

## **ROBERT RYAN**

### **AFTER 50 YEARS, HE KNOWS MECHANICS OF SELLING VEHICLES**

Bob Ryan has been fond of Fords for a long time.

They're a product he believes in, which is a good thing, considering he has been selling them since 1945.

Ryan, 79, a senior sales representative at Shakopee Ford, is going on his 50<sup>th</sup> year in the business, which started on June 1, 1945.

But his love of mechanics, in general, goes back a little further.

"My father was a "hay shaker" – farmer – in the St. Patrick area," said Ryan. "He didn't care much for mechanical stuff. When I was 9, I could start the gas engine that pumped water, better than Dad. I was always tinkering with farm machinery and neighbor' cars."

In 1945, Ryan was drafted into the Army on his birthday, February 6. "When I left her on the bus, it was 35 below zero. There were 32 of us from Scott County."

All 32 started out at Fort Snelling and 31 were then sent to Fort Sill in Oklahoma. Ryan was the only one of the group to go to Aberdeen, Maryland.

Besides his basic training, Ryan was also taught about the mechanics of Army vehicles. His specialty was half-tracks – armored trucks with tractor treads in back and wheels in front.

After he completed his training, Ryan was sent to San Antonio to a base called "South San." He spent four months at Duncan Field, an Air Force base, before being shipped overseas.

Ryan was next sent to New Caledonia, an island in the southwest Pacific, east of Australia. There he worked in the capital city of Noumea, on tractors and trailers on the docks.

Ryan spent 2 ½ years there. "The officer was good to me," he said. "I could get a 24-hour pass whenever I wanted, although there was nowhere to go but around the island."

And there was a little bit of home on the island, as well.

Ryan said Bill Schaffer of Shakopee, a Navy ensign, was also stationed in New Caledonia, along with Ryan's friends Cal Brown of Shakopee, Joe Egan of Savage and Jimmy O'Brien of Prior Lake, who were in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and Jerry Kopp of Prior Lake, who was a Seabee.

Ryan wasn't allowed to correspond with family, since his location was to remain a secret, but he said Schaffer was able to write letters and share news from home.

The Scott County soldiers enjoyed socializing. "We were all together for a year," said Ryan. "We had a party every Saturday night! As much as I hated to leave home, I didn't mind it too much. And I liked what I was assigned to do."

Ryan also spent six months on the Pacific island of Bjak, serving as a mechanic for the Air Force.

Ryan was then given a six-week furlough home because his wife Margaret was gravely ill and in the hospital. When Ryan came home, he stayed with his family in St. Patrick, while Margaret recuperated at her mother's farm in Savage.

Ryan asked for extension of his leave and was relieved of his duties May 18, 1945.

Ryan barely had time to settle back home before a call came from Harold Noyes, who owned Sales and Service, the Ford dealership in Shakopee.

"He said, 'I know you're going to go to work for me,'" Ryan recalled. "He said he would give me \$50 a week." Back then, Ryan said a weekly wage of \$30 was considered good, so \$50 was especially tempting.

"I still owed the hospital a lot of money, too." He said.

So Ryan accepted Noyes' offer and went to work as a car mechanic. In 1947, Noyes sold the dealership to Jim Covington, who renamed the business "Jim Covington Motor Sales."

Ryan continued as a mechanic for two months, and was also selling part time, when Covington called him into his office and told him, "You don't belong in this shop."

What Covington meant was that he wanted Ryan to utilize his supervisory skills, so he promoted Ryan to general manager of the parts and service department.

Ryan remained general manager through a variety of dealership changes. In 1952, it became "Joe Morello Motor Sales;" in 1957 it was "Bob Schmitt Motor Sales."

In 1959, Ryan was contacted by Dick Lang from the Ford Motor Corp. Ryan was asked about his interest in having a dealership, and Ryan said he had a cousin who wanted to invest money in the business.

So, in 1959, Ryan bought the Ford dealership in Shakopee and renamed it "Bob Ryan Motors."

Ryan said he knew he'd only want to be a dealer for five years. So, in 1963 he sold the dealership to Burdett Stief, who is now its president. He renamed it "Shakopee Ford," a name it has kept to this day.

Ryan then became a salesman for Prestige Lincoln-Mercury in Minneapolis (now located in St. Louis Park) and worked there until 1964, when he returned to Shakopee Ford.

Six months later, he left and started Ryan Auto Sales, selling mainly used Fords, Mercurys and Lincolns, along with some General Motors vehicles. Ryan was in that business until 1982, when he sold to Gene Miller of Jordan, on the condition that Ryan still works there.

In 1992, Ryan decided to quit working. On his last day, he stopped by Shakopee Ford to talk with his friend, Fred Krueger (who is now general manager).

He said Krueger was surprised Ryan had quit. Krueger felt so strongly about Ryan's selling abilities, he called Burdette Stief and said, "I think we should have him here."

Ryan said he had just gotten home when the phone rang. It was Stief. "He told me, 'Don't turn me down, again,'" said Ryan. So Ryan came in and talked with Jim Frampton, the general manager at the time to figure out a work arrangement.

"I went to work a couple of days later," said Ryan. "And I've been here ever since."

Ryan works with repeat customers. He said he has been around long enough to be selling cars to three generations of one family.

When asked for a retrospective of his career, Ryan smiled and said, "I go back to the Model A. I used to have a '31 Model A. That was a good year for them."

Ryan said he has seen lots of models come and go. "People usually stick to the brand they're driving," he said.

His personal preference is for Lincoln Town Cars. He does admit to having a Chevrolet Imperial Landeau at one time. But Fords are his favorite.

Besides, he said, his love for vehicles and his career is based on their inner workings, not necessarily their outward appearance.

“I like cars only because I was a mechanic,” he said, “not because I was a particularly good salesperson.”

Selling cars keeps Ryan on his toes. He has a brochure of the Ford Windstar minivan coming out in 1995, hanging on his wall. “You really have to learn, every year a new model comes out,” he said. “But then, you’re never too old to learn.”

By Susan Vieth