

Dodd RV President Jamie Dodd represents the second generation of leadership for family-owned Dodd RV, which celebrated 44 years in business in 2017. Dodd and his siblings have expanded the Virginia dealership to include a second store, increased the dealership's inventory and added key brands to the product lineup.

Retailing RVs a Family Affair for Dodd RV

After 44 years selling RVs, the Dodd family knows the ebb and flow of the RV business. A second generation of ownership has successfully expanded the business and raised its profile with consumers.

By Jesse Sidlauskas

Now in its 44th year of RV sales, Portsmouth, Va.-based Dodd RV is riding high. In recent years, the family-owned dealership has expanded its footprint, upped its inventory and added key brands to its lineup. For back-to-back years, Dodd RV has won the RV Dealer of the Year award for customer service from consumer review website DealerRater.

Over the decades, Dodd RV has put plenty of memorable seasons in the books – some lucrative, while others endured. Though the recent banner seasons fall into the former category, the dealership entered the RV industry in the latter.

As its first shipment of Terry travel trailers arrived on Dodd's existing car lot, the 1973 OPEC oil embargo was in full swing. Nationwide, gasoline rationing and economic uncertainty made RVs a tough sell.

In 1956, George Dodd founded the business as a Texaco service station while attending school at Old Dominion. The company soon expanded to include automotive sales.

Dodd regularly purchased trade-in cars from Virginia Beach,



George Dodd got into the RV business in 1973 selling Terry travel trailers. Despite the ups and downs of the RV business, he never regretted his decision to become an RV dealer. The dealership's location in Yorktown, Va., is pictured in these photos.

Va.-based Bay Camping, where he met and became friends with Bill Gorman, Bay Camping general manager and future RV/MH Hall of Famer (class of 2011).

“They didn’t want the cars and I didn’t want the trailers, so over the years, I bought a lot of cars,” Dodd says. “As time went by, (Gorman) convinced me that if I could sell cars, I could sell trailers.”

At Gorman’s urging, Dodd attended a 1972 Greenville, N.C., dealer show, and returned home with a deal to sell Terry travel trailers the following year.

“We had eight or nine trailers, and they just sat on the back lot and nobody would even look at them,” Dodd says. “They just sat there, and I thought, ‘What in the world have I got here?’”

The budding RV dealership escaped peril only thanks to his pre-existing auto businesses, he says.

When the economy heated back up, Dodd started selling “all the trailers (he) could get,” but even as units regularly rolled off the lot, he didn’t allow himself to forget the long-dormant

1973 Terry trailers. When the economy waivered again, he was determined he would be prepared.

From the bumpy start until his children took over leadership in the early 2000s, Dodd persistently worked to avoid debt, preferring to own his inventory and properties outright.

Taking the Plunge

Like many dealership owners, Dodd hoped to see his children grow up to lead the family business. His children, however, weren’t enthusiastic about the prospect.

“While the children worked at the dealership, they didn’t want to go into the business,” he says. “They went and worked in other places, and then they realized how successful it could be and they came back.”

The first was Susie Dodd, who took a full-time position at the dealership in 1994, and currently serves as Dodd RV comptroller. Six years later, George Dodd recruited his son Jamie to join the business as president, and in 2002, Jennifer



Dodd RV Product Specialist Scott Hudgins (left) dealership General Manager Michael McNeil discuss how to help a customer. Customer service is a top priority for the business, which has won back-to-back Dealer of the Year awards from DealerRater, a consumer rating and review website.

Dodd joined her siblings in leadership roles at the company.

With all the pieces in place for succession, George Dodd was reluctant to yield control. He had given 44 years of his life to the business. Adding to his unease was the knowledge that the younger Dodds had ideas they were eager to implement, including the addition of a second location in 2004.

“This was the hardest time of my life,” George Dodd says. “I went through almost a crisis myself because I didn’t want to give it up, but I know it was the right thing to do.”

George Dodd wasn’t the only person wary of change under the new leadership. With the fate of the family business in their hands, the stakes were high for the Dodd siblings, too, according to Susie Dodd.

“Because we are family and because that’s our name on that building, where our dad worked his butt off his entire life, it gives us that drive and that push to make him prouder,” she says.

Unlike their father, the siblings were not categorically opposed to debt, if it could be justified. Upon arriving at the dealership in 2000, Jamie Dodd saw an opportunity in adding a second location some 35 miles north, in Newport News, across the Hampton Roads harbor.

Though two interstate highway bridge-tunnel systems make a link to the peninsula, Jamie Dodd suspected that the harbor hemmed the Portsmouth dealership’s scope and market, blocking the company’s access to customers in the peninsula.

“We were unable to serve the RV customers that lived on the north side of our market, our town” he says. “It didn’t take long; I could see that quickly.”

Data from buyer registrations, Statistical Surveys and OEM buyer maps, along with other indicators, quickly confirmed his suspicion, and in 2004, the dealership opened Dodd RV of the Peninsula in Newport News.

In 2009, the dealership expanded to a larger facility in nearby Yorktown.

At first blush, the expansion would have seemed impractical to Operations Manager Brian Doss, who joined the company several years after the expansion in 2014.

“No dealership in their right mind would put two of the same dealerships 35 miles apart from each other,” Doss says. “No other (RV) dealership down here does that.”

In addition to unlocking the peninsula market, Doss cites the recent growth of the Yorktown location as the primary factor behind Dodd RV’s back-to-back Dealer of the Year awards from DealerRater, a consumer rating and review website scoring RV and automotive dealers across the country.

“Jamie had enough foresight to say, ‘To really service our customers well, we need a dealership on each side of the water,’” Doss says. “We’ve made it convenient for (consumers).”

Finding Stride for the Long Haul

Under the leadership of the Dodd siblings, Dodd RV had grown from a single-location dealership and service shop with a staff of three to nearly 50 employees spread across two full-service dealerships in the span of a few years.

But despite the early growth trajectory under Jamie’s leadership, he says the business has kept to the cautious outlook that George instilled.

“We’re continuing to grow and expand, but cautiously,” he says. “We’re not going overboard.”

Though skeptical of the new business practices his children applied, George Dodd is proud of the success his children have had.

“When Jamie took over, he had new ideas, which I was kind of questionable of then, but now I realize that the ideas he had accumulated from going to college and worked out great,” he



says. “They’ve been very successful. All four children have done great. The good Lord blessed me, I can say that.”

The siblings, however, say that the dealership’s success has always hinged on principles instilled by their dad.

“A family-oriented business is how we work,” Susie Dodd says, noting that “family-oriented” doesn’t just apply to the Dodds.

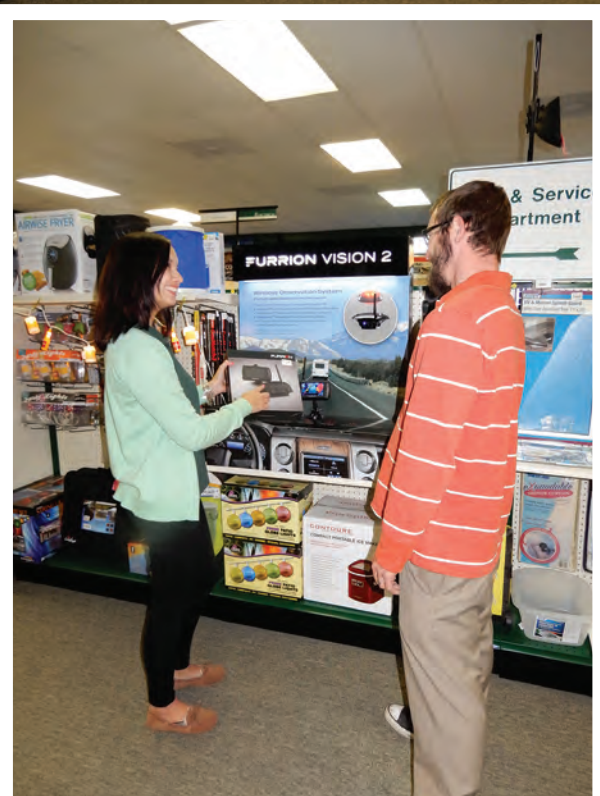
Bobby Branch, for example, whom George hired before Susie was born, was still at the dealership when Susie started in 1994. Branch worked with Dodd RV until a year before his death in 2015. Today, Susie Dodd lists Branch, alongside her dad, as the two biggest mentors in her career.

“Those two taught me everything I know,” she says.

Susie Dodd continues to forge strong connections with fellow employees. About five years ago, an issue arose with a co-worker’s pregnancy resulting in a miscarriage that required surgery. The woman’s husband, a soldier, was away, so Susie Dodd drove her to the hospital and waited through the surgery. Susie Dodd took her home and, with the help of a third co-worker, stayed with the woman until she was back on her feet.

“We were her family, and that’s just who we are,” Susie Dodd says. “I couldn’t imagine having to go through all this without having anybody do it with you.”

On a professional level, these types of relationships help



Parts expert Crystal Wigginton assists a customer find the right part of his RV. Dodd RV works hard to make sure employees have the skills and training they need to be successful.

Top: Dodd RV has a large, well-stocked parts department with products from companies including Carefree of Colorado, Dometic, PullRite Shurflo and Winegard.

Dodd RV technician Ricky Minor works on a camper. The dealership's technicians are capable of tackling nearly any type of service work.



keep employees happy, and in the competitive dealership market have a big impact on whether the business retains its employees, according to Doss, the dealership's operations manager.

"Obviously, pay is one of the things, where you pay competitively, but pay can't be the only thing," he says. "If it's just the highest bidder, it just becomes a bidding war, so you've got to make the environment conducive for them too where they enjoy coming to work."

For example, Doss says the dealership invests in employee outings to local Triple-A baseball or semi-pro hockey games and buys lunch for employees every Friday.

"Little things like that show the employees you appreciate them and that you're willing to spend some money on them outside of the normal paycheck," he says.

Whether at a personal or financial level, Jamie Dodd says it's difficult to overvalue the importance of Dodd RV's staff.

"We are very selective when we are hiring, and then once we do hire someone, we invest heavily in their training," he says. "We've found that to be a very positive investment for us and a good situation for our guests to have someone who's knowledgeable in every department." **PRO**

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