

Chester Garage changes hands

Written by hebronjournal

Wednesday, 06 December 2017 15:05 -

After nearly 43 years, Marlin and Judy Smith turned the keys to Chester Garage over to Dave and Barbara Remmers.

Remmers brings 28 years of mechanical ag experience with him, working on tractor engines. He is looking forward to picking up where Smith left off on irrigation motors.

"It's all nuts and bolts to me," Remmers, who will also offer light automotive service, said.

The Remmers are planning to follow Smith's footsteps — working hard and operating the business themselves.

"After the first of the year, we'll service dealership motors. The diesel side will be covered as well," Remmers said.

He and Barbara were impressed with Smith's ability to provide front to back services on irrigation motors. Smith sold motors to customers, then serviced them.

"He does a good job. That's a good mechanic to follow that engine through," Barbara said.

Remmers said the transition from Smith to his service will be seamless.

"Customers will have no worries," he said. "They can call the shop number and always get a hold of me."

He said Smith warned him sleep won't come easy next summer.

From the time Chester Garage opened in 1975, Smith's service has been a mainstay, day and night.

He started the business after Moxham Garage owner, Robert Moxham, had health issues.

Smith had been working at Byron Service when he heard Moxham's was available. He had graduated from technical school in Beloit, Kan., where he and Judy met.

She majored in business. Both were 23 years old when they bought the garage.

"We had this huge fear of not succeeding," Smith said. "I worked on semis at night. The more snow or rain, something would break down."

Foote's Cafe was open 24 hours when the Smiths took the garage over.

"There were rows of semis there," Judy said. "There were cars that broke down, too. We met a lot of people off the highway through the years."

It was interesting what they would see on the highway, Smith added.

One night, he was called because a semi hauling elephants to a circus had to have its brakes adjusted to clear the scales.

Smith said the elephants stuck their heads out and swung back and forth in unison.

"The truck kept going forward. I got on the creeper and grabbed a hold of the axle with one hand," Smith chuckled. "It was just something. How else would you ever run into something like that?"

Another night, Smith was called to a bus hauling Boxcar Willie's band.

"Everyone was mad at the driver because he shut the bus off, which you don't do with a diesel engine," he said. "This one had a starter problem."

Smith didn't know who Boxcar Willie was, but he knew he could pull-start the bus with his 1980 Chevy 3/4 ton truck.

It worked.

"They all jumped out and wanted to shake my hand," he said.

They also wanted to compensate Smith and gave him posters autographed by Boxcar Willie.

"I come home and I had these pictures and she (Judy) said, 'Who?'" Smith laughed. "The kids seemed excited."

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He and Judy developed close friendships through the shop. One couple wanted a new engine for their motor home and had to stick around for a couple of weeks.

They parked their home on the slab that used to be the main shop building the Smiths had replaced.

"They were from Canada and went to Texas every year, where her relation was," Smith said.

The engine came in and Smith worked all night to install it.

But, after hanging out with the Smiths and going to their girls' ball games, the couple was in no hurry to leave.

"They weren't ready to go," Smith said. "They kept coming back every year."

The Smiths also visited the couple in Canada and went to Niagara Falls with them.

Chester Garage's building was replaced in 1983. Smith remembers the exact date.

"Dec. 20, 1983. There was an ice storm. We had this building to put up and a layer of ice on the floor."

Time passed and Smith found bending over fenders and his health wasn't a match.

He also found working on a tractor stuck in a pond was unusual and he liked it.

"I was wading in the water trying to fix this tractor," he said.

Smith eventually contacted a dealer in Hastings to hook himself into selling name brand motors, like Ford.

"That's when it really took off," he said about the second leg of his business. "It got to be known Chester was the place to go. We didn't shut anything off at 6 or 7 at night. We just kept going."

The garage's irrigation service is known in Kansas, specifically northern Kansas, but Smith said he has gone as far as Wichita.

"Hopefully after Jan. 1, I'll have a couple of engines here to show the public what I've got," Remmers said.

Chester Garage is open from 8 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. For information on garage services, contact the Remmers at 402-324-5804.