

Memoirs of a Rebuilder

**By Robert R. Brown
As told to Bradley R. Brown**

I guess the story of B&L Alternator and Automotive really began with football. Frank J. Brown Jr., my father, made the trip across Virginia from Bristol to Newport News at the age of 22 after finding out that the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company would pay him to play football for the Apprentice School team. So Dad left the mountains and headed for the coast. Back then it took him 13 hours and he arrived in Newport News on August 5, 1934.

I am sure at this time it was unclear what the trip and future would hold for him but as a hardworking man of the times he still made the journey. Frank was the only boy of eight kids in his family and he had to make it for himself.

Frank began working in the X31 department for electrical trade. After four years of industriousness and dedication he became a young supervisor and at the age of 26 was also captain of the football team. Not bad for a country boy who grew up laying concrete with his father's business.

Frank always had ambitions for a business of his own, so in 1948 he bought two lots for about \$500 and built a 50-by-100-foot building where he could begin his legacy.

His first business was called Mercury Armature Company. Frank would let apprentice guys work on "piece work" winding armatures and receiving pay for what they could turn out. Frank also had limited rights to VMC who sold wire, varnish, ovens, etc., solely to anyone who had the franchise (which was limited).

Just to give you an idea for the armature business back then, it took 13 major operations for one armature to be produced. The day came when Frank bought a 1953 Ford Panel Delivery Truck and began selling and delivering armatures from within town to North Carolina. This delivery process grew to fixing generators on tractors, cars, and trucks.

One day a local businessman named Whity Green asked Frank if he would be

willing to supply auto parts stores with generators, armatures, and starters. Frank, of course, said yes. So he started hiring employees and rebuilding units from junkyards. As the business started growing Frank let one of the shipyard apprentice boys start running the business during the day while Frank continued to work day shifts at the shipyard and nights for himself. At this time the name was changed to B&L Generator Service, where B was for Brown and L was for Lafferty. After a few years Frank bought out Lafferty's portion of the shop.

Frank at this time started to expand his business more by bonding brake shoes—400 sets a day which sold for \$1.25 per set wholesale—and once again the name was changed to B&L Generator and Brake Shoe Service. Frank never changed the name B&L since it was already pretty well known. At this time the wholesale side of the business was doing great and B&L was stocking up to 25 stores.

In 1961 he made the difficult decision to leave the shipyard and work full-time in his business.

At age 17 I started working full-time after school since up to this point in time I had been working folding boxes and such since the age of 12. I'll never for-

get that year, it was 1962. I began working on Ford starters with my dad and he started teaching me everything he could about winding armatures, among other things. He also had a two bay garage for electrical installations. Back then you did everything you could and no job was the same job all the time. One day you would be building starters, next generators, next boxing brake shoes, next loading trucks, unloading the cores, and so on and so forth.

After some time I started working on some cars out in the bays or whatever else I could do to help out. When the alternators first started making their appearance on the scene in the early 60s, I started working on the Chryslers, Fords, and the Delcos. Back then the light was on, you pulled the alternator, replaced the trio and reinstalled it and made easy money off of a 25-cent part. Now look at the way the business has changed.

On April 4, 1964, I was drafted in the Army and served with the 25th Division 2nd/27th Infantry. At this time my father continued to run the business with the stress of me at war in Vietnam and wondering every day if I would return. Luckily I returned home on January 14, 1967—battled and beaten from the war and what I had seen, but went right back



Just seven years young, the current B&L Shop was modeled after dealerships and is state-of-the-art.



Times they are a-changing. Inside B&L are 10 bays for full service auto repairs!



The original B&L shop was built in 1950 in Newport News, Va. by Frank Brown, Jr.



Second and third generation Browns—grandson Brad (L) and son Robert (R) in 2003.



In 1969, Patriarch Frank Brown, Jr., age 57 is seen here busy at work.



King of the heap in 1965, son Robert Brown sits on a stack of Delco starters.



Business was good, as evidenced by these 30 1959 and 1960 alternators.



Frank hand wound these mid-sixties Ford armatures in 1968.

to work in the family business.

A short time later I met my beautiful wife Debbie Hancock and started a life along with working for my father to continue the business. On February 9, 1973 I had my first daughter Melanie, and at that time life was wonderful. As the years continued to change the business into more car repairs and less wholesale sales, the family auto part stores were falling by the wayside due to foreign competition. On February 20, 1976 I had my son Bradley and hoped that one day he would be there to work with me like I had with my father.

In 1978 my father sold me the business and these were the happiest years of my life. I was a business owner, happily married, and I was watching my kids grow up. Business was ever-changing and at this time we changed the name again to B&L Alternator and Automotive, and built onto the current building with an eight-bay addition. We continued to grow into more of a full service auto repair facility and as time passed the rebuilding/wholesaling/brake shoe side of the business just faded away with all the small stores selling out or going under due to the overwhelming competition from the big name stores.

Everyone was looking for a cheap price and a lifetime warranty—which is a marketing genius in itself. Just how many units are replaced in a lifetime anyway? Chances are you're going to sell your vehicle, lose your receipt, have other failures and such before the warranty will ever be used.

To add to this competition the foreign market was really taking off with leaps and bounds which in turn set forth to change the business further than ever before. Units were harder to fix and parts were much more expensive than ever before. As we continued to evolve the full service repair side of the business the rebuild shop services became more specialized. We worked on more marine and industrial units than ever before along with servicing the ever growing needs of the full service side of the business. We also started inspecting cars and doing complete repairs such as motor jobs. The need to evolve in this business has been a very large part of staying alive.

My son Brad has been working with me, running the business for over eight years now, and we are constantly talking about the changing needs of this occupation. All of the rebuilders in my area are gone except maybe one, and the difficulty of getting parts and repairing items gets harder all the time. We see more heavy equipment items than ever before and also sell units that are remanufactured or new. The time and cost in repairing most units these days is greater than just stocking the whole unit for sale.

The large part of our business now is in our new state-of-the-art shop we built for full service auto repairs and modeled after current dealerships. This 10-plus bay shop is top-notch and allows us to continue to grow and further our legacy in this market which is forever changing. We have been open in our new building going on seven years now and man what a ride it has been!

I look back and wonder where time has gone and how everything came to light but I guess that's the legacy that my son will have to continue long after I am gone. I could have retired by now, but when I think of all my dad went through it gives me incentive to keep working. Life is so rewarding but you have to be willing to stand up and continue to always fight to the end.

Robert "Bob" Brown is president of B&L Alternator and Automotive, Inc., Newport News, Va. His son Brad is company vice president.