

# TIM WOLLESEN, SALES MIDWEST INC., LOVES SELLING IRON

By Suz Trusty

Tim Wollesen grew up on a row crop and livestock farm near Wall Lake, Iowa. Helping his Dad on the farm was part of his childhood, from his early memories through his high school years. "But then the farm economy slowed, and the market dropped," Tim says. "Dad was close to retirement and made the decision to sell the farm. It was a tough choice, but the right one."

So Tim was one a many young men who were, for the first time in their lives, looking for a job off the family farm. After graduating from high school, he spent three years working for a local farmer. He says, "In 1985, the manager of a lumberyard in a neighboring town brought several of us 'farm boys' to one of the lumber company's stores in Kansas City. I guess he was sure that farm boys would know how to work."

That lumber company grew to 250 stores across the country. Tim moved to ever-advancing positions in several of their stores in metro Kansas City, in time becoming the delivery manager for all ten of the company's Kansas City stores.

## Meeting the Donkey

Tim first saw the Donkey Truck Carried Forklift when Ken Ensor, of Quality Corporation, brought one to the lumberyard. Tim says, "I told him it was too little for what we needed to move and asked him to 'take that thing out of the yard.' But the corporate office wanted me to give them a good test, so I agreed to bring in three of them for a three-month try out. They proved me, and everyone in the lumberyards, wrong; they were strong and durable, able to handle the heavy loads. My first order was for 75. I went from telling Ken to take that thing out of my lumberyard, to selling them, and I still love them."

At that time, Tim had no idea of how big Ken's company had become or the background on the machine's development. "Over the years I found that Ken was a manufacturer who was totally committed to his products and his company and to the needs of his customers," says Tim. "He was straightforward in his operations and would do anything for you. In fact, a couple of us dealers always referred to him as 'Dad,' saying, 'Call Dad, he'll make that happen.' I don't think he ever knew about that. He is in that 'Dad' category for me, a valued friend, mentor and role model."



Tim Wollesen grew up on a row crop and livestock farm near Wall Lake, Iowa, and thought his future would be on the family farm.



This 1945 John Deere is the first tractor Tim's grandfather bought new. Tim still has it and that little John Deere, he rode as a kid, too.

Tim had been thinking about leaving the lumber industry to start his own venture in equipment sales. Ken invited him to see the turf equipment at TPI's July 1995 Summer Field Day at Todd Valley Farms in Mead, Nebraska, hosted by Wayne Thorsen (TPI President 1996-1997).

"Being a farm boy, I figured I knew a lot about farming, but I didn't know anything about the sod industry at the time. I wondered how big the show really could be and how much equipment could it possibly take just to grow grass?" Tim says that first TPI show was a real eye-opener and gave him quite an education.

## Out on His Own

Tim started Sales Midwest, Inc. in the spring of 1996 with the Donkey Forklift his first line of equipment. "At first, I was selling the Donkey out of my car," he says. "I was going through some life changes and, during the transition, had moved into an apartment. That apartment also served as my work base, office and storage facility."

Tim dressed for the job as he had in his lumberyard position, light-colored dockers and a buttoned shirt with a collar. "The sod customers would take one look at me in those dockers and quickly find some reason I should crawl underneath a machine to check out something. I was going through three pair of dockers a week before I realized they were just testing me to see if I knew my products and was willing to get a little dirty to make sure they were working right."



Tim's not sure if the change came about because he switched to jeans, or because the sod farmers he'd visited were telling their friends he was a "straight-talking" guy, but after those first few months, cold calls didn't feel so cold any more. "Now I love going out and meeting with my customers in their fields or in their shops, whether we talk equipment or talk fishing," he says. "Sod farmers are the most down-to-earth folks I've ever worked with and the most willing to level with you."

As the business grew, Tim rented a building in the Kansas City area with another forklift company. He says, "I traded office space for their service work. I moved the business to our Olathe, KS, location about 18 years ago and have been there ever since."

Tim slowly gained the "grocery list" of product lines Sales Midwest now offers. He says, "Once our Donkey sales were going strong, I was approached by several manufacturers that wanted me to sell their equipment. I wanted top lines, so I'd evaluate each piece first to see for myself how it performed and would connect with several of that company's customers to ask their perception of the products and the company. Progressive Turf Equipment was our first additional company; Kesmac was the second; First Products the third."

Sales Midwest now sells new equipment and related turf care products for the following companies within a broad region of the Midwest: Donkey Forklifts, Master Craft, First Products, Brouwer Kesmac, Progressive Turf Equipment, Brillion Farm Equipment, Landoll, and TAMANET. Sales Midwest is a multi-state distributor, with the territory ranging from six to ten states, depending on the sales and distribution agreement with each of the companies. Most of the new products Sales Midwest sells are specific to sod producers and the turfgrass industry. He also sells some new equipment, such as the Donkey forklifts, to lumberyards, hardscape (brick and block) yards, and the roofing industry. About 80 percent of the used equipment the company handles is for turfgrass production.



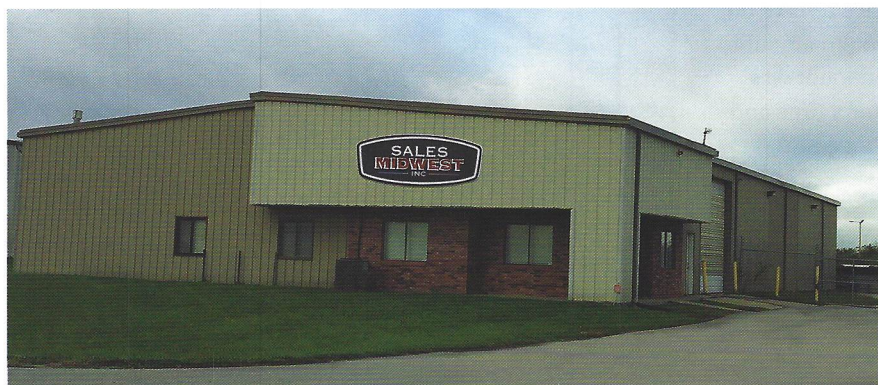
Tim, Dawn and Colton Wollesen love the outdoors, so this is a great spot for their family photo.

Tim expanded the company's offerings to include parts from the beginning and starts stocking parts for whatever new line of products he adds. Sales Midwest now stocks a parts inventory worth close to a million dollars. Tim says, "Sod is like milk—its shelf-life is limited. If a piece of equipment breaks down, the worth of that sod is in jeopardy. We try to make sure we have what our customers need, in stock, to get them back in the field right away. We can't have everything, but we'll have the main things."

## Selling Equipment Around the World

When the economic downturn hit the US, sod farmers stopped buying new equipment. Many were forced to downsize their operations, and some were forced out of business. Suddenly there was a glut of used equipment available for sale.

"We'd moved quite a bit of used equipment when the economy was good," says Tim. "When a sod farmer bought a new machine, it often was a replacement for an older model that they'd then want to sell. I discovered I loved making the match between used equipment, and those who could use it, just as much as I loved selling new equipment. We'd also started bringing some of those used machines into our shop, refurbishing them, and then selling them."



Tim Wollesen moved Sales Midwest into this building in Olathe, Kansas, about 18 years ago.



In 2007-2008, when the US money exchange wasn't very good overseas, in most countries, their money was strong. That made the market for used equipment more attractive to overseas buyers. Tim embraced that opportunity.

Tim soon learned that selling internationally is not as complex as shipping internationally. All the paperwork, quarantines, cleanliness and legalities must be met precisely—and those rules vary by country. He mastered those processes and for a time was shipping two container loads of equipment to overseas buyers each month.

"It isn't easy," he says, "For one piece of equipment, we had to get toothbrushes and clean every groove to make it acceptable. We've now shipped to Australia, Europe, Israel, Sweden, Mexico, Canada, Iceland, Romania and South Africa. And we've shipped nearly everything, from motorcycles to boats, as well as sod equipment."

Tim continues to receive calls and emails from turfgrass producers within the US and all over the world who are looking for good used equipment. "If we don't have what they're asking for, we'll go looking for it," he says. "And, in most cases, we'll find it."

## Becoming an Auctioneer

Tim was seeking another way to help sod farmers move the huge number of machines and get a reasonable price for them. "You can't put ten similar items on a website or classified ad page without hurting the market value," he says. "In 2010, I became a certified auctioneer and appraiser, not to conduct live auctions, but to 'auction' equipment online."

He started Diversified Asset Solutions/Assetbids.com. The company, unlike many auction sites, specializes in serving the turf industry. Tim says, "There were 3,800 sod producers in the US when we started. We allowed the equipment owner to protect their machine by placing a conservative reserve on it. That piece of equipment would not be sold for an amount lower than the number we'd agreed on. If the amount was not bid, the machine was taken off the market for a time and then reposted later as an item for sale."

When the housing market started coming back, the online auction became less active. While that avenue for sales is still available, Tim currently has the site down to be revamped. He says he'll bring it back online when he feels the need. For now, he thinks his website ([www.salesmidwest.com](http://www.salesmidwest.com)) is the best avenue to sell used equipment as it gets high traffic, because all of his connections know "sod and landscape equipment is what we do."



Tim Wollesen with an array of the new equipment product lines Sales Midwest distributes. Tim loves selling iron.

## Love of Flying

Tim's love of flying goes all the way back to his childhood. The "old school" crop dusters (those applying pesticides to the crops in a field from a small, low-flying airplane) would usually have a kid stationed along the side of the field with a flag or flashing beacon to signal where they should start their next pass. Tim was that kid.

"I was so fascinated by their ability to maneuver that little plane so low and so accurately that I would nearly forget to duck out of the way before they started dusting," he says. "I really wanted to become a pilot. But everyone told me the only practical way to get insurance and enough hours to qualify was to go into the military. I didn't see military service as a fit for me, so I dropped the idea."

About three years after starting Sales Midwest, Tim's accountant, who knew he had a love of flying, looked at all the time and money he was spending on commercial flights, driving, fuel and hotels, and suggested checking out those expenses as compared to those of getting the



Tim expanded the company's offerings to include parts from the beginning, because the shelf-life of sod is limited. If a piece of equipment breaks down, the delays could put that sod's worth in jeopardy.



training to become a pilot and renting, leasing or buying a plane. Tim says, "He'd done that for a couple other clients and found it was not only cost-effective, but a more efficient way to reach the ag market, which in turn, increased sales. Of course, I started the training immediately when he said the numbers showed it would be workable right away and probably become a smart move financially as the business grew."

Tim's flight instructor was a no-nonsense lady who also was qualified to give aerobatic training. He took that training, too, not because he wanted to perform stunts and fly upside down, but so he would be better equipped to handle difficult situations if they would ever occur while he was flying.

"I was chicken about taking the written test," he says. "So I got in a lot of solo hours, as well as supervised hours, before my flight instructor finally pushed me into taking it. Once I was qualified to fly by visual flight (VFR), I started working on my license to fly using instruments (IFR).

(According to Epic Flight Academy, "The acronyms VFR and IFR stand for different types of FAA pilot guidelines that aviators must follow when flying. VFR stands for 'Visual Flight rules,' which basically means a pilot must follow certain FAA flight rules operating by using only their eyesight while flying. IFR stands for 'Instrument Flight rules,' which means that a pilot is basically flying by using their instruments for navigation, radar, weather tracking, flight path monitoring, take-off and landing purposes, etc." For more information, visit: <http://epicflightacademy.com/vfr-pilot-rating-vs-ifr-pilot-rating/>)

Additional training and flight hours are required to qualify for a license to fly more complex aircraft, with the level of both escalating for each level of complexity. Tim earned his multi-engine IFR to fly the twin-engine plane he owned at one time.



Tim and Dawn Wollesen pose for this photo with Tim's "office," his name for his plane.

Tim calls his current plane, a Beechcraft A36 Bonanza, his flying office. He says, "I'm fortunate to have a business that supports my hobby. But, the bottom line is, flying a small plane allows me to reach my clients faster; fly into small rural airports; and see more people than I could by flying commercial airplanes. And I can make it home to be with my family sooner—and that is the most important."

## Giving Back (Angel Flight and Homeland Security)

Tim would rather give back by action than make a monetary contribution to a worthy cause. "Probably the most rewarding volunteer work I've done was as a pilot volunteering my plane and time to fly missions for Angel Flight. It's a non-profit organization that arranges humanitarian and medical flights for adults and children in need."



Tim found time to give two youngsters a chance to "play pilot" during his Baton Rouge Angel Flight mission.

Through Angel Flight, he became a First Responder for Homeland Security and was one of the first pilots in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit. "I flew medical supplies in and patients out. During that time, I also flew dignitaries from FEMA, the Red Cross and Heart-to-Heart up and down the coast to assess damage. It was a very intense experience for all involved as we were being shot at by looters wanting the medical supplies we had on board. We had to wait for the military to secure the airports before we could land. You just can't imagine the amount of devastation there and the chaos that was going on. I'm glad I was able to help, but I hope I never am called on to do something like that again. Some of what I saw will stay with me forever."

## TPI Connections

Tim is quick to point out that, except for a few TPI shows that were outside the US, he has attended them all since becoming a member in 1997. He says, "I love this organization. I eat, bleed and sleep TPI. Turfgrass



producers are my bread and butter; selling to them is how I make a living. If TPI and the turfgrass producers are not successful, we as vendors will not be successful.”

Tim was elected to the TPI Board of Trustees and officially began his three-year term on July 1, 2016. “I have served on several different boards, and I’ve never seen any as dedicated as the TPI Board. I have the greatest respect for each of them. Everyone brings their own unique perspective to each issue discussed, but we all have a common goal for the association to succeed and grow. We’re all dedicated to listening to the ideas and concerns of our members and addressing them.”

Tim understands the challenges facing the industry, and the need for a proactive approach to addressing them. As well as the plastic grass, ever-more-stringent governmental oversight and regulations, and the inaccurate news spread by environmental activists, there’s the shortage of qualified employees. All those factors impact vendors as well as sod producers. He says, “We need to be united in making our voices heard, and TPI is working on that. I truly believe TPI is on the right path to achieve long-term success.”

## Family is Number One

Dawn and Tim were not looking for a long-term relationship when they met. Each of them was out with friends who just happened to choose the same spot to gather that evening. Tim says, “I like to say that I rescued her. She was the beautiful blond lady out on the dance floor surrounded by a crowd of guys that all wanted to dance with her. I stepped in and the two of us had a great time and danced the night away.”

The next night, with no preplanning, both groups of friends decided to go out again—and to the same place—which neither group usually did. “We spent the night dancing again,” says Tim. “And that time, we planned our next meeting. Dawn is the love of my life, my wife, my soul mate. We think alike; we like the same things; we’ve never had an argument.”

Dawn has always worked in marketing. She’s currently the digital marketing manager at Bunzl Processor Division/Koch Supplies, an international distribution company for food and meat processing and packing supplies, working on the website and social media portals.

Tim says, “We don’t work together, and we don’t talk shop. All my travel could be hard on our marriage, but she understands that sales is all about relationships and knows how important it is for me to establish and maintain those personal connections. Dawn loves to fly and she took a ‘Pitch Hitters’ course so, in case of an emergency in the air, she’d be able to get us back to the ground safely.”



Tim and Colton Wollesen pose for a photo during a pheasant shoot hunting trip.

Tim jokes that he’s the pilot and the flight attendant when he and Dawn take off for the lake on weekends. He’ll have a cocktail and peanuts ready for her to enjoy on the trip, while he’s doing the flying.

Tim says, “Our son, Colton, turned 25 on March 31. We have only one child, so life has, and does, revolve around him.” Tim, Dawn and Colton all love the outdoors and have taken numerous trips together for hunting, skiing, snowmobiling and summers at the lake. “The three of us have a great relationship.”

Tim is a little jealous though, because he says Colton will call Dawn more than him when he just wants to talk. “So, if I want to spend some quality time with him, I’d better be dressed in camo,” says Tim. “And ready for Colton’s call on where we’re headed.”

Colton graduated from Pittsburg State University in May with a business degree, and a major in marketing. He’s accepted a position with Excel, Inc., a marketing firm in Kansas City. Tim agrees it’s a great opportunity for him, but he can’t help hoping that, over time, when Colton has had some experience with what work is like in the “real world,” he’ll see even greater opportunities with Sales Midwest. Time will tell.

Suz Trusty is co-editor of *Turf News*.

All photos courtesy of Tim Wollesen.

