



This business runs in the blood

■ A NOMMA member's love for his multi-generational family company results in Top Job bronze.

By Lisa Bakewell

Metal fabrication is in Michael Stylski's blood. It always has been. Since the age of seven, when he went to work for his father, Stanley Stylski (except for the five years he left the industry to "pursue other career paths"), Michael has always been in the ornamental iron business. And he loves it.

"I had an old guy tell me when I was in my late teens," says Stylski, "If you have a passion for what you're doing—really, really enjoy what you're doing—then you never have to work a day in your life.' And that's basically it in a nutshell. I love what I do, and it never gets old."

And you can believe Stylski when he tells you that his love for the business never gets old. His passion for metal fabrication and his business just keep growing—and his enthusiasm is contagious.

You can't help but be excited for him.

So, what's Michael Stylski, Sr., president and CEO of the Accent Ornamental Iron & Powder Coating Company of Cambridge, MN, excited about these days? He's particularly excited about winning a bronze award in NOMMA's 2008 Top Job contest (Interior Railings-Ferrous category).

"It was our first entry ever," he says with a grin, "and our first NOMMA award. Plus, it was a challenging job—unlike any that we've ever done before."

For your information

Project

Interior railing that resembles "mangroves."

Fabricator

Accent Ornamental Iron Co.

Biggest challenge

Keeping the railing's unique twig pattern intact, while adhering to the building code.

Approximate labor time

560 hours

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The home's two exterior decks reflect a "twig" design, similar to that of the striking interior staircase.

A "fitting" challenge

As Stylski tells it, he received a call from Mihm Custom Homes, with whom he's worked on and off for more than 12 years.

"I got a call to go out to the job site to meet with the builder, home owner, interior designer and architect," he said. "I did, and they presented me with a picture of a railing that resembled mangroves." [Editor's Note: Mangroves are types of tropical evergreen trees or shrubs having stilt-like roots and stems, forming dense thickets.]

"The picture had no top rail on it, so it wouldn't conform to the building code. It didn't have an inch-and-a-half grippable surface for a top rail and it had a wooden newel post, which we were unable to reproduce exactly," explained Stylski. "So what I did was this: I made a sample piece of railing that was very similar to what they had. They liked what we did, and we got

the contract for the job directly from the homeowner. From there, everything was good to go."

The homeowners, the Shafers of Mendota Heights, MN, also commissioned Accent Ornamental Iron to complete two exterior decks.

"Those were fairly simple," said Stylski. "They were straight pieces of railing that fit between stone pillars or monuments."

It was the award-winning interior stairway that posed a little more of a challenge, according to Stylski. "The interior [job] was a stairway with a little more than 180-degree turn to it," he said, "with railings on both sides — the easy side and the tight side (the curve). We created these railings using 1-1/4" round hammered bar top rail, 1" hammered bar support posts, and varying sizes from 1/8" to 3/4" embossed bars for the twig pattern. The newel posts were fabricated from several embossed bars and custom,

plasma-cut random mounting plates."

To begin the fabrication process, Stylski and his crew measured the radius of the proposed stairway (24" & 72" radius) and took the measurements to the shop. There, they created templates of the stairway and rolled the top and bottom rails. The piece was then taken back to the job site to see how the rails fit the curve.

"We brought it out there and the curves were just right," Stylski said.

Next, Stylski and his crew marked out the riser lines onto the top rail.

"We marked the leading edge of the riser and the tread," he said. "We transferred that onto the top rail, and we brought that back to the shop. Next, we produced the skeleton frame — which means that you have a top rail, the vertical posts (that actually fasten down to the step) and then the bottom rail."

The piece was then brought back to the job site for another field fit. This time it was a little skewed and needed to go back to the shop for adjustments.

"One of the posts was off for one reason or another," Stylski said. "One of the curves might have moved in the shop or in transportation between the job site and our shop. We tweaked it again and brought it back a third time."

This time, the fit was right.

Accent Ornamental Iron & Powder Coating Co.

is a proud member of NOMMA according to Stylski. "The benefits far outweigh the cost," he says.

His favorite benefit? "It's the ListServ on email, where you can ask a question and you can draw on the knowledge of the rest of the people in the industry all over the country," he notes. "Back when I was learning the trade from my dad, it seemed that none of the fabricators talked — everyone was guarding their secrets. Now, if you ask another fabricator a question with regard to a supplier or a how-to question, you're nine chances out of ten going to get an answer from them."

“...it took six of us to carry it into the house. It had to have weighed at least 400 pounds!”

Now, it was time for the piece to go back to the shop for finishing, where Stylski and his crew started with the artwork — the mangrove-patterned panels. These panels, created by welding the largest twig-type materials first and gradually working down to the smallest twigs, are what give the piece its unique flavor.

“Once the artwork was done,” Stylski said, “we did a field fit again — a fourth field fit — and everything fit perfectly, so we brought it back to the shop and did a white blast. We sand-blasted off the metal, removing all of the mill scale and debris from welding; and the grind marks were smoothed out and transitioned so that they looked the same color.”

Finally, the piece went to the powder coating department where an acid

etch was used to etch the material and get it to rust. When the etching process was complete, the piece was rinsed off, phosphatized, and clear powder coated. The piece was then returned to the job site and installed.

“Everything went well; 560 hours went into that job—including fabrication and installation,” said Stylski. “I had three fabricators in the shop who basically built that railing, but it took six of us to carry it into the house. It had to have weighed at least 400 pounds!”

When asked what the biggest challenge of the piece was, Stylski says that it was keeping the flow and the twig pattern in tact — keeping it tree-like — while conforming to the building code.

His favorite part? “The custom

nature of the job,” he said, “and having never produced anything like this before. The guys at the shop really like to get into these one-of-a-kind custom jobs!”

A real family affair

After working full time for his father in the family business (Allied Iron Works) from age 16 to 25, Stylski left the industry for five years to pursue other career paths. In 1988, though, he returned to the ornamental iron business and started his own company, Accent Ornamental Iron.

“I thought I’d try it on my own,” he explains.

As the sole employee, Stylski operated his business from a two-car garage in Anoka, MN until 1991, when he moved his family and his business to Cambridge, MN. There, he worked from two large pole buildings located on the family’s 40-acre farm.

In 1997, Stylski’s father passed away, so he combined the customers

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"Once you get [the customer] into the showroom, and they can touch it, feel it, and see samples of what they're doing, nine out of ten times, they buy" says Mike Stylski.

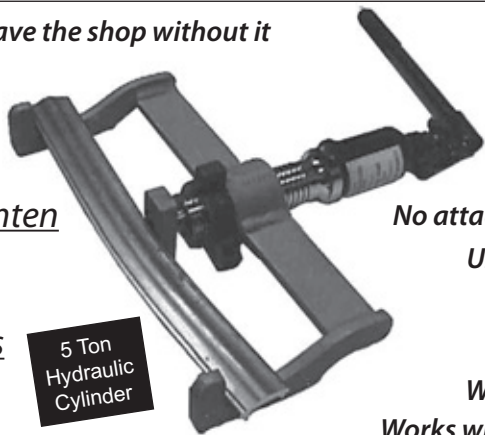
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and assets from his father's business with his own. With this change, Accent Ornamental Iron was able to continue serving many third generation customers originating from Modern Iron Works, the company that Stanley Stylski originally owned before heading to the Korean War with the US Army.

At this time, Michael Stylski's son (Michael, Jr.) also began to take a more active, full-time role in the company. "He's 29 now, and he's been working with me since he was a kid," says Stylski.

Stylski's 24-year-old daughter, Jessica, also worked for her dad as an installer for two summers while going to college. His younger daughter, Laura (age 21) is completing her last year of college, but works in the office during breaks and summer vacation.

One of the company's greatest assets, though, according to Stylski, is Kelly Olene-Stylski, vice president and business manager of Accent Ornamental Iron — and his wife.

"She's been a godsend," he says.

Kelly, who came on board in 2004,

is responsible for all the day-to-day business operations including billing, collections, and scheduling for Stylski, among other duties. She also mans the showroom, which is a key element to Accent Ornamental Iron's success, according to Stylski.

Expansion and diversification

"One of our biggest assets here, besides Kelly, is our 1,800 square foot showroom," says Stylski. "It's been our experience that you can go out on a job site and meet with the designers, the architects and the homeowners — you can show them pictures till you're blue in the face — but once you get them into the showroom, and they can touch it, feel it, and see samples of what they're doing, nine out of ten times, they buy.

"It's just a matter of getting them into the showroom," he continues. "And, of course, our showroom isn't very centrally located. Being in Cambridge, we're 45 miles north of

the Minneapolis St. Paul area, so it takes some effort for them to get here. But once they do, and they can see what they're buying, we usually have the deal."

In 2004, Accent Ornamental Iron made a final move to its current location, a 10,000 square-foot commercial building in the heart of downtown Cambridge, MN. Besides working on their own ornamental ironwork contracts, they currently provide powder coating services for several other ornamental iron fabricators in and around the Twin Cities metro area.

"I powder coat for about 10 or 12 of my direct competition," notes Stylski.

Last year, Stylski purchased Olin Wrought Iron, a manufacturer of American-made balusters and newel sets, which are manufactured by merging ancient blacksmithing techniques with state-of-the-art computer, controlled technologies.

"We thought long and hard about

the Olin acquisition," recalls Stylski. "But with the amount of business we did with him in a year, we thought it made sense to make that purchase. And it's been a good purchase. I sell to many of the fabricators in the Twin Cities area here as well as nationwide. Also, we do a tremendous amount of business with Texas Metal Industries (TMI). They handle our products in their catalog."

Today, Accent Ornamental Iron & Powder Coating Company has nine key employees including Stylski, his wife, and his son. That number can increase to as many as 13 during the peak season.

Hard work = steady growth

Accent Ornamental Iron has enjoyed continued success throughout its history, according to Stylski.

"We've had steady growth every single year since I've opened the door. "We've never had a year that was less than the previous, even in this econo-

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my,” he says. “From Christmas to April 15 — because of the weather — we normally gross in the first quarter equal to one good month any other time of the year. But, for the last three years we have not experienced that. We have stayed busy all year long. Fortunately, we are sitting right now with a three-week backlog of work, and I have not had to lay off any of our key people.”

Accent Ornamental Iron’s success doesn’t come easily, though. There’s a lot of hard work involved, and the Stylskis have very stiff competition — both are daunting in the world of metalworking. Yet, Michael Stylski, Jr. marks the third generation of Stylskis to work in the metal fabrication business.

Stylski says, “In this area I can think of four other businesses that are second, third, or even fourth generation companies. We have good competition and a lot of other talented fabricators in this area, but we do hold our own, and we’re respected in the industry.”

To keep that respect and to keep the company profitable, Stylski runs a

very tight ship. “I base my production on the dollar amount of the job,” he states.. “I require my guys to do X number of dollars every day.”

“I have three fabricators who work in the shop,” Stylski continues. “Those guys are given a job, and once it’s fabricated, it’s cleaned up and it goes to our powder coating department. There, we have one guy that oversees powder coating, though he has a helper when needed. Then, my two installers take out anywhere from one to seven jobs per day — generally there’s multiple stops every day of the week because 50 percent of our work takes less than a day to fabricate and install.”

During the peak months (April to November), Accent Ornamental Iron’s jobs are planned and executed six to eight weeks out, with 40-50 orders pending at a time — requiring Stylski



to put in 12-hour days.

Does he get tired? “Yes,” he says, “but I love what I do. It’s my passion, and it never gets old.”

Metal fabrication is in Michael Stylski’s blood. It always has been — and it seems that it always will. ❁



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