



## Cool & Collected

Meet the winner and finalists in the 2023 Coolest Thing Made in Arkansas contest.

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### SPOTLIGHT: MADE IN ARKANSAS

**1** **Weldon Williams & Lick Inc.** has printed tickets in Fort Smith since 1898.

**2** **No event** is too big. It's done work for Super Bowls, World Cups and Olympic games.

**3** **The company** is adding skills and services as ticketing goes digital.

# Ticket Masters

After 125 years, Fort Smith printer keeps innovating

BY MARK FRIEDMAN  
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FORT SMITH – Major League Baseball had an unusual request for its 2008 All-Star Game ticket: It wanted its printer to mix infield dirt from the old Yankee Stadium into the ink, preserving a few grains of the House That Ruth Built in every ticket.

Weldon Williams & Lick Inc. had printed tickets for MLB for decades, but the Fort Smith printing company had never done anything like that for any customer since it was founded in 1898.

But WW&L took the challenge, and MLB soon shipped three five-gallon buckets of Yankee Stadium soil from the Bronx to WW&L's nearly 200,000-SF Fort Smith plant.

"And so when they printed the tickets, they had what looked like dirt of the infield," said Sam Bright, who handles cost estimation and production planning. "And they tinted it



MICHAEL WOODS

Weldon Williams & Lick CEO Tracey Geren, left, and President Ron Wilson discuss what the future holds for the ticket-printing company headquartered in downtown Fort Smith.

WW&L

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## Vulcan Hits Pickleball's Sweet Spot

• **Vulcan finished** the biggest-ever manufacturing run for pickleball paddles this summer for Walmart.

• **36 million** Americans played pickleball in 2022, and new courts are being built across Arkansas.

BY KYLE MASSEY  
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First things first: It's a pickleball paddle, not a racket.

It's one of a few essentials for playing America's fastest-growing sport, and "thousands and thousands" are made each year by an Arkansas company, Tanners Team Sports Inc.

Tanners of Hot Springs "got in on the ground floor" of pickleball with its Vulcan brand paddles, according to Lucia DiGiacomo, general manager of Vulcan Sporting Goods, a Tanners subsidiary.

And Vulcan is now an official paddle of the burgeoning Professional Pickleball Association tour.

"Of course I play, absolutely," DiGiacomo told *Arkansas Business*. A former tennis player like Tanners CEO Vince

VULCAN SPORTS

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### Exec Q&A: Adriene Brown

The Small Business Administration's state director on how higher rates affect lending.

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Arkansas' Largest Manufacturers

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**1898**

Year that **Chauncey Lick** partnered with **O.D. Weldon** and **George T. Williams** to create **Weldon Williams & Lick**.

**2%**

Annual turnover rate for workers at **WW&L**, which today employs about 140 people in Fort Smith.

**56%**

Year-over-year revenue decline in 2020, as the company confronted **COVID-19** and a sudden shift to digital ticketing.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WOODS

Ringside tickets, printed by WW&L, for a fight between Floyd Mayweather Jr. and Manny Pacquiao in Las Vegas in 2015 were selling for \$100,000.

## WW&L

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brown with that gritty feel, so you actually had some of the dirt in the ink when you touched it.”

In 2009, the Yankees started playing in a new stadium across the street from the original.

While MLB’s project was unique, creativity and customer service was

nothing new for WW&L. Over 125 years, it has printed tickets for Super Bowls, Olympic Games, World Cups — even a visit from the pope.

But in recent years, WW&L has weathered major threats to its business: COVID-19 and the shift from paper tickets to digital ones.

WW&L had been confronting the latter for the past decade, CEO Tracey Geren said. “We just didn’t know it would happen overnight

because of COVID,” she said. “So that was a bit tough.”

The company doesn’t release revenue figures, but Geren said that in the first year of the pandemic revenue dropped 56% from 2019. By 2021, it had declined 67% from 2019.

“It was just that drastic to this company, because the two industries we were in, education and live entertainment, were closed for business,”

she said.

To make up for lost revenue, WW&L is expanding service lines, such as issuing VIP credentials for backstage access. WW&L embeds radio frequency identifiers into the credentials, which allow or deny access to certain areas, WW&L President Ron Wilson said.

“We’re really taking more of that project management role,” he said. “And then we’ll go out and help

**Left to right: Carissa Brewer, designer/compositor, designs a project for one of the company’s customers. A WW&L employee works on an Original Heidelberg Cylinder press. WW&L custom mixes all its ink to get the right color for a customer’s product. David Kelley, a digital press operator, reviews printed items. Richard Baker, vice president of manufacturing, said precision is a must in the printing process.**



them figure out who the best partner is for that and we deliver the whole solution.”

WW&L also has expanded its line of event souvenirs and commemorative gifts. “We’re much broader in the whole cycle of customer experience before, during and after than we’ve ever been,” Wilson said.

WW&L, which for years declined requests for interviews with *Arkansas Business* and other media, decided that it was time for a change.

“We’re realizing now that we do kind of need to promote ourselves a little bit. People need to know who we are and what we do,” said Richard Baker, vice president of manufacturing. “And so we’re having to change our stance a little bit, because print is minimizing ... due to digital.”

And more changes are on the way.

In August, WW&L announced that Geren will retire next year after 38 years with the company. Wilson, previously president of WW&L’s wholly-owned subsidiary, KIS Technologies, will succeed her.

**Founding**

Chauncey Lick is credited with founding WW&L and getting it into the ticket printing business in the late 1800s.

At that time, the manager of a Fort Smith opera house came to Lick “to save his professional life,” according to the company’s website.

The manager asked Lick if he could make reserve tickets for a performance in just two days, said Cap Vick, WW&L’s vice president of operations and Lick’s great-great grandson.

“Back then, printing out reservations was very difficult, even more difficult than it is today, because you had to do all the typesetting,” Vick said. “It was a painstaking deal to set all that type.”

Lick worked around the clock, completed the job and, according



Richard Baker shows some of the machines used in the printing process.

to Vick, found his niche. He then partnered with O.D. Weldon and George T. Williams to create Weldon Williams & Lick in 1898. Williams later sold his interest to Lick and Weldon, discontinuing an active role in the company.

With controlling interest in the company, Lick in 1906 bought land at 7th and A streets in Fort Smith and built a two-story, 21,000-SF building that the company has expanded over the years to nearly 200,000-SF. Its brick exterior with few windows gives no indication

about what goes on inside.

With about 45 shareholders, the company’s ownership largely remains in the hands of Lick’s family, Vick said.

**Customers and Employees**

A key development for the company early in the 20th century was printing custom, numbered tickets for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. WW&L printed about 95% of all of Ringling Bros.’ tickets, which “really set them on

their way of doing this,” Vick said.

WW&L also diversified, printing placards that told the ice delivery person how large of a block of ice to leave at a house.

But it was Lick’s philosophy on business — to take care of the employees and customers — that carried the company through the decades. WW&L owners issue profit-sharing bonuses, and the company covers the cost of health insurance.

**WW&L**

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PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WOODS

WW&L displays tickets in the halls of its Fort Smith headquarters to college football games dating back to the 1930s. WW&L also produced tickets for MLB games.

**WW&L**

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As a result, employees have been “extremely loyal,” Vick said. The average tenure at the company is about 18 years, with some working there for five decades, and the turnover rate is about 2%.

Among the company’s employees are married couples and parents and their adult children.

Geren, the CEO, said that one of the keys to the company’s success is having “an experienced, dedicated workforce. We’ve invested in our people.”

Lick also was dedicated to serving the customer, which has also guided the company.

“Our people will move heaven and earth to take care of a customer, and to get the art just right, to bail them out of a jam because they didn’t order on time,” Geren said. “I mean, we take great pride in that.”

The customers appreciate the attention to detail, too. The tickets “are like \$100 bills” to their customers, Geren said. “It’s their revenue stream.”

And WW&L guarantees the accuracy of the tickets.

“There are a lot of printers out there, but you have to really know how to do that,” she said. “It was not easily duplicated by others.”

Lick was president for 55 years.

“He was very, very good at pivoting and reacting and listening to customers,” Geren said.

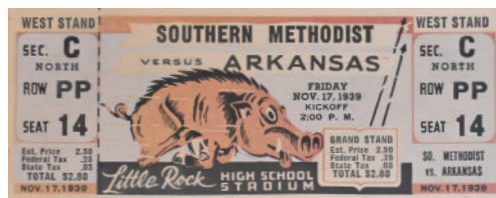
In that spirit, WW&L has branched out into the manufacturing of parking passes for colleges and other customers.

Those passes require intense testing; WW&L’s research and development department puts them through machines designed to mimic the harshest of weather conditions.

**COVID-19**

WW&L had already been preparing for the shift to digital tickets when the pandemic hit in 2020.

“We started positioning ourselves in different directions,” Geren said. “But then we really had to shift and expand and accelerate our focus, as



a result of the pandemic.”

The switch happened quickly, and WW&L lost some accounts as paper tickets shifted to digital platforms.

One digital ticket competitor had a single school on its platform in 2020 — within a year, it had 160, Wilson said.

Business declined, and for the

first time in its history, WW&L had to lay off workers, going from 260 employees at the start of the pandemic to about 120. Today, it employs about 140.

Geren said WW&L made sure it kept its skilled workforce.

“The most important thing to us is to have people [in place] when business returns,” she said.

Geren said that the business hasn’t returned from pre-pandemic levels because “a big chunk” of its business was with reserved seats.

“Those were really high-value projects,” she said. “And we know that work’s not coming back in that form.”

**The Future**

WW&L focused on growth and started thinking differently as paper tickets declined.

“We started thinking in terms of connection,” Geren said. “So we started thinking about that and working with organizations who still want to reach out and connect with their fans and their patrons.”

Some of the work includes providing fans with souvenirs such as custom tickets or ice from the hockey rink of a championship game.

“It’s a time of great change in the organizations that we do business with, and so out of change comes opportunity,” Geren said.

The museum at the company’s headquarters features tickets and other items WW&L has produced in its 125 years.

“What we do today is on this wall,” said Baker, vice president of manufacturing, pointing out the various items to guests.

“The bottom line is we print highly embellished tickets to events, performing arts, parking, all the different stuff,” he said.

“We do books. We do lotteries. We do a lot.”

“Now, can I tell you that we’ll always do that?” he

said.

“I don’t know what the future holds. We will pivot and adjust. That’s what we do as a company.” ■



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Tracey Geren, CEO, Weldon Williams & Lick Inc.