Indiana shop adjusts to shifting landscape

By Traci Matt
Associate Editor

Twenty years ago, a 16-year-old golf prodigy named Tiger Woods hit the PGA, presidential candidate Ross Perot warned that NAFTA would destroy our economy, and green was just a color.

It was a different world when we last spoke with Tom Silnes at Bridgeport Starter and Alternator in Indianapolis, Ind. At that time he and wife Beverly were juggling three employees, six kids, and Tom's return to college with honors-level grades. They were planning to expand into trucks and more automotive applications, and were worrying about parts proliferation.

A different world, indeed.

Since then they have whittled the shop down to no employees, shelved college because of the high expense, and added grandchildren and great-grandchildren to the fray. Beverly still manages the accounting side of things.

The takeaway of this story is that out of thousands of rebuilding shops which were thriving in the early 90s, Tom is one of the few survivors. When asked why he has been able to stay in business his first reaction is to joke: "I guess I'm just dumb."

Beverly corrects him: "How about stubborn, or persistent."

One of the keys to survival was knowing when to downsize. As Tom watched his customers' businesses fail, or close due to death or poor health, he simply did not replace his employees as they moved on.

"As each one of them left I thought, 'I bet I can get along without hiring somebody else,' and then finally after the last one left I thought, 'I bet I can just do this myself,'" he said.

Customer focus over the past two decades has shifted as well. Although the early-90s found them with a full workload of heavy equipment and industrial applications, including airport ground equipment, today they focus on "mostly truck and oddball" jobs.

"Now we do virtually no heavy equipment," he said. "We also sell more new units. Just the other day I sold an alternator for a police car. No parts were even available for it. How do you rebuild that? There are just so many units available new and cheap, I can't afford the parts, let alone the labor to rebuild them."

Three years after our last interview, Bridgeport Starter and Alternator moved from a rural location nearby the airport, to "the inner city." They own their current 10,600-square-foot building which sits on almost 1.5 acres.

"The building we have is our retirement," Tom said, although he has no answer to the question of when he will retire. They rent the upper level of the building to a furniture store.

The urban location has its challenges, yet Tom takes it all in stride. He said nine people were caught stealing from his secured parking lot this summer alone.

He is more upset about the customer who acid washed his new starter and then brought it in for a warranty return.

Tom has been rebuilding since 1966, when he paid $50 for 50 old starters and generators wasting away in a chicken coop and began working part time out of his garage. He also worked full time as a truck mechanic. His boss was paying new price for rebuilt units, and Tom finally talked him into letting him take some of the work home.

Just as he was building up enough of a customer base to quit the day job, his employer decided he wouldn't send any rebuilding work his way if he quit.

So he quit.

Then in 1971, he set up in an old gas station with a partner and one employee, and started into business full time. In 1983 Bridgeport Starter and Alternator, named for the Indianapolis suburb in which it originated, moved into an 11,000-square-foot building and incorporated.

That same year, they became charter members of the *Electrical Rebuilder's Exchange* mailing list. He said the paper has been a valuable tool for his business, and even recently has come to his aid during a difficult job.

"Last year we had a car show in town and a customer had a starter fail on a V16 Marmon from the 1930s. I had to fix the starter for him to enter a big show at the 500," he said. "Through one of your ads, I found a rewinder in Texas that rewound the armature for me and did a wonderful job."

His proximity to the iconic Indianapolis Motor Speedway continues to be a steady source for what he calls the "oddball" work.

"Right now we have a couple race car starters we're trying to get a brush made for but not having any luck. The customer has 10 of them," he said. "We also have a couple old Ferrari generators and starters coming in."

Our report from 20 years ago included many examples of Bridgeport Starter and Alternator's antique car customers. One was a local doctor with a fleet of show cars that had to be "perfect."

At that time Tom's viewpoint on that customer was a tongue-in-cheek, "Quality has always been our goal. We don't make mistakes."

"Did I really say that?" he again chuckled during our recent conversation. "Well, today we do some antiques, but I spend so much time making parts and looking for parts that we kind of got away from that market."

Tom said rebuilding will be around as long as there are problems to be solved. His most recent challenge is developing tools or fixtures to speed up teardown and reassembling of 39MT Delcos.

"I still see some business out there. It's nothing like it was and I don't think it will ever go back to what we like to call the good old days," he said.

In addition to being an original *Exchange* subscriber, Tom is a faithful ERA Show attendee, and even went home from the Kansas City show in 1997 with the grand prize of a television. That was just the start of a lucky streak and he has added several prizes to that list at subsequent industry events, much to his surprise.

"I figured I used all my luck up when I married Beverly."

ERE