

Focused on customers

Three generations keep three locations running smoothly

By Whitney Carnahan

Bill's Tool Rental was founded in Colorado Springs, Colo., in 1958, by Bill Lewis' father. Today, the rental equipment company is three locations strong with 27 employees, and three men at the helm: Bill, who is the second-generation owner and president, and his sons Hunter Lewis and Wylie Lewis, both vice presidents who are the family's third generation in the business. Whether it's building their own rental facility or surviving wildfires, the three work together well.

The business has changed quite a bit over time. Bill began working in the store while in elementary school, doing odd jobs, part-time. Part-time work turned into full-time and he oversaw additions to the original store. He brought his sons to work early on and later, the two decided to join the business, too. Today, Hunter handles the operations and Wylie handles much of the branding and business development.

"Everybody starts at the bottom here. I worked here for my father when I was six years old. I picked up nails. He paid me a penny for two of them. I brought Hunter with me as a baby," Bill says. "I'm a proud father. I'm so fortunate I get to work with my sons."

The original downtown location on Chestnut Street has a 13,250-sq.-ft. building on 1.6 acres. The company relocated its second location on the east side of the city in 2001 to East Platte Ave. There, the company designed and built a 13,000-sq.-ft. location on four acres. The third location opened in 2008 in the north part of Colorado Springs on Vollmer Road. The north location measures 4,000 sq. ft. on five acres.

"The north location was a building remodel, which included perimeter fencing and propane tank installation," Bill says. "The beauty was that this location had a very low entry cost."

All three locations include rental counters, equipment storage and repair shops. "Each location includes our sales division, Springs Contractor Supply inventories," Bill says.

Springs Contractor Supply sells to contractors, municipalities and military. Homeowners and do-it-yourselfers also purchase tools and supplies at contractors pricing. "We sell safety equipment and supplies, pneumatic equipment and a full line of light construction equipment. Wacker Neuson, Atlas Copco, Bil-Jax, Genie and Husqvarna are our major equipment manufacturers," says John Hathaway, sales manager. "If we sell it, we will warranty and repair it."

Bill's Tool Rental also services and repairs its own equipment. Like most rental companies, "We purchase rental equipment in lots. For many years, when we get in new skid loaders, we pull them into the shops and switch out the tires. We dismount the tires that come on the machines and replace them with" ➤ Page 44



Left to right, Bill, Wylie and Hunter Lewis at their East Platte Ave. location.



BILL'S From Page 42 severe-duty, Supergrip tires. We discovered Supergrip tires at *The Rental Show* years ago. These tires have a very hard, durable rubber compound. They have saved us a fortune in tire costs. This spring, we purchased a total of 30 Bobcat skid loaders and mini-excavators. The rubber tire machines went to the shops for tire replacement and company logo and website decals. This group of machines also had their rims painted blue, our company color. This increases the visibility of our machines and brand recognition, even when viewed from a distance," Wylie explains.

Bill says the customer breakdown is about 60 percent contractors and 40 percent homeowners. "We get a lot of walk-ins," he says, adding that construction work has increased locally since the recession, and housing and commercial construction also is coming back.

"Each project is usually flooded with a conglomerate of equipment from various rental companies," says Wylie. "We do business with quite a few government contractors for the Air Force Academy, Fort Carson, Shriever Air Force Base, and Peterson Air Force Base. We do not have exclusive contracts generally speaking. The Black Forest fire has created a sizable demand for demolition machines and excavation equipment as well as large tree chippers."

Bill says equipment has changed for the better over time. "I believe that the sophistication of equipment has improved dramatically through the years," he says. "I remember manufacturers producing rammer compactors that had exhaust deflectors on them. These were not mufflers. Look at current engineering, with great muffler designs. Look at the sound suppression on generators, light towers and most other equipment. Each year, equipment is engineered with more and better designed safety devices."

He says the customer perception of rental also has changed. "I see that the general public is more aware of equipment rentals as an option for all construction and improvement projects," Bill says.

"Homeowners and individuals are more receptive to the idea that, 'With the appropriate equipment and operator instructions I could complete this project.'



I see a greater number of general and sub-contractors ask themselves, 'Why should I tie up a substantial portion of my working capital in purchasing, insuring, licensing, and maintaining equipment? Let the equipment rental companies do that. I'll put those dollars to work in other areas that are more productive,'" Bill says.

To encourage that idea, Hunter and Wylie are focused on the customer experience.

Hunter oversees the day-to-day operations. "I'm the problem solver. I spend part of the day at the rental counter. It always helps me to keep a pulse on the daily service and equipment demand," he says.

The business does take orders online, but customers have to receive a confirmation call before the equipment is reserved. "It gives us a system," Hunter says. "The online interface is effective because the customer may not know what the equipment they need is called, but they can identify it in the photos."

The purpose of the phone call, he says, is to make sure the equipment is exactly what they need for their project. "We want to be with them every step of the way," Hunter says.

Wylie agrees. "It's important to make the customer feel comfortable. Our goal is to give them expertise, the least expensive and most logical solution." Bill's Tool Rental also offers site visits if customers aren't sure what equipment is needed for their project.

Bill compliments both sons a great deal and credits them with his recent use of technology. "One day each week, Wylie, Hunter and I meet over breakfast. We each have a list of tasks. Wylie puts them on Evernote, an iPhone app. Evernote allows all of us to see checklists, pricing for used equipment and other information that one would like to have readily on hand. We sync all this information to our phones, computers and iPads. It saves a lot of time. Evernote also makes us all more accountable to our respective tasks," Bill says.

All say they like being in a family



MANAGEMENT DIGITAL

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Editor's note: For more about Bill's Tool Rental in Colorado, check out RENTAL MANAGEMENT DIGITAL for ARA members only.

business. "Working with family has its ups and downs. When something major needs to be addressed, it is easy to get together and get down to 'brass tacks.' Familial issues always pose an interesting issue when they manifest themselves in a business setting. At the end of the day, being family, we can depend on each other to do what is best for the company," Wylie says.

"I absolutely love working with my sons," Bill says. "I appreciate the intellect and perspective they bring to the company. We agree and disagree, we spar around about various topics and we have very strong opinions and beliefs, so it is not a perfectly smooth road. We respect each other's strengths and attributes. I have the experience and they have the technology skills. I am 'risk averse,' as Hunter calls it. They have a more fearless attitude. It is the best of both worlds. The best part to me is continuing my father's philosophy of serving our customers with honesty, integrity, devotion and unequivocal value. Hunter and Wylie will see to it that this philosophy continues — our company flourishes and our customers prosper. What could be better?" **RM**

