

One man's junk is another's business

'If we don't have it, we'll get it' are bywords of auto wreckers

By LANE WALLACE
BUSINESS EDITOR

GARY ROBERTS paused for a moment atop the forklift in his auto-wrecking yard to think about why he likes the business.

"A lot of people come in here to get parts so they can fix up their cars. It makes you feel good to see your junk rolling down the road," said Roberts, owner of G&G Auto Wrecking on Errington Road.

"But after they fix it up, it's not junk any more," Roberts added. "The people are appreciative when you can find the part they need."

The ability to find that part — and sometimes offer a bit of advice — are as important to auto wreckers as the parts themselves.

"Customer service — that's all we can really sell," said Glen Cluster, who has been in the wrecking business in Watsonville since 1958. "I built my reputation on customer relations," he said as he tugged on his cap and reached for another toothpick from a container full of them.

If a customer has a problem with a part, "I tell 'em to come

and talk to ol' Glen Cluster," he said.

Cluster runs the truck-wrecking business on Errington Road that bears his name. The dean of local auto wreckers, he started in the Salsipuedes area in 1958 and moved to his present site in 1961. In the late '70s, he sold the domestic car section of his business (now G&G) and the

foreign autos (now Gerry's) and kept the truck department.

There's an unusual relationship among auto wreckers — they compete, and yet they cooperate in tracking down parts. "It's not a

cutthroat business," said Steve Janowski, owner of Gerry's. About 40 to 50 percent of a wrecking yard's business is with professional mechanics.

"The dismantlers' association has emphasized cooperation among dealers," said Cluster, past president of the Northern California Auto Dismantlers Assn. and one of the organizers of the Bay Area Auto Dismantlers Assn.

A computer system, started about five years ago, enables wreckers across the country to put out the word when they need a part, or when they have one

that's needed. The computer information is transmitted either by satellite or land line.

There's also a telephone hotline, but the computer system, which is adding customers, is superior, said Cluster, who got his installed last week.

"It's selective," noted Cluster. "We can send information to just certain areas." With the phone system, there's no selectivity — everybody can listen in, and can learn what price is being quoted. With the computer, communication between wreckers on a price quote can't be seen by others.

Wreckers will first put the call out for a part in the computer's "local area," California and Arizona. If the call goes out nationwide, Cluster said, the part is liable to cost more, not only because of freight charges, but because the wrecker who has the part knows it's tough to get. There used to be a teletype hotline, but that proved too slow. "The teletype only typed 60 words a minute, and some of the people (in the wrecking yards) typed five words a minute. They weren't stenographers," Cluster said.

They may not be stenographers, but the people who work in wrecking yards are walking encyclopedias on auto parts — they know just where the thousands of parts in their yards are.

There are written records, but that's not the source the people in the yards turn to first.

Asked where he keeps his information, Roger Smith, of Coast Auto Supplies and Buena Vista Auto Wreckers on Lee Road, said, "Right here," pointing to his head.

"Sometimes I'll be lying in bed at night and remember where a part is" that he couldn't find, Smith said.

Only Coast employees (there are 12) are permitted in the yard. Until the early '80s, customers were permitted to search through the yard themselves. But there were too many problems with theft and

damaged parts, plus the possibility of a lawsuit if a customer were injured.

So Mary Gates, owner of Coast, closed the yard to the public and found most customers preferred it that way. "They like the fact that they don't have to go through the yard looking," she said.

There was also a problem with people sneaking into the yard at night until Gates enlisted some canine help.

"We've got two junkyard dogs," she said proudly. "Butch and Maggie." Butch, an English bulldog, and

Maggie, a pit bull, are kept in a pen during the day and turned loose at night.

"We haven't had any problems with people coming over the fence since we got Butch," Gates said.

Gates has been in the wrecking business since 1963, when she and her husband operated a yard in Scotts Valley. The yard moved to Buena Vista Drive in 1968 and to the present site in 1978. When Gates and her husband divorced a few years ago, he left and she stayed with the yard, which includes a retail parts division. "My sons Peter and Chuck work with me," she said.

It's unusual for a woman to own a wrecking yard, but Gates said she knows the business and the people in it and doesn't

have any problems. "Once in a while I'll get a call from somebody saying, 'I want to talk to the guy who owns the place.' I tell them, 'You're talking to him,'" she said with a laugh.

Gary Roberts had 19 years in the wrecking business in San Jose before he and his wife, Doreen, bought G&G seven years ago.

Roberts said he made the move for two reasons — he wanted his own business and "I wanted to get out of San Jose." Gary works in the yard; Doreen runs the office.

Photos by
Kurt Ellison



Junkyard dog

Butch is the watchdog at Coast Auto Supplies.

REFERENCE

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WATSONVILLE REGISTER-PAJ ARONIAN May 6, 1985

Industry to 1980



Mark Keith removes a carburetor at Coast Auto Supplies.



Glen Cluster explains to **Ken Malat**, of **Scotts Valley**, how to modify the bell housing for his truck.



Mary Gates, owner of **Coast Auto Supplies** and **Buena Vista Auto Wreckers** on **Lee Road**.

Happy in Watsonville

'I wanted to get out of San Jose,' said Gary Roberts of his decision seven years ago to move to Watsonville and buy his own business.

