

BUSINESS || INVESTING

Local dinosaur builder a world beater

GLOBAL ISSUES

Beamsville firm a model of innovation, writes columnist **David Crane**

In Beamsville, a small town in southern Ontario, you can find a world-leading company that manufactures, of all things, dinosaurs for top museums on every continent. It is a fascinating example not only of how a Guelph University graduate in sculpture made Canada a global centre for dinosaurs, but also of what entrepreneurship is really all about.

Successful entrepreneurs need two things. First, they must have a good idea for a business, a product or service that other people will want to buy. Second, the entrepreneur must have the capability and commitment to turn the idea into a commercial success. A dogged determination to succeed is essential.

Peter May, the founder of Research Casting International, is an example of something else that is important: experience. He had the benefit of building dinosaurs for the Royal Tyrell Museum

of Paleontology in Drumheller, Alta. and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. The best entrepreneurs are often people who have had on-the-job experience, which gives them learning curve opportunity.

But May's experience is important for another reason. If Canada is to create good jobs and succeed economically in the global economy, it must find specialized niches where it can excel. Canada's future depends on successful entrepreneurs who can identify and build such high-value businesses, with good jobs, serving the world marketplace.

Research Casting International has become a leading supplier of dinosaurs and other museum exhibits around the world. If you saw the movie, *Jurassic Park*, you will remember the scene late in the movie where the survivors of the failed enterprise are seeking escape from aggressive raptors by climbing up a giant dinosaur skeleton.

It was built by May and his company, after a cold-call letter to Steven Spielberg's film company when May read of plans for the movie. In fact, there were two dinosaur skeletons that May built for the movie, an Alamosaurus and a Tyrannosaurus rex.

May also built the five-storey tall Ba-

rosaurus in the main rotunda of the American Museum of Natural History in New York, which is shown defending its youngster from an attacking Allosaurus.

According to the company, "the display represents the tallest free-standing dinosaur mount in the world." It also required molding and casting a section of the Hell Creek Badlands in Montana.

In fact, he has built hundreds of dinosaurs for museums around the world, including fleshed out dinosaurs on display in Canada's Museum of Natural History. His customers include virtually every museum in the world with a dinosaur collection, along with a project for a Disney theme park.

Word of his expertise spread quickly and, while working at the ROM, May set up a small facility in Toronto. Then he moves to a larger shop in Oakville in the late 1980s, and later in Beamsville. Today he has a 25,000-square-foot facility and employs about 30 people with a wide range of skills in materials, molding, digitization and engineering. His business is headed toward \$5 million a year in sales.

Moreover, it is moving beyond dinosaurs to other types of exhibits. For ex-

ample, his company built the planets for the Hayden Planetarium in New York, an Egyptian subterranean glass-making furnace from 2300 B.C. for the Corning Museum of Glass, as well as molds of site-specific geological formations from around the world, including lava flows from Hawaii, the San Andreas fault line in California and layers of ash that fell when Vesuvius erupted in Pompeii.

It was the only foreign company

granted permission to mold artifacts in the Three Gorges in China before the Yangtze River was flooded.

Right now, May's projects include a major dinosaur exhibit for a Berlin museum and the reconstruction of an extinct whale for the Virginia Museum of Natural History.

It is the experience of May, and many other creative entrepreneurs across Canada like him, that gives us the best hope for a successful country in the future.

So long as there are people with clever ideas and the determination and ability to make them work, we should have a good chance in the global economy.

David Crane can be reached at crane@interlog.com by email or by fax at 416-926-8048.