

Trucks Keep Firm Rolling, March 7th, 1999

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By Jim Balow, Sunday Charleston Gazette-Mail

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BLACK BETSY - While visiting China a few weeks ago on a trade mission, Eric Clark was amazed at the primitive state of the Chinese firefighting equipment.

"We were in the Tianjin Economic Development Area, a free trade zone about 1.5 hours from Beijing," said Clark, vice president of Clark Truck Parts in Putnam County. "It's the third largest population center in the country with about 11 million people.

"They have less than 100 fire hydrants in the city. They have 80 to 90 fire departments, but the largest tank they had (on a fire truck) was 750 gallons." Pumper trucks in the United States typically holds between 2,000 and 3,000 gallons of water, he said.

Clark, whose 40-year-old family-owned business specializes in buying and reselling surplus off-road military trucks, trailers and truck parts, had a proposal for the Chinese firefighters.

"We told them we can take a certain truck, put a 2,000 to 3,000-gallon tank and a pump on the back. Their problem is they have to get water. This truck can drive up to any river or pond, fill up, and come back out again. That's the key, coming back out.

"If they bought a comparable all-wheel-drive 6 x 6 truck new, just the truck, it would cost between \$65,000 and \$80,000. I can sell them a similar truck for \$23,000 to \$25,000. With the tank and the pump... I should be able to sell the whole unit for \$60,000 to \$65,000."

Jack Clark (right) has built Clark Truck Parts into a thriving business, buying surplus Army vehicles and selling them to loggers, miners and others who need off-road vehicles. Son Eric Clark hopes to sell trucks to China. His dog Samson is unofficial greeter at the Black Betsy headquarters.

From meager beginnings

It's unlikely that Jack Clark ever dreamed about selling fire trucks to China when he started the business that bears his name in 1960. "I had a \$300 income tax return check and just a little bit of inventory," he said.

Jack Clark took over a small business repairing old Army trucks. "Some weeks I'd take home 10 to 15 bucks. My top mechanic was making \$2 an hour and another was making \$1.25. They both made more than I did. I realized that was not the way to do it," he said. So Clark explored other, easier ways to make money. He started buying surplus Army trucks and selling them to small, independent gas drillers, who needed sturdy, off-road vehicles. "We were selling World War II truck. Vietnam trucks were just starting to be



released."

He also bought surplus truck parts, like rear axle assemblies, which coal machinery builders could use in mine vehicles. "That just took off. Pretty soon we were ordering several tractor-trailer loads a month. I knew where I could buy axles and knew someone who needed them. Everyone knew me as the axle king."

Jesse Flanigan (left) prepares to paint one of four trucks that will be shipped to Peru. Jack scoured the country, looking for good deals on surplus trucks and parts. He tells stories of how he used to sleep in his truck overnight, either too poor or too stingy to spring for a motel. When it got too cold in the cab—he couldn't keep the gasoline engine running overnight to run the heater—he would crawl underneath the truck to warm himself from the heat radiating from the engine.

The hard work paid off. In 1965, he moved the business from North Charleston to a larger site on West Washington Street beside Orchard Manor. By the early '90s he'd outgrown that site too, so he spent \$1 million to buy the former home of Ray Resources near Poca.

"We've got 16 acres and a 60,000 square foot building," Eric Clark said. "It fits us like a glove." Moving was not so easy, though. "Dad told everyone it would take three to four months to move. It took over a year."

These days you're likely to see as many as 200 vehicles on the lot as you pass by on W.Va. 62.

A family business in transition

Eric Clark didn't set out to follow in his father's footsteps, although he remembers working 40-hour weeks during summers while his junior high buddies were attending basketball camp. Instead, he wanted to be a basketball coach, building on his years of playing at Cross Lanes Christian Academy and in college. He earned a graduate degree in the sports field and even spent a year as an assistant to then-UCLA coach Jim Harrick. He changed his mind in 1992, just as his father was about to move the business to Putnam County. "When Dad bought the property he said if there's ever a time to come back, this is it."

He agreed, and joined his brother-in-law Richard Casdorff as the heirs apparent for Clark Truck Parts. Eric, 33, and Richard, 37, serve as vice presidents while papa Jack, 61, reigns as president.

"Richard is good with numbers and finances, while I'm more of a people person," Eric said. "I've been doing some marketing."

"I know I'll not have to do anything like Dad did, but I'll have to move us forward."

He's already started. A couple of years ago he got interested in the Internet. "I thought, we're so specialized, this would be perfect for us. I got Dad's permission to buy a computer and a scanner." Through trial and error, Eric built a company Web site.

"We've been hit over 30,000 times in two years," he said. "Off it, we've sold trucks to Peru twice, to Mexico and Argentina. It's paid for itself over and over again."

Eric turned to Charles Ryan Associates for marketing help. At the firm's urging, he filmed a brief video showing one of the off-road trucks in action. The ad firm also developed a sales folder and fact sheet, and suggested that Clark contact Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., for help in exporting.

Those efforts are starting to pay off. After calling Rockefeller's office, Eric decided to join the recent Project Harvest trade mission to the Far East. Rockefeller, who had to

return early from the trip for the impeachment trial, followed up by visiting the Clarks last month. He plans to return in a couple of months with a group of Chinese visitors, with hopes of closing the fire truck deal.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va. met with Eric and Jack Clark and Jack's son-in-law, Richard Casdorff, last month to help promote the firm's efforts to export trucks to China. "It's neat how that works," Eric said. "I never realized you could get all that assistance."

As part of his expansion plans, Eric envisions a series of hubs scattered across the globe—one in China, perhaps one in Kenya and another in Peru.

We'd like to set up centers in other parts of the world. We could send truck there that they put together and paint. We could sell them parts.

"They like to call it joint ventures," he said. "That kind of scares us, but that's what it would be. They would send mechanics here for training. Then we could buy stuff and not have to touch it."

Brother-in-law Richard Casdorff is working on similar plans in Peru, Eric said. He will visit Peru in April with officials from the U.S. Department of Commerce and the West Virginia Export Assistance Center.

Annual revenues have been hovering around \$2.3 million, Eric said. "If this deal goes through with China, we will double quickly. If they took 100 trucks, that's a \$2.5 million deal.

"Our business is neat," he said. "We offer quick solutions. People come here in helicopters.

"You probably would never see our equipment being used. There's nothing pretty about it. The only time it's pretty is if you've got something in a tricky situation and you've got to move it somewhere else."