History in the making

Fifth Avenue celebrates silver anniversary

By Randy Rundle

This year Fifth Avenue Antique Auto Parts is celebrating 25 years in business. I want to share with you the story of my business and how a simple idea grew into a company known worldwide for making all types of antique vehicles more reliable and fun to drive.

In the beginning

I developed an interest in antique vehicles at about the age of 12 beginning with 1928 to 1931 Ford Model A cars and trucks. I bought and read every book I could find on the Model A Ford. I also spent time with local antique car collectors who restored the Model A Ford cars as a hobby.

By the time I was 14 years old I was buying and selling Model A Ford cars and parts. In those years (late 1960s) most every farm still had at least one Model A Ford parked back in the trees, along with various motors and spare parts stored away in barns. Parts were inexpensive and plentiful.

I received my first (of many) lessons in marketing during those years. I had a half dozen good years in the Model A parts business. Then the original parts supply began to dry up. It was happening all across the country, which eventually would result in most every part of a Model A Ford being reproduced. I decided I did not want to be in the reproduction parts business so it was time to move on.

I had learned to drive on my grandfather's farm around the age of 12. First it was tractors, then pickups, followed by the bigger grain trucks hauling grain to the elevator. It was not so much the age but when you could reach the pedals that determined when you learned to drive. It was a much simpler time and the farm implements were not nearly as big as they are today.

As I look back now, there were some benefits to growing up in a rural community like Clay Center, Kan. I learned common sense and a good work ethic early on in life. Learning to drive in a 1950 Chevrolet pickup had also piqued my interest in those old trucks. They were affordable and there were plenty of them around.

Most of the farmers in our area bought the 1948 to 1954 model Chevrolet or GMC pickups, and one of the first things they did was build wooden sideboards that were tall enough to be level with the top of the cab. When harvest came, they would fill up the pickup box with grain, level with the cab (or slightly more), and drive to the elevator. Were they overloaded? No doubt, but 4.56 gears in the rear end combined with the standard issue "overload springs" and six-ply heavy duty spilt rim wheels and tires made it all possible.

The granny low gear in the optional four-speed transmission would always pull the load out of the field even if it meant going up and over a terrace or two. It was the same four-speed transmission they put in the two-ton trucks, so it was tough enough for the job. A 90 horsepower six-cylinder engine was not exactly a powerhouse but you would not have known that by how they were used. Looking back now, I am amazed that those trucks held up as well as they did.

(A bit of trivia: 1950 was one of the best sales years for Chevrolet trucks. They outsold Ford and Dodge by a wide margin. It was also one of the best harvest years for the farmers nationwide with good prices and good yields.)

I bought, fixed up and sold dozens of 1948 through 1954 Chevrolet and GMC pickups during my high school years. All of my pickup projects were a work in progress. I did not have a lot of money in those days and those trucks were often my only transportation. While my pickups did not always look the best, they were as dependable as I could make them.

About the time I would get one of those old pickups up and running good, someone would come along and want to buy it. A hundred dollars profit and down the road my truck would go—but now I had money to start on the next one.

It was during these early years that I gained my knowledge of six-volt electrical systems. I experienced firsthand the hard starting, yellowish dim headlights, and the dead batteries.

I learned to park on a hill whenever possible so I did not have to depend on the battery for starting. Then I began to look around and realized that all of the six-volt vehicles in the area were having the same electrical problems I was. I decided all of those six-volt vehicles needed fixing and I was just the guy to do it!

In 1984, I began studying six-volt automotive charging systems in depth, especially generators and regulators. I camped on the doorstep of every local mechanic with questions, spent a lot of time at the local generator rebuild shop learning how a generator charging system was supposed to work, and what I could do to improve the reliability of the six-volt charging systems.



Fifth Avenue Antique Auto Parts, a lifetime labor of love.

I also decided to study the more modern alternator type of charging systems introduced in the mid-1960s. I wanted to know why car companies switched to an alternator type of charging system and how an alternator charging system was different from the generator type of charging system I was used to.

As I discovered, the big advantage to the alternator type of charging system was the ability to recharge the battery at idle and low rpm, something a generator could not do. That meant brighter headlights, easier starting, and no more dead batteries. The problem was, alternators were only built for 12-volt electrical systems.

So I decided to apply modern technology in reverse and build a six-volt alternator. In my mind it made perfect sense. As I look back now, I had just enough automotive electrical knowledge to be dangerous. I talked to anyone who would listen about my six-volt alternator idea. Everyone told me that a six-volt alternator was the dumbest idea they had ever heard of and not to waste my time—or theirs.

Determined not to give up, 18 months later with the help of longtime friend Rod Keen, I had my first successful and very expensive prototype six-volt alternator. I installed it on my 1951 Chevy pickup (it is still there today) and drove it every day and night for a year—with excellent results!

It was the first time I had bright headlights, easy starting, and the first time I was able to see both sides of the driveway at the same time!

With the success of the six-volt alternator finally within reach, a little more engineering was necessary to make my six-volt alternator more "manufacturing friendly." I then began selling them locally to six-volt vehicle dealers who were still experiencing the same dead batteries, hard starting and dim headlights that I had.

My six-volt alternator made big improvements to the reliability of those vehicles as well. With satisfied customers locally, I knew I was on the right path. In January of 1987, I started Fifth Avenue Antique Auto Parts to market and manufacture my new six-volt alternator. The name came from my address (I lived at the corner of Fifth and Arthur) and I thought the name sounded a little upscale.

Fifth Avenue Antique Auto Parts has had only two business locations in 25 years. The first was the original location at 502 Arthur Avenue in Clay Center. Then in 1992, I bought a 3,500-square-foot building located in downtown Clay Center which still serves as the main location today.

I spent six months fixing up the new building, putting in central air and heat to replace the outdated overhead hanging furnace and window air conditioner. It also got a paint job along with new wall partitions, a stereo radio, and a modern telephone system.

I officially moved in Memorial Day weekend in 1993 and that same weekend we hung the '49 Chevrolet onto the front of the building. That car made it official. I decided the horn and lights had to work on the car and they still do to this day.

AGS Super Service

In the beginning, Rod Keen and I spent many hours together working on my six-volt alternator project. Once we had the design figured out and the alternators began to sell, I felt he needed to share in the success. Thus AGS Super Service was born. That is the company we established to manufacture the alternators for Fifth Avenue. Rod is in charge of AGS Super Service, and he keeps the profit generated from each alternator manufactured as his share of the profits. I am proud to say after 25 years and more than 10,000 alternators, we are still on track. Today the cost of the parts to build a six-volt alternator (the same parts we have been buying for the past 25 years) is one and a half times more than what I used to sell the six-volt alternator for retail. My how times have changed!

After the six-volt alternator started selling well, I looked into getting a patent. I talked to some of the people "in the know" at Kansas State University and a local patent attorney who explained how things worked.

I learned I would actually need three patents to protect my six-volt alternator. One was a technology patent which would protect the idea and the concept of the alternator. The second would be a design patent to protect how the alternator was physically designed and how it functioned. Finally, I would need a manufacturing patent to protect the process of how the alternators were built.

The cost of the patents would be somewhere around $20,000 and they would only be good in the United States. I also learned that it would be at my expense to engage a lawyer to "go after" someone who copied my idea. Meanwhile, they would continue to make their knockoffs up until the day we would go to court. I could likely win a judgment but collecting could be something else.

Learning from Coca Cola (the formula is not patented) and other Fortune 500 companies, I designed things internally inside of the alternator to protect the design and how it functions. It worked!

My next challenge became how to market and sell a product that had not previously existed, to customers all across the United States (who had never heard of me or my company), and do it with little or no money.

I solved that problem by getting involved with the Great Race. The Great Race (itself less than five years old at the time) was a vintage car rally in which pre-1940 cars were driven 4,500 miles across the U.S. in just two weeks time.

I decided the Great Race would be perfect advertising if I could get one of the entrants to install one of my new alternators. I could then establish a proven reliability track record for the six-volt alternator and get some good word-of-mouth advertising along the race route.

After knocking on about a dozen garage doors and giving my best sales pitch, Bud Melby of Seattle, Wash., agreed to try one of my six-volt alternators on his 1936 Cord. The Cord had an all-electric shift controlled by levers on the steering column. In addition, a lever between the seats controlled the overdrive portion of the transmission via an electric solenoid. The car often got "stuck" in overdrive because there was not enough voltage in the battery to activate the overdrive solenoid.

The steering column electric shift also required a pause between lever movements, then more engine rpm so enough extra current could be generated to complete a gear change. I was truly hoping my first Great Race car would be a Ford, Chevrolet, or Dodge—something I had experience with—but things did not work

out that way. Truthfully I had never even heard of a Cord automobile until I got involved with Bud.

Bud became more than a customer. He became a mentor to the kid from Kansas who was more than a little overwhelmed with the task of marketing his six-volt alternator.

Bud said: "My first trip around the block and I knew that six-volt alternator was something special. I had never met or even heard of Randy or his company, and I was a little doubtful that his alternator could do everything he said. He was pretty young at the time…In past years we traded out batteries at noon each day because of the extra electrical load from things like electric fuel pumps and accessory lighting. In 1989, for the first time we ran the whole entire race on the same battery."

This was just the beginning of a long and mutually beneficial relationship with the Great Race and its participants. After a few years a group of entrants asked me to work on their cooling and fuel problems. That is how the Fifth Avenue electric radiator cooling fans and the gear-driven electric fuel pumps came to be. Today all types of antique vehicles are using Fifth Avenue six-volt and 12-volt electric fuel pumps.

Electric radiator cooling fans were another challenge. The final product I developed was an electric radiator cooling fan available for both six- and 12-volt applications. The fans have ten blades for maximum efficiency and are powered by a heavy duty sealed ball bearing motor for a long service life. The fans are mounted using adjustable metal mounting brackets for durability and everything is USA made. I still build electric radiator cooling fans the same way today as when they were introduced in 1993.

Since 1989, I have developed more than 40 specialized products to make all types of antique vehicles more reliable and fun to drive. Every new product I develop still gets tested on Great Race type vehicles first to be sure the reliability of the part is there. I know when I install a part on a Great Race type vehicle, it will be tested in more severe conditions than it will ever see in a normal application. One of the most grueling was the 2011 Peking to Paris competition, which required these antique vehicles to log 9,000 miles on unpaved roads (see "Peking to Paris" in the August 2011 *Exchange*).

Going Hollywood

Fifth Avenue's reputation for making antique vehicles more reliable and fun to drive has traveled all the way to Hollywood. When movie studios use antique cars during filming, they call us for help. Some of the popular movies I have worked on include "Devil in a Blue Dress," "Lolita," "L.A. Confidential," and the most recent "Indiana Jones" movie.

Everyone who works for the studios on a movie set belongs to a trade union. After my conversation with the transportation director for "Devil in a Blue Dress," I offered to fly out and install one of my alternators on each of the two movie cars. He quickly explained that it does not work that way. Because I was not in the "trade," I was not allowed into the shop area.

He said: "I am going to have to find a way to pay you. We need your services and no one else does what you do."

Up until that time I had never paid much attention to the ending credits of a movie. But if you watch, everyone who has anything to do with the making of the movie that belongs to a trade union or guild is listed in the credits—including the catering company. So I became an "outside transportation consultant" and got my first supporting movie role. While I did not receive a name mention in the credits, I did receive a paycheck!

I also tried to get a Fifth Avenue license plate tag topper installed on one of the cars in the background. He said that would be removed during editing and end up on the cutting room floor. A special editor goes through the movie scene by scene and deletes any commercial products or advertising that is not under an advertising contract for the movie. So I asked the obvious: How much would it cost to put a tag topper on one of the cars? There is a $10,000 minimum. That is why you will never see a Fifth Avenue tag topper on a movie car.

A royal connection

One day in 1998 I got a call from a gentleman with a really thick British accent explaining that he was the royal minister of transportation for the Queen of England and he was requesting my services on behalf of the royal family.

Now, I was not born yesterday, and I knew the odds of somebody calling Fifth Avenue Antique Auto Parts from the royal palace in England was about a million to one. I have friends and customers all over the world, and there was no doubt in my mind this was yet another prank call from one of my British customers.

The caller kept going on about this Cadillac limo that once was a part of the royal family and it was being located for restoration for use by the queen in the upcoming Pan American Games. I finally said, "If you are who you say you are, fax me something on the queen's letterhead." I figured that would put an end to it. About ten minutes later the fax machine went off.

I immediately felt about two inches tall and called him back to give my best royal apology.

The 48th Pan American Games was coming up and Queen Elizabeth had decided she wanted to ride in the same 1951 Cadillac limo that she rode in with her mother during the first opening ceremony. So an ad was placed on BBC television showing a picture of the car, along with the VIN and a contact number. It was found unrestored but mostly complete in Winnipeg, Canada.

Once everything was approved, I made up a care package with a list of instructions and included one of my six-volt alternators, an electric radiator cooling fan, electric fuel pump, and all the related parts I could think of for insurance. I was more than a little nervous—if something ran amok, it would be there on TV for the whole world to see!

Much to my relief, the project was a success. The car worked perfectly on the opening ceremony day. A few weeks later I received a note from the queen on her stationery thanking me for my services to the royal family. Also included in the box was a VCR copy of the first Pan Am Games showing the Cadillac on tour (with the disclaimer "not for public viewing").

I was thinking that I might even be knighted for my work, but it was explained to me I needed to perform an act of bravery or other such equal act as listed on the official royal decree. Preparing a 1951 Cadillac limo for use by the royal family was not on the list.

Fifth Avenue Internet Garage

In the spring of 2004, I started to design



Back in the day, Randy Rundle's daily driver was a 1951 Chevrolet 1/2 ton truck that he purchased from the original owner in 1973. It still has his first 6-volt prototype alternator on it. Many things were installed and tested on the truck, and he filled the cab with smoke more than once!



Randy at the bench of his Clay Center, Kan. shop today.

One of the first 100 6-volt alternators sold and installed in May 1988.

a website. I had looked at enough of them to know what I wanted—a basic, simple website. Like many of my customers, I was not interested in dancing alternators or flashing headlines.

(Like me, most of my customers would rather spend time in the garage than in front of a computer. In the early days that worked, but now a computer is part of everyday life, as are smart phones.)

By this time, I had collected a ton of information related to alternator installations, and I wanted the site to be more of an information source so customers could read about their particular project and the parts they needed. Then when they called to place an order, they would already know what they wanted and the prices.

Along with pictures and complete descriptions of the parts, I also included copies of the same instructions that come in the parts package. That way, customers would know exactly what steps are involved in installing a particular part.

The website has opened up a worldwide customer base, especially once I discovered there is a software that will convert an American website to just about any foreign language. That same software will also work for email, allowing a customer to write an email in Japanese (for example) and it will be in English when I receive it.

That is partly how the alternators have made their way around the world to 16 foreign countries, along with most all of the provinces and territories of Canada. The world is getting smaller.

I remember buying a fax machine in about 199 and receiving orders in the middle of the night when no one was here. How cool was that! Now purchase orders come by email and credit card payments are electronically deposited into your account. Who could have imagined that 25 years ago?

I have truly enjoyed the past 25 years. I have met a lot of interesting people, have worked on a lot of interesting vehicles, and have established some lifetime friendships with customers from all around the world. Who could ask for anything more? For those of you reading this, I hope you can appreciate some of my experiences and understand the rewards that come with turning a passion into a successful career. I hope your travels in life are equally as rewarding.

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