

A&T Tire and Wheel celebrates 50 years of business



By Brock Weir

Whether you know it as 'The Barn?', 'The Shed?', or even 'The Temple of Tire?', generations have come to know the little building just on the east side of the tracks as a place to get specialized service to ensure a smooth and safe ride.

Now, A&T Tire & Wheel is marking 50 years of service in Aurora with a community celebration this Saturday from 12 noon to 4 p.m.

'Being in the same location for 50 years in a small town is kind of significant, and the business is still thriving,' says Mike Young, Co-Owner of A&T. 'Three generations of families have come to see us here. When I started 16 years ago, I took over running the shop for Dan Smith and I saw grandkids coming in here who told me their dad brought them here, and their dad came here because their grandfather had shopped here. It was neat seeing the third generation coming by to buy some stuff and remembering the shop when they were kids, the little differences it has gone through the years. It was pretty rough when Dan bought it, more like a barn.' A&T Tire & Wheel might now list Industrial Parkway South as its address, but when the 'barn' was first raised on the same location, it was Ross Street. Industrial Parkway was little more than an idea at that point.

The business was founded by Anne and Tony Tielemans on the opposite side of the street, very much a family business. The Tielemans owned the business until 1998 when it was bought by Dan.

'Aurora has grown a lot since I moved here in 1998 as a teenager,' says Mr. Young. 'I have seen Aurora grow exponentially over those years. When I took over, the shop had some history and had a good following, but it wasn't lined up. Within the industry itself, there wasn't the snow tire craze with people lining up for that seasonal changeover. Over the last five to 10 years, we have gone up by 10 to 20 per cent every year. It has been crazy. The growth has been massive to the point where we have lineups down the street before we're open just for the switchover. It's busting at the seams every season and it just keeps growing.'

And the business keeps evolving.

From the early days of dirt floors, the A&T is now a shiny red showplace, always busy, and always a showcase for memorabilia charting automotive history.

They are small by design. They want to maintain that small-town, personal feel in a market that is continually bringing in competition from big box stores. They see that competition as a bonus because it affords them the opportunity to highlight their very specialized services and attention to detail.

'I have been in tires for 26 years and everyone we hire is knowledgeable about the details. If someone has a classic car or a custom wheel package they want to put on, generally the big box stores won't be able to help very well with that. They might dabble, but they don't specialize in that. We want to give excellent customer service.'

'We see new customers every day. A lot of them say they drove by our place 10 times in the last couple of years and had always wanted to stop in. We do have a lot of word of mouth business. The neighbour gets talking to the neighbour about their shiny new rims, they mention our name, and the next time that customer needs tires they usually pop in and try us out for our knowledge base and quote. We can usually be very competitive for pricing because we have some really good buying power. We have good

relationships with our local suppliers over the years, we have a good turnaround time too, so we can do most things the same day.? Their location has proven adjacent to the GO Station has proven advantageous over the years as well, with many customers leaving their cars at A&T before heading out for their morning commute, leaving a note with what they need done, such as a tire change, and coming back at the end of the work day to drive home.

But the location might also prove to be a challenge as Metrolinx, the operator of GO Transit, is looking to expand rail service in the area, including double tracking. Land on the west side of the tracks has already been purchased to allow that to happen, and Mr. Young says overtures have been made to A&T as well, but they have no intentions of budging from their home for over a half-century.

?Over the last two years, we have had our fair share of enquiries and discussions and offers, none of which we're interested in,? says Mr. Young. ?We're standing as proud and as tall as we can to be a force that has been here for a long time. We don't want to sell. We don't want to be chained to the tree, per se, if that ever does happen, but things do happen and we will move on if we have to, but it is not something we're going to go easily.?

A&T Tire & Wheel marks its 50th anniversary this Saturday, September 15 with a community celebration starting at 12 noon with a free barbecue which will accept donations benefiting Abuse Hurts. A free jumping castle and balloons for the kids runs all day with a live band, Smokey Monaghan, performing at 2 p.m., and door prizes at 4 p.m. A&T is located at 54 Industrial Parkway South.