

EXECUTIVE FILE

# Twisting, turning iron into decoration



**Ron Richardson, president of Downtown Ornamental Iron,** followed in the footsteps of his father, who was a welder. Now Richardson works with his son and daughter at his Bend shop. Mike Sims grinds steel in the background.

Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

# Bend metal shop uses modern tools to create its ornamental pieces

By Tim Doran  
*The Bulletin*

Inside Downtown Ornamental Iron in northeast Bend, employees twist, bend and hammer steel into decorative stairways, gates and art pieces.

They still heat the metal to work with it, but in the shop on Layton Avenue the employees also pound metal with an air hammer and bend steel rods with computer-aided machines.

A hammer and anvil can still be found in a corner of Downtown Ornamental Iron. And grinding work still sends sparks flying.

But, as with other industries, technology has changed metalworking and welding — and Ron Richardson, president of Downtown Ornamental Iron, has seen most of it during the 26 years since he started the business.

The company takes its name from



A trade-show display shows products created by Downtown Ornamental Iron, which is one of the few shops in the region that can create 1.5-inch-by-1.5-inch twisted steel vertical bars in railings

its first official location, the downtown Bend building now occupied by The Blacksmith Restaurant. Downtown Ornamental Iron was located in the area now occupied by the bar, he said.

He shared the space with an auto detailer, he said. Richardson's half of the rent was \$75 a month, he said.

"It really helped," he said, referring to sharing the rent. "I outgrew that one pretty quickly."

See Iron / B5

## The basics

**What:** Downtown Ornamental Iron

**Where:** 63023 Layton Ave., Bend

**Employees:** Five, including owner Ron Richardson.

**Phone:** 541-389-8186

**Web site:** [www.downtownornamentaliron.com/index.html](http://www.downtownornamentaliron.com/index.html)

# Iron

## Continued from B1

Welding runs in Richardson's family. His father was a welder, and Richardson's son, Josh, 34, and daughter, Skye, 31, work with him at Downtown Ornamental Iron.

In the beginning, Richardson, who also worked as a millwright, made metal parts used in home construction, like beam brackets. Contractors, however, began asking for metal banisters, railings and gates.

Today, Downtown Ornamental Iron specializes in decorative metal work, and even supplies some components to other shops. Richardson said Downtown Ornamental Iron is one of the few shops in the region that can create 1.5-inch-by-1.5-inch twisted steel vertical bars in railings.

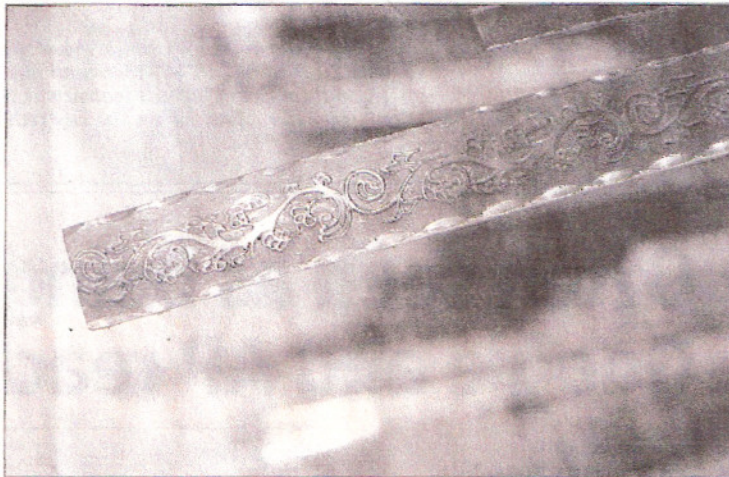
The employees create pickets that bow, or give them scroll, floral, wood grain and other textures.

Downtown Ornamental Iron also offers custom metal mirror frames, sconces, bookends and hooks.

The employees use some of the latest metalworking technology, such as a computer-aided plasma cutting system, for more intricate designs, such as a Western scene with tall trees and cowboy on horseback. The system cuts steel using electrically charged compressed air forced through a nozzle at high velocity.

The plasma cutters, computer-aided metal fabricating machines, air hammer and other equipment in the shop are valued at about \$400,000, Richardson said.

Like other construction-related businesses, Downtown Ornamen-



Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

An example of textured steel created by Downtown Ornamental Iron.

tal Iron had plenty of work during the building boom, employing up to eight people.

"We couldn't find quality workers," Richardson said.

Currently, the work force totals five, he said.

The company has kept working during the economic crisis. Richardson credits the contractors and customers he's forged relationships with during 26 years in business for helping maintain a steady flow of work.

Richardson agreed to answer a few questions about ornamental metal work and his company.

**Q:** How did you get started in metalworking?

**A:** I grew up welding. My dad was a welder. I (studied it and) got a college degree and grew into it working with contractors. That kind of led to the ornamental work.

We specialize in ornamental iron decorative metals. It just

kind of evolved into that.

**Q:** Does Downtown Ornamental Iron have a main product?

**A:** Most of our work is interior or exterior railings and banisters.

**Q:** You are a full-service shop. So all the work is done here?

**A:** Most of our stuff comes in as raw metal. We try to use American-made steel. We take that and fabricate our products out of that, even the forging. We've grown into a supply shop as well.

**Q:** What prompts customers to go with metal over wood?

**A:** Mainly the look. It's more decorative. You can do more decorating with metal than you can with wood. (Also,) when (wood became) expensive, metal was probably a better deal.

**Q:** You mentioned that some consumers seeking ornamental metal pieces shop out of catalogs. What is the advantage to hiring Downtown Ornamental Iron?

**A:** We're more (expensive) for our coining and texturing than what you can buy out of (a catalog, some of which is made in) China. But number one, you're not buying out of China. People want to buy local.

You (also) save on shipping. Metal's heavy. You don't have the shipping cost.

Plus, we can do custom designs.

**Q:** With the economic crisis decimating the construction industry, how has Downtown Ornamental Iron survived?

**A:** Because we've been around a long time, we have a lot of customers who've been with us. It's not like it used to be, but we just finished a big house out in Tumalo and another in Caldera Springs.

I've built (previous) homes for people who said, "Ron, are you ready to do it again?"

We're pretty big on the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) upgrades. That's probably our biggest commercial work, ADA upgrades.

**Q:** How has the business changed since you began?

**A:** Much of it is all computer-aided. We can do 100 pickets exactly the same because it's run by computer.

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