

# Howard youth's signs show up around countryside

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HOWARD — Most of Jimmy Haak's 14-year old peers are probably more creative than him when it comes to spending money, but few could match the creative way he earns his money.

Haak, of rural Howard, has been making decorative metal yard signs and ornaments since he was 8. His first project — a 4-H exhibit — led others to ask for his services.

"My relatives wanted some, and then it went on from there," Haak said. "My aunt took one down to the river, and somebody saw that."

Friends of the relatives began calling, and then friends of the relatives' friends. Without ever really intending to, Haak turned his hobby into a mini-business. And instead of letting the profits go to his head, he used his newfound wealth to pad his savings and to purchase a plasma cutter, welder and hand tools.

Haak practices similar restraint in personal relations. He seems more likely to bend iron bars with his hands than to boast of his talent, and his only confessed wish is a new pickup. In the future he wants to follow his father into farming, do some mechanic and repair work on the side, and continue making signs.

He's got some ideas for new types of signs, but he has no desire to advertise or start a Web site. Word-of-mouth advertising has worked fine so far, and he can't let his business grow to the point that it infringes on the growing season.

Because of his farming schedule, Haak limits

his sign work mostly to winter. He works in a shop on the family farm.

His main product is a heart-shaped yard sign about 4 feet high and 3 feet wide. Haak uses a manually-operated roller to bend a flat iron bar into the shape of a heart. Inside the rim of the heart, Haak welds a family's last name and a silhouetted shape such as a tractor, pheasant, cow, etc.

Haak's mother, Janet, helps him do some of the detailed painting on the signs. Farmers and ranchers like to stake the signs along their driveways or in their front yards.

Haak charges \$30 for a basic heart-shape with a name inside it. If the name consists of more than four letters, each additional letter is \$1 extra. The price to add a shape inside the heart is \$5.

Haak also makes decorative mailbox toppers, which he cuts from flat sheets of metal. Those sell for about \$20. Many of Haak's creations can be seen in yards and on top of mailboxes all over his rural Howard neighborhood. Others are displayed in cemeteries near Howard, and he has shipped his creations to customers in Iowa and Nebraska.

Haak also does practical metalworking around the farm. Among his creations are a hose reel, a fitting shoot for show cattle, a bike rack and shelf brackets.

Unlike his ego, his handiwork seems to know no bounds. "Getting him to talk about it is the tougher part," said Haak's father, Larry. "Sometimes I have to get after him a little bit."