

Edwards is three generations strong

By Jim Romsaas, *Mesabi Daily News* (April 4, 2014)

VIRGINIA — Forty-five years ago, Edward Skalko was trying to make a living as a door-to-door salesman selling cookware to area residents.

That experience getting to know the customer paid off well for the now-retired Skalko, who founded Edward's Oil a short time later with his wife Marion.

Today, Edwards — Oil and Propane employs between 225 and 235 in facilities across the area.

"It's really amazing how our business grew," according to Edward Skalko, 82. He said the business was "hanging on by a shoestring" just after it was started out of his Midway home with book work being done in the basement or at the kitchen table.

The importance of the customer was passed on to his son Bob (now the firm's general manager) and grandson Scott (who joined the business about one year ago).

"Customer service is very important," Bob Skalko said, and Rule No. 1 at Edwards is putting the customer first.

"If you treat people well, they will always come back to you," Edward Skalko said.

Ironically, Scott Skalko is now carrying on the ideals started by his grandfather and continued by his father.

Scott Skalko, field staff for Edwards — Oil and Propane, is continuing the tradition of going door-to-door like his grandfather once did. The 27-year-old is canvassing potential customers in the neighborhoods long-served by Edwards.

"I knock on the door and try to make an impression," Scott Skalko said, but doesn't put any pressure on them. "We are here to help you," he says.

The residents warm up to him once they know he is part of the family and that they can get service locally. "People still want to know who they're buying from."

Bob Skalko, 54, was quite pleased to have his oldest son join the company. "It's just very rewarding to have the business grow and pass it on as time goes by."

The first Edwards location was at Hoover Road and Ninth Street North in Virginia and was a simple 12-by-16 station, where Bob Skalko cut his teeth.

He pumped gas, washed car windows and checked tire air pressure at the two-pump, full-service station. He later drove truck for the company, as well.

While Bob started at age 9 or 10, he ultimately went off to college at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where he obtained a bachelor's degree.

Then came decision time about joining the business.



From left to right, Bob, Edward and Scott Skalko are pictured at the Edwards office in Virginia recently. Edward founded the business 45 years ago, Bob is now the general manager and Scott joined the company one year ago as a field staff representative for Edwards — Oil and Propane. (Photo by Mark Sauer, MDN)

"What should I do," Bob asked his father.

"I'd love to have you," Edward said, but the decision had to be up to Bob.

A short time later, Bob joined the company and began working in the Hibbing warehouse and working on his master's degree at night.

Bob Skalko said it was a good decision to join the company. "I grew up in the business" and knew I could make a difference, he said.

Edward Skalko, now 82, made it all happen starting in 1969 with six big oil firms in Virginia at the time.

"I wanted to get into the business," he said. "I thought I had more to offer than door-to-door sales."

Edwards Oil (named after Edward Skalko) grew bit by bit and was aided by one of the oil company leaders retiring and recommending his customers go with Skalko's new firm. But with that growth came the need to buy product and inventory.

Around 1971-72, he went to the banks seeking money to grow but was turned down. However, one businessman in town that believed in the elder Skalko finally gave their support and a loan. "I've seen you grow and I think I can

help you," Skalko said the man told him.

Edwards paid the company's first loan back in quick order and picked up some other accounts at the same time as some of the oil companies began to leave the area.

Looking back, he said it was a good beginning, but "it was a real hard struggle for us."

Playing a big role in bolstering the business along the way were the mines, which were "instrumental in our growth," Edward Skalko said.

Edwards added gas stations around the area and later established the Lucky Seven General Stores (named after Edward and Marion and their five children) throughout the Iron Range.

In addition to gasoline and fuel oil, Edwards added TriMark Industrial Services and just got into the propane business with North Country Propane in 2012.

Edwards has various products and facilities across the Iron Range. Headquartered in Virginia, there is a rail facility in Kelly Lake, bulk storage in Hibbing. Edwards also has a complete service department to take care of customer emergencies.

Offering the different types of fuel and always having

supplies on hand is something Edwards has always been proud of.

Looking back, "this little store always had fuel," Bob Skalko said.

Moving ahead to modern times, that same philosophy held true during the recent propane shortage.

Edwards had alternate ways to get propane when prices were skyrocketing, he said. That included the Kelly Lake facility being able to bring in propane by rail car.

The entry into the propane business actually sparked the interest of Scott Skalko, who was working for Cargill after graduating from UMD in 2009 with a business degree.

While he had a good job and liked what he was doing, he said he "never loved it" and "wanted to be around family."

As per family tradition, Bob Skalko wanted Scott to approach him if he was going to join the business.

That is exactly what happened as Scott Skalko ended up talking to his dad about it and decided to take a position in the new propane business.

The decision came many years after Scott first worked for his dad at the Hoover Road Lucky Seven store. He worked in sporting goods and had the job of separating the bulk worms and leeches into small containers for resale. He also had janitorial and cash register duties.

He recalls the best time as fishing opener weekend, which meant an onslaught of customers, including athletes, movie stars and pro wrestlers. A couple of the most famous, he said, were former U of M and Boston Celtics great Kevin McHale and former University of Indiana head coach Bobby Knight.

The move into the family business has been a positive one for Scott, as well. He has seen a lot of loyalty in an age when there doesn't seem to be as much as in previous generations.

The cool thing about being in the family business, Scott Skalko said, is customers saying, "I know your grandpa."

As his son entered the business, Bob Skalko shared as much knowledge as he could with his son and encouraged him not to let the details slip through the cracks. "Every little detail in business is important."

Scott Skalko has seen his father work extended hours over the years and says he will "do whatever it takes to make it (his new position) work." My dad "has a lot to teach and I have a lot to learn."

Looking back, Edward Skalko fondly recalls the small, two-pump station and is appreciative of all the work that went into growing the business.

"I'm so thankful for what was accomplished."