

forefront of the digital movie explosion.

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As much as Eric Olson likes to talk about where Sonic Equipment Company is headed in the movie industry, he's just as eager to remember where the company has been and where it is today. Sonic — builder, supplier and partner of hundreds of cinemas and theaters across 21 states — has developed a niche within the movie industry, helping build or refurbish theaters and make them capable of providing the most advanced “movie magic” on the market. Through it all, the company's focus has been remaining an active member within the Iola area, as well as in dozens of other communities throughout its market. “When we moved out here in 2007, that became our focus, our goal,” said Olson, Sonic's director of operations. “We wanted to make sure that those little towns that we serviced had the same opportunity that New York, L.A. and Chicago had.” Doing so meant bucking the industry trend of focusing on large population centers to the detriment of Middle America. “The adage is that 80 percent of the movie industry's revenue comes from 20 percent of the screens,” Olson said. As long as the studios catered to that “80 percent,” they had little concern about serving the rest of the country, he explained. That stuck in the craw of Sonic leaders, who were insistent new equipment could be developed, and less-expensively so, than devices built for huge movie screens found in big cities, “so Mom and Pop could be able to afford it,” Olson said. “We had to have something that fit this market,” Olson said. “Fortunately, we were out there in front, and we were selling their equipment,” giving Sonic more leverage in the decision to cater to the Midwest. Those relationships also allowed Sonic to push for smaller, less-expensive technology. “I don't want to say we were the ones instigating this, but we certainly were a voice in that process,” Olson said, as more affordable digital projectors were introduced into the marketplace, and state-of-the-art equipment became accessible to movie theaters in towns such as Iola, Fort Scott and Chanute.

The next step into the 21st century comes within the next month. Iola's Sterling Six Cinemas,

owned by B & B Theatres, will be equipped with a satellite delivery system certain to transform the entertainment package available at the local moviehouse. The Bagby family, owners of B & B Theatres, also owns Sonic Equipment. With satellite technology, movies can be “delivered” to the cinema through a digital signal, which is then downloaded onto a library management system — the electronic “brains” of the projector room. From there, movies, previews and any other digital displays can be programmed and sent to any or all of the six projectors with a few touches of a button. Even more noteworthy, Sterling Six is nearing an agreement with Microspace, a global provider of video, audio and data to theaters around the world, to begin showing live broadcasts of sporting events and other performances. “In the days of 35-mm projectors, theaters were able to offer only what the Hollywood studios provided,” he noted, while smaller, independent filmmakers were left out of the loop because they couldn’t afford to convert their films to 35-mm format. Digital projection and satellite technology changes that. “Somebody can say, ‘Gee, I’d love to see the opera or the ballet, or UFC on the big screen,’” Olson said. Or, after the new Allen County Hospital is built, and doctors want to partake in a training session offered on the other side of the globe, the digital signal could be displayed live to any of Sterling Six’s movie screens.

Part of Sonic’s charge has been to educate theaters about the ongoing technology boom. “If they’re forward-thinking, they can do these types of things,” Olson said. Olson stresses the importance of utilizing social media for theaters to adapt to the changes, particularly through Facebook and Twitter. “That’s how we get the word out to our global customers,” he said.

SONIC EQUIPMENT took shape in the 1970s as Sonic Signs under the guidance of the late Sterling Bagby, who moved his operation to Lola in 1982, when he acquired Lola Cinemas 1 and 2. The company remained a small operation, with five employees, dedicated primarily on serving B & B moviehouses. The company’s focus remained largely unchanged until 2000, when Sonic officials agreed to expand its services from beyond B & B franchises to any and all theaters across the country. The acquisition of Kneisley Manufacturing in 2007 coincided with Sonic’s relocation to its current home at 900 W. Miller Rd.

MEANWHILE, the movie-making world was about to undergo its largest change since the advent of Technicolor. “2007 was when we started looking at digital cinema,” said Michael Covey, Sonic’s production director. “We knew the industry was going to change, but we didn’t know how fast.” Olson told people in 2009 he expected it to take 10 years to complete a full conversion for every theater in the country to go digital. Now, in 2012, that deadline has been pushed up to 2013. As a result, Sonic “made strategic moves, and took a lot of risks along the way to put ourselves at the front end of that wave,” Olson said. “Which means we threw a lot of money at it,” interjected Lonnie Larson, Sonic’s quality assurance manager. “That’s true,” Olson replied. “We took risks when others in the industry weren’t able to afford to. We invested a lot of time and money into it when we didn’t have a lot of time or money. We went through (the

recession of) 2008 with everybody else. There wasn't any money coming in, but there was a lot of money going out. "We called it an investment," Olson continued. It paid off handsomely. "That helped us to build relationships and make deals that we wouldn't have been able to do a year or two down the road," he said.

As Sonic took the lead in digital wave, its employment numbers surged. Eleven employees were added in 2010; 10 more in 2011. A crew of 25 — when Sonic moved to Miller Road — now stands at 52. Covey sees more growth a likelihood. "The industry is always evolving and coming up with new technology, which means potential for growth," he said. "We are constantly revisiting what we're doing."

ALL THE WHILE, Sonic remains dedicated to lola. "One of our focuses is spending our wealth within the community," Covey said. "In the last 13 months, we've purchased six new vehicles from Twin Motors Ford. Whenever we have customers we fly in, or people to train our techs, we set them up at hotels locally. Our shirts are made at The Shirt Shop. We've done a lot of business with Hawk Business. We use Advantage Computers when we need materials." Megan Hageman, customer service and marketing director, spoke about Sonic's regular food drives to benefit the Community Pantry, or coat drives for needy families. Sonic's work and outreach is highlighted constantly through the social media outlets like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, where Hageman keeps the world in touch with what goes on at Sonic. Sonic employees also take advantage when visiting motels in other communities by collecting courtesy soaps and shampoo bottles, which in turn are donated to Hope Unlimited, the National Guard or other civic agencies. Employees also have honed their green thumbs by planting a garden outside the lola plant. The harvested produce is immediately donated to local businesses to do with as they please. Sonic and Kneisley also had a hand in acquiring playground equipment for the flood-damaged Riverside Park in 2007. "Having Sonic in a small community has helped us within the industry, because we're so community-minded, and we're so close with one another," said Cathy Lynch, human resources director. "Our customers appreciate that we care so much." And as Sonic's reach expands, other communities benefit as well, Hageman said. "We're training technicians who will move to other communities, where they're going to be renting or buying homes, too," she said. "That's important to us, to know we're providing good neighbors and active community members."

Covey also pointed to the excitement that builds around small communities when a new movie screen opens, using Lucas in north central Kansas as an example. The town of fewer than 500 is one of many to have a moviehouse equipped with digital projection system installed by Sonic. "All these little theaters have community pride," Covey said. "When they're open, they're no different in presentation, or quality, as a theater in Chicago or in Denver or in Kansas City. "There's nothing better than going to a small community and installing a new system, and seeing people when they come out of the movie," Covey said.

The rapid growth and changes in technology cause frequent soul-searching, Olson admitted. “We had no idea when we moved out here five years ago that it would change as rapidly as it did,” Olson said.

He noted the company has accomplished many of its short-term goals, such as becoming a respected company, locally and nationwide. Olson recalled a conversation with a passerby recently at an airport. The person saw the “Sonic” shirts, and asked if they were the ones that built movie theaters.

In years past, most associated Sonic — incorrectly — with the completely unrelated chain of Sonic Drive-In restaurants.

“We’re becoming respected across the country, and beyond,” Olson said. “That feels good for the little company that could from lola, Kansas.”