



NEIGHBORS

by Bob McEowen

Herman Beck's life is ripe with contradictions. Each morning, the 65-year-old entrepreneur, farmer, disc jockey and author wakes in a two-room cabin lit by kerosene lamps. He feeds his chickens, then climbs on a knobby-tired EZ-Go electric cart and drives across his Current River farmland to an office, where he oversees an online bookstore, video and Web production companies and an Internet radio station.

He wears a beard and simple clothes that give the impression of a Mennonite farmer, but his cubicle at the Back 40 Group incorporates the latest technology.

Herman, or Herm as he introduces himself, lectures about free-range poultry production methods at small farm conferences. On the radio and Internet forums, he calls himself "The Old Buzzard" and speaks of living in harmony with all creation. It seems odd, then, to hear him describe the activities on his 175-acre Shannon County farmstead in corporate terms.

"What we have here is a conglomerate. We have a group of companies that are vertically integrated," says Herm, CEO and chairman of the board of the Back 40 Group.

In addition to Back40books, Back40 Internet Innovators, KWBC.fm radio and Pleasant Valley Productions, the corporation includes a record label, a sustainable farming research division and a technology development company.

To date, the Back 40 Group has just six employees, including Herm and his wife, Linda, and boasts only modest success. Fluffy Cat Records currently represents three artists. His Web design company has about a dozen clients. KWBC.fm radio broadcasts traditional country music, bluegrass and gospel to less than 100 online listeners worldwide at any given time.

Herm has no difficulty reconciling the humble growth of his businesses with his somewhat grandiose depictions of them. "It's a big company in the making," he says.

Currently, Back40Books.com, an online bookseller with more than 2,500 titles in stock, accounts for most of the sales. With books on every subject from canning fruit to beekeeping to wine-making to wind energy, Herm's Web site appeals to a wide variety of readers.

"The common denominator is that most of these people are trying to become either more self-reliant or to live in harmony with the Earth," he says. It was exactly these sentiments that inspired the business, which has operated in Missouri since 2005. The original concept came to Herm much earlier, though, he says.

"This whole thing started in 1993 when I was mowing hay in Ohio," he says. "All of a sudden, I just started getting all these ideas bombarding me. I turned the tractor off and started writing."

Herm says he believes his life's mission is to bridge a gap between the modern consumers of technology and the old, more Earth-friendly ways practiced by American Indians, the Amish and fellow members of his back-to-nature generation. The Intercounty Electric Cooperative member says he is uniquely qualified to connect these two, seemingly disparate, worlds.

Growing up in Ohio, Herm was influenced by the simple ways of the Amish. His father, how-



One-time commercial photographer and auto salesman Herman Beck dropped out of the corporate world to raise chickens and "live in harmony with all creation." Now, the Hartshorn-area homesteader is building a new corporation to share what he's learned with others via books, radio, videos and the Internet.

A country conglomerate

Meet Missouri's high-tech guide to simple living



ever, was an automobile dealer and deeply immersed in the business world.

Herm followed his father's path, starting his own car parts import business, he says. Eventually, he became disillusioned and dropped out to become a handyman and candle maker.

"I had a radical change," Herm says. "Up until 1974, I had custom-made suits, clipped fingernails. If you

met me in 1976, you would have seen me with long hair, living in a Volkswagen camper and doing art and craft shows."

Herm eventually became a commercial photographer, married Linda and bought an Ohio farm where he raised poultry. A federal grant allowed him to publish his methods for free-range chicken production. His manual, "Free-Range Poultry Production and Marketing," brought him notoriety among sustainable agriculture adherents.

In 2001, a speaking engagement at a small farm conference led him to Missouri, where he and Linda stumbled upon a rare piece of private ground for sale in the Ozark National Scenic Riverways. Located about 10 miles from tiny Hartshorn, they rely on satellites to provide high-speed access to the Internet.

Herm envisions a high-tech clearing house of back-to-the-land information. Aside from books, he sees videos — many with him as guide — providing today's Earth-conscious consumers the information they need to live simply and success-

fully on small farms and suburban plots.

By partnering with national farm and home supply stores, he sees nothing but growth for his fledgling companies. He also believes he has the skills and ideas to convey his message of harmonious living in the digital age.

Herm says his company, which sold \$35,000 worth of merchandise in December, could soon see annual revenues in the millions.

"According to the business plan I have written out, we should be profitable by the end of this year," Herm says, adding that he eventually hopes to employ 50 people.

In the meantime, he's busy building a structure that will support a larger company. And just as Herm sees no contradictions between living in a rustic cabin and selling books on the Internet, he finds nothing unusual about building a complex business to teach people to live simply.

"Our mission statement is basically that we're offering products to help people live in harmony with all creation. We're trying to fill a niche that allows people to get the tools they need to live that kind of lifestyle," he says.

It's a business well suited for a public that yearns for a simpler lifestyle, he says. "I definitely think that five years from now, 10 years from now, this will be a real success story."

For more information, log onto www.back40books.com or www.back40forums.com. To listen to Herm's Internet radio, log onto www.kwbc.fm.