

Barney Kaplan Surplus to End Era Under Detroit's Hood

By Bill McGraw

Barney Kaplan is liquidating his inventory.

He's selling tens of thousands of pulleys, rotors, armatures, housings, solenoids, stators, bushings, coils, pinions, shafts, bolts, starters, alternators and generators. Those gadgets help run Packards, Fords and LaSalles from the 1930s, and also Russian tanks, U.S. Navy minesweepers, World War II aircraft, steam shovels and rock-crushers—among many other things.

Since the 1940s, Kaplan, 88, of Farmington Hills, Mich. has been a supplier to people who practice the greasy art of parts rebuilding for automobiles and other things that use engines. His company's name is Barney Kaplan Surplus.

Most people don't know much about the parts rebuilding business. But among rebuilders, Kaplan—a born storyteller who has wavy white hair, chaotic eyebrows and the thick fingers of people who work with their hands—is legendary, as is his museum-like warehouse on Detroit's west side.

"Barney is unique," said Bill Gager, president of the Virginia-based Automotive Parts Remanufacturers Association. "What he was selling is unique."

In addition to selling parts unavailable anywhere else in the world, Kaplan also has served as a benevolent uncle to a couple of generations of businesspeople, giving them advice, bend-over-backward service and sometimes easy credit.

"He has a heart of gold the size of North America," said Rob Buksar of Hoosier Electric in Gary, Ind. "The entire industry thinks of him as a great guy, an honest guy, a guy who would roll out the red carpet for you."

Kaplan has had a lot of fun in 60 years of supplying parts, and he has traveled a lot and made a lot of friends. But he said he has not become rich.

"My problem is I focused on other people and on the industry and build-

ing growth," he said. "If I had focused on the money, I'd have 3 or 4 million in the bank."

Kaplan appears hearty, but his eyes are getting weak. His partners are his son Jerry, 54, and his wife, Saralee Kaplan, 87, a gentle woman who works the phones and heats up homemade chicken soup for visitors.

"I've been on the phone with Europe," she said one day last week. "I'm just locking in some sales, and I'm so proud of myself. As I get older, I get more confident."

Despite being a couple of decades past retirement age, the Kaplans plan to continue as brokers, putting together people and parts. Only the parts no longer will be in their warehouse.

Today, that warehouse, a two-story building that sprawls along a run-down section of Epworth Avenue, is an emporium of esoterica.

Aisle after aisle is filled with shelves and bins and barrels of machines and parts of machines whose identities would be a mystery to most people.

Like the 10-inch cylinder sitting on a kitchen table that almost takes two hands to lift: It's a part of a starter for the engine of a crane.

Or the piece sitting near Kaplan's office that looks like a small torpedo: "That's a starter for a diesel locomotive," Kaplan said.

Kaplan is a tinkerer, too, who has designed such things over the years as a machine for dumping large barrels, shop-floor carts and a table that speeds the soldering of parts for generators and starters.

As they sell the contents inside their warehouse, the Kaplans are dealing with a problem on the outside of the building: Graffiti that City of Detroit inspectors say they must remove. One is a stylized version of the name Thor. The other says, starkly, "Detroit cries."

Barney Kaplan calls the graffiti "art-work that brightens up the neighborhood," which includes broken and burned-out buildings that have old tires and garbage spilling out of them. The Kaplan warehouse has been burglarized close to a dozen times in the past year, Jerry Kaplan said.

But Detroit's business climate is not the reason the Kaplans are liquidating. It's because the rebuilding business is changing, partly because of cut-rate

competition from Asia, partly because parts are made better today than 20 years ago.

Jerry Kaplan said it will probably take six months or more to clear out the warehouse.

Barney Kaplan butted in, saying: "We're going to get mad and just crate it all up and get it out of here. I'm not crazy about it. But I can't afford to stay in it."

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