

Illinois Rebuilder Honored for Half Century of Service

By Traci Matt
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In a world where careers change as quickly as clothing styles, Ron Petrucci is a rare breed. Petrucci, owner of Prix Parts in St. Charles, Ill., recently received the Golden Recognition Award from the Automotive Parts & Service Association of Illinois (APSA). The award recognizes recipients for “50 years of conscientious and steadfast adherence to the highest principles and standards which have contributed immeasurably to the advancement and development of the automotive industry and the community.”

Petrucci has been a member of the automotive industry since he began working at Majestic Auto Parts in Riverside, Ill., in 1955. Today his business is the result of an army of satisfied import customers, including a strong base of antique import restoration enthusiasts.

Prix Parts was founded in 1964, partially due to a growing need for import rebuilt generators and starters. With \$500 cash, Petrucci bought all the used import generators and starters he could find and began rebuilding them. He simply found a need and figured out how to fill it.

For example, today the Prix Parts Web site boldly declares they have “Vanquished the Lord of Darkness, Sir Lucas.”

Petrucci explains: “The ‘vanquished or conquered’ is a term associated with service people that solve the problems related to products made by the Joseph Lucas Company. This goes way back to right after World War II. Sir Lucas manufactured much of the electrical equipment in British cars. At that time their cars were offered to be usable for eight years. With that in mind, things were designed accordingly. Their problem began when customers started to really like the Austin Healey, MG, Morgan, and Triumph cars that Britain turned out.

“Then when those eight year products started to need servicing and switches acted up — wind-screen motors (windshield wiper motors to you), heater motors, etc., did not work. That included headlights, hence the ‘Prince of Darkness’ term was born. Lucas problems are, in part, responsible for many mechanic jobs around the world.”

Petrucci soon found that as his market grew, so did the competition.

“Prix Parts had been the third independently owned source of import car parts to offer parts for imports in the Chicago area back in 1964,” he said. “The specialty of our competition — to gain market share — was a fast delivery of almost any dollar amount of an order. Two of these managed to hire staff that my store had trained, one by offering a company car for coming over to them.

However, I believed that would be short lived. This was not the diamond industry and you counted each dollar of profit carefully. I could see no profit in delivering a \$5 item so the competition soon earned that share of sales.”

This was just one of many tough lessons Petrucci learned in the hands-on school of business. He often found himself as an employee “training camp” for other parts stores that wanted to branch into the import market. In addition, in order to maintain market share he formed a “union” with a longtime customer to offer auto repair, remanufacturing and new parts sales. A difference in management ideas eventually led to the demise of the auto repair venture, but many things worked out well for Prix Parts.

“Looking at the big picture, owning the property that I operated my business out of was to my long-term gain. When the repair company failed, I checked the market and found that I could lease the property and do very well. I did just that and moved my rebuilding business close to home. Bottom line — if at all possible, purchase the property you operate out of and it will be good to you later,” he said.

Back in the 60s, today’s “antique” import vehicles were newer vehicles that faced a parts and information crisis in the U.S. Petrucci credits his rabidly loyal customer base to spending the past four decades “offering more than parts and service.” At one point this included a 30-minute delivery offer, as well as technical seminars for customers.

“We would start with an agenda that would sort of get their interest, however we often wandered as questions dictated,” he said. “Things would come up like ‘What do you do when a customer comes in at 6 pm to pick up his car and you find his credit card is maxed out?’ These customers knew their business of repairs but often the related issues would knock them silly. At this point, all jumped in with ideas and we soon built a close family that all enjoyed sharing time with.

I thought it was great to be able to help and that created the bond keeping us all needing one another a little.”

Petrucci found that by extending extra effort he was able to gain business. One example he gave was the day he canvassed repair shops and service stations to find that the majority of them did business with Wheaton Auto Parts. He proceeded to the auto parts store, and after impress-



The Golden Recognition Award was given to Ron Petrucci of Prix Parts by the Automotive Parts & Service Association of Illinois for 50 years of exemplary service to the automotive industry.

ing them with the list of contacts he had made, walked away with an order of his own for rebuilt units.

At Prix Parts' peak in the 1970s, Petrucci employed a staff of six as well as three rebuilders in a full-scale parts store. Today he runs the show by himself. In addition, he owns Speed Merchants, and organizes local racetrack rental and arrangements for corporate outings and car dealers to teach safe road racing high-speed driving skills. A nice change of pace from a day on the golf course!

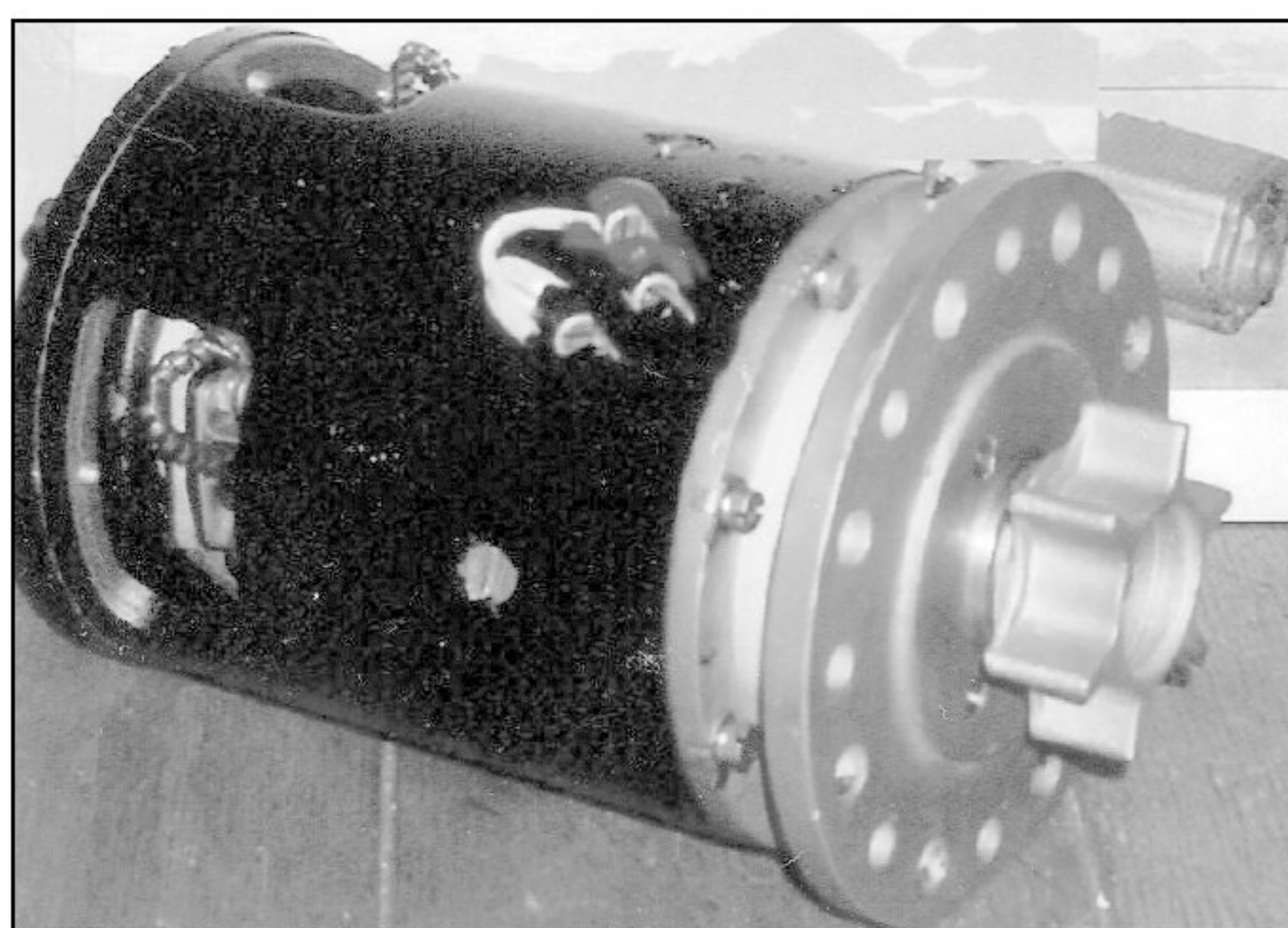
Petrucci loves to tell stories. One of the most endearing yarns begins in his teen years building a Model "A" Ford street rod and the birth of his love of cars. This led to a decision in 1957 to rent a Shell Service Station on — where else — Route 66.

After attending Shell product training, rounding up extra equipment, and purchasing a used Ford half-ton truck, he was faced with the task of putting the company name on the vehicle. Unfortunately, he did not know a sign painter.

"So, off I went to the local hardware store for stick-on letters that would spell 'Ron's Shell Service,' enough for both doors of the truck," he said. "After driving the truck for a month or so, I noticed people on the passenger side were often smiling and they would wave at me. This went on for a week or more when it dawned on me that I really did not know any of the people that had been waving at me.

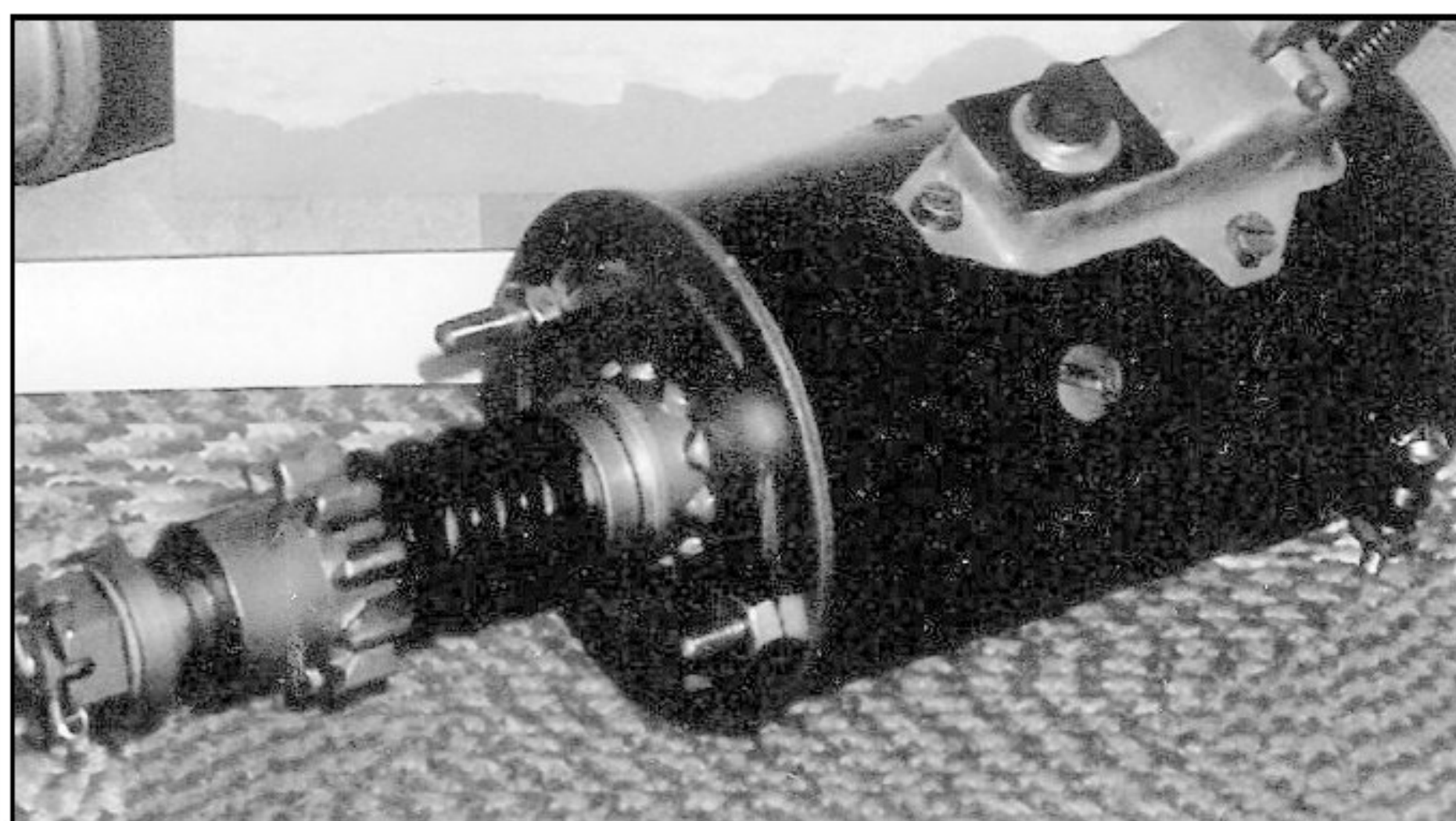
"One day I returned to the gas station from a different direction and parked with the passenger side facing the office. No wonder they were waving and smiling — the 'S' had come off of the right side door and the panel now read Ron's hell Service. So here I am at 21 years of age and I have this really big decision to make in the area of promotion. Remembering that the door missing the letter 'S' brought all the attention, do I continue to gain from the missing letter and remove the 'S' from the driver's door, or return to the hardware store and buy a replacement 'S'?"

"Hmm, not all that big a problem as I found help with making that choice when the Shell Oil Co. sales rep came by and I told him of my great promotion discovery. You bet — I bought a replacement 'S' for the right side door that very day!"



Rotax generator for 1936 Aston Martin, 1500cc. This generator is different because it bolts directly to the front of the engine at the crankshaft and is driven off the crankshaft by a coupling. At the back of the generator — front when mounted — is a fixture to accept the hand crank (if needed to start the engine).

One of his most triumphant stories is about the time he solved a rotating electrical problem for the Robert Bosch Corporation, which was headquartered near him in Broadview, Ill.:



Lucas starter no. 250498 (6-48) for 1946 Morgan F-4. This starter, for a three wheel vehicle with an 8HP engine, is different in the way the drive works. Notice the extended armature shaft. The drive feeds away from the body of the starter — not all that common.

"Back in the early 70s, there was an irritating defect problem with their reman diesel starters. However, I had located the problem and our diesel starter reman units worked fine. One Saturday morning the manager of the Bosch rebuilding shop came in to discuss their problem. I offered to take him into my shop and point out what the difficulty was. The armature



Marelli starter no. MT21F-18/12D9 for 1962 Ferrari Series II.

winding was opening under a load, but on the test bench, the armature was fine.



Lucas screen motor no. 75404A for 1966 Jaguar E-type.

"I gave him a magnifying glass and pointed out the defect in their OE armature. Was he a happy man! He left with the broadest grin and I'm sure he could not wait to get into work Monday morning and tell the shop staff of his discovery."

Today, Petrucci said he feels a "little creek in the morning," and is looking for a replacement to step into his business shoes.

"Here, I must admit, every time I get close to promoting the business sale, I have bad dreams. The thing is just a part of me!"