and I could do Hill City, Kansas? One can't get this?" So they stepped in together, found a commercial bank to help them and bought Cougar Boats in 2004, relocating it to Hill City.

As a lifelong boating enthusiast, Tony had a special interest Kansas. He is co-owner of Cou- in this type of company. He says with a smile, "I thought I knew a lot about boats. I learned an awful lot more after we bought this company."

> Cougar Custom Boats continues to specialize in customized, high performance boats. Tony says, "Our customers are the kind of people who can get a boat with all the bling." In other words, they are built for high performance plus are decorated with all the bells and whistles one could want. Their boats are custom designed and built to the customer's specifications. The customer selects his or her own color scheme, trim, and graphic design.

For example, a man from Colo-

boat manufacturing sales repre- he ordered a twenty-two foot boat Poore, Berney Shumate, and all velopment by helping rural people sentative named Berney Shumate. in canary yellow with a bright the people of Cougar Custom help themselves. The Kansas Proorange and red flame design, all done in gel-coat.

Not only do these boats look good, they move fast. While a typical pleasure boat might go 40 miles an hour, some of these Cougar Boats can do a hundred miles an hour or more.

Hill City might seem to be an unlikely place to look for such boats, but Tony says their location in Kansas is an asset. The central location makes it convenient for shipping and the work ethic is excellent. The company's Web site, www.cougarboats.com, has made it possible to reach customers all over.

Tony says, "I knew that we could build 'em here, create jobs in Hill City and ship these boats as conveniently to the east coast as the west coast." In the last four years, the company has sent boats from Hill City to some 14 states, from Florida to California. Wow.

So Tony is proud of their rural location. Hill City is a town of 1,543 people. But Tony is originally from a farm near the town of Alton, population 114. Now, that's

How exciting to see a boating company find a successful home in the heartland.

The sun is setting across Lake phone. He saw an opportunity for rado saw one of their boats at the Havasu in Arizona, and the beaunorthwest Kansas, so he lined up Denver Boat Show. The man was tiful Cougar Boat is coming in two investors, including a former named Burns, so true to his name, to the dock. We commend Tony

Boats for making a difference file radio series and columns are with their entrepreneurship, initiative, and hard work.

With such guiding principles, this company can remain anchored in

a wave of success.

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