

THE LITTLE SHOP THAT COULD

TIRE RAMA



Tommy Wilson, Rudyard's original "Old Sore Head", views new sign on HWY 2. Circa 1960s.

If you're driving U.S. #2, running east or west along Montana's Hi-Line, you'll eventually come to a large red sign that advertises the town of Rudyard: "596 Nice People—1 Old Sore Head. Rip Snorting & Raring for Business".

If you make the turn and head north, you'll follow the black-top through a neat and trim community with a dozen or so businesses. In an era when small rural towns seem to be struggling, Rudyard is confident and spunky. It sports a theatre, a bank—even a bowling alley.

One of the businesses on the far end of town is Tire Rama, a thriving tire and repair shop that is the birthplace of a corporation now headquartered in Billings and is—at 45 stores and growing—the 23rd largest tire company in America.

The story of Tire Rama established its roots in the 50s when a local farmer named Clarence Lynch opened a small shop in his garage. He pumped gas, did some repair work and sold a few tires. Clarence had a flair for business; he was well-liked and fair and his mom and pop enterprise quickly

outgrew its britches. In 1957, a shiny new building called Lynch's Tire Service opened on main street.

Clarence Lynch, a man with a taste for adventure and a stomach for risk, wasn't done yet. Finding two equally minded investors, he formed BLM Tire company and, gathering their resources, they went on the prowl for more tire stores.

The business continued to expand and by the early 60s, Lynch was hitting the road to promote his tire dealership and before long he had more work than he could handle.

While traveling in the northeast corner of the state, Clarence met Jack Hasty, the manager of a co-op in the small town of Richland. Along with Mr. Lynch's knack for business came an ability to recognize character—he could spot an honest man and a good worker and he saw such a man in Jack Hasty. Mr. Lynch recruited Hasty to run his store in Rudyard, eventually selling it to him in 1967. In 1974, Jack Hasty bought another tire store in Havre.

About this same time, a young farmer north of town named Chuck Patrick had a growing fondness for Mr. Lynch's lovely

daughter. Clarence immediately saw promise in the young man—he was smart and hard-working. The 70s were a hard slog for farmers and it didn't take much convincing—Chuck married Florene and moved to Great Falls, taking over the tire store there.

The fledgling corporation continued its upward surge—BLM acquired tire stores in Spokane and Rapid City, South Dakota and one in far-flung Anchorage, Alaska. But by 1977, the partners decided it was time to hang it up. They offered the business—lock, stock and barrel—to Patrick and Hasty. Knowing a great opportunity when they saw one, the two men decided to make the jump. On the very day the new business owners signed the papers, the tire store in Spokane burned to the ground.

Despite Tire Rama's shaky beginning, the men recovered their poise and set a course for the future—they had a company to build. Chuck stayed with the store in Great Falls and Jack Hasty, Tire Rama's first president, relocated to head up the sales division in Billings. Through the 70s and early 80s, the partners closed the stores in Anchorage and Rapid City and bought out various tire dealerships in Montana. Chuck—who became the 2nd president of Tire Rama when Hasty retired in 1992—brought his brother Warren into the organization in 1978 as the Chief Financial Officer and by the time of their retirement in 2003, Tire Rama was a force to be reckoned with; it was on the map in the world of tire dealerships with holdings that included 27 stores.

In 1991, Patrick and Hasty hired a young man named David Wehr. Dave was born and raised in Rudyard and he proved to be a quick study. Starting out as a purchasing agent, he developed many talents, working in various areas that included the marketing and finance departments. He spent 10 years honing his skills as manager of the retread plant in Billings.

In 2003, when Chuck Patrick retired, a transition team cast about for someone to take the helm. Their man, they decided, was David Wehr, whose family had owned an auto parts store right next door to Lynch's Tire Service.

"I've been in business all my life," says Wehr. "I remember pumping gas at my dad's store when I was 8 years old."

Ironically, the CEO of one of the biggest tire dealerships in the United States also had a summer job mowing the lawn of the original tire shop, Mr. Clarence Lynch.

At the present time, Tire Rama has dealerships in Washington, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming and employs over 500 people. The company has doubled in size in the last five years.

Is there a formula for Tire Rama's success?

Dave Wehr had this to say: "Hi-Line guys are the best

workers and the smartest guys one can find and we scoop 'em up any chance we get."

Such qualities are found in abundance in rural communities along the Hi-Line, and it is evidenced in the fact that the top tier positions in Tire Rama's corporate offices belong to men from that area. Greg Passon, Chief Operations Director, is from Havre. Steve Brownlee, from Rudyard, is the manager of the store in Billings. Skip Harden, married to Clarence Lynch's daughter Jodi, was born and raised in Hingham and manages a tire store in Missoula. Bill Bangs of Inverness spent years with the company. And to top it off, the current Chief Financial Officer, Trent Fuhrman, is Jack Hasty's nephew. Like one big family and it's come full circle.

Corporate headquarters in Billings, the mother-ship, serves the other 45 stores. Cavernous warehouses contain



Lynch's Tire Service, early 60s.

vast numbers of tires and supplies that are shipped out daily in a fleet of colorful semis. The adjoining command center is a beehive of activity. Tire Rama, known as a class act in the industry, is poised for expansion, confident of its future. Their goal, says CEO Wehr, is 50 stores by 2013.

Not too bad for a business that got its start in a small Hi-Line town.

The original tire store, independently owned by Bob Toner—Rudyard's honorary Old Sorehead—is still going strong and stays busy serving a 40 mile radius. Staffed by long-time employees Rick Pester, Lowell Strissel and Hazel May, it shares a tried-and-true business philosophy with the corporation in Billings.

"We have loyal customers," says Toner. "They want to be treated fair, be treated right. And if you do that you get return business. You've got to treat 'em like you like to be treated yourself."

It's the Hi-Line ethic. That's where it all started. And it's there to stay. **SM**



~Craig Sterry moved to Great Falls from the Hi-Line two years ago. His articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including River's Edge, Fiddler Magazine and Big Sky Journal. He is on a life-long quest for the perfect bowl of chili.