

the whole building," says Tony defiantly. "We took a hit, but we organized a few pieces, and sent the rest of it to the core buyers (re-builders) or for scrap. I said I'm going to start over, and we started organizing and now everything is in its place."

As a result, Tony has reduced his workforce from 15 employees to five full-timers: two in the office including him, two men outdoors, and a delivery truck driver. The rest are part-timers, including his wife, Becky, who does the books. But he quickly adds, "We're doing twice as much as we were by simply knowing...where...everything...is at."

It's also interesting to note that the yard men work by the piece: \$7 for a door, \$4 for a wheel. On a typical day, Tony will sell several engines and transmissions as well as a variety of other parts. His biggest movers are wheels, followed closely by front bumpers. And the cars that are the most popular on the road today, the Camrys, the Chevy pickups, the Dodge Caravans, and yes, the Ford Tauruses are predictably his best parts sellers. The problem is he can't just buy 10 Ford Taurus bumpers; he has to take the whole package...guts, bones and feathers.

Body parts such as doors and bumpers sell quickly, but engines and transmissions are often still under warranty. "So sometimes we may buy an '06 car; well the engine may not sell for three years....we have to sit on those a good while to recoup our money. We might make the bulk of our money from body parts, but we've not made a dime on that car until we finally sell that engine and transmission."

Tony buys about 300 wrecked cars per year, and he'll sell 300 hulks per year for scrap. So every year, a contractor with a huge crushing machine comes to the Rhoadesville yard and reduces a third of the inventory to cubes. "I'm not in the scrap metal business," points out Tony, "that's just a byproduct. Everything on a car can be recycled. They even use the tires now for different applications...They take everything away; it's gone. When they take it to the steel mill when they go to grind it...the byproducts, like the seat material will go one way and the aluminum will go one way; it sorts all of that." And where will it eventually wind up? China, which seems to be the source and destination for just about everything these days.

Last year, Tony's Auto Parts grossed right around three quarters of a million dollars. But he cautions, "We're having a harder and harder time buying good quality salvage vehicles. It's a big problem...right now over 60 percent of all the vehicles sold are being exported." He rattles off the



Above, at Tony's Auto Parts, they know the exact location of every vehicle in the yard. Note the graveled alleys between rows and how they have spread out hay to dry out mud. Also note that most of the cars are late model vehicles. Below, an entire warehouse full of nothing but engines and transmissions. Because of extended warranties, Tony Wilson has to keep this inventory in stock longer for his initial investment in the wrecked car to be recouped.

Photos by Phil Audibert



names of the countries: "Guatemala, Afghanistan, Russia, Lithuania, buying on the Internet right there beside us. And we'll be sitting here bidding and we'll be bidding against somebody from Lithuania on an automobile in Fredericksburg, Virginia."

The problem is the weak dollar. Where Tony can't afford to run a bid up beyond \$4,000, his competitor in Lithuania will bid it at \$6,000. "There's not \$6,000 in parts on that automobile," he protests. Besides, he adds, there's no title on many of these wrecked cars, so the foreigners avoid paying export tax when they label the wrecks as parts, load them aboard container ships and take them out.

Many wrecked cars go to Lithuania and are rebuilt as complete cars and sold to Russians. "They may take two and make one, but a lot of these vehicles are repairable," says Tony who, as President of the Virginia Automotive Recyclers Association, is trying to crack down on this title issue.

"This salvage industry, I don't know what it's going to be doing in 10 years from now," he continues. "We can't see the future." Look at the standard KIA drive train warranty, an unprecedented 10 years or 100,000 miles. "That means I can't sell those parts for 10 years." And it's not just KIA. It used to be a car's life lasted 100,000 miles. "Now it's 200,000 easy, 300,000 and more."

Soon Tony Wilson will be donning a coat and tie ("I actually dress up pretty good") to make lobbying pilgrimages to Richmond and the Virginia General Assembly to knock on the doors of legislators and regulators alike. Just recently, Tony was talking to the heads of the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Division of Motor Vehicles. Salvage yards are licensed by DMV. But they must hold a Storm Water Management Plans through DEQ. "Well their computers don't see one another," says Tony with an exasperated eye roll.

Here's the problem. There are 1,250 licensed salvage yards in the state of Virginia. About half of those are no longer in business, leaving, let's say, 600 active licensees. Everyone should have a Storm Water Management Plan, but only 126 actually do, and they are the ones who are routinely inspected. Tony flops his plan out on the desk. It is two inches thick.

"These people who are licensed, I do not want them to lose their license. I don't want to put them out of business. But they need to play on the same playing field. They need to come into compliance. Give them two years. Most of them don't even know that they have to do this. Let them know. Go about it diplomatically, and be a part of a better organization and a better industry."



A tale of two Tauruses: Technology and organization in the modern salvage yard

Imagine this: Two cars, both Ford Tauruses approach each other on Route 20. It's late at night and it's cold. Taurus #1 shoots into a right-hand curve too hot and loses it on black ice. Its back end clips the driver's side front door of the oncoming Taurus #2. Taurus #1 continues skidding across the road, plunges over an embankment, and runs head on into an unyielding tree, crumpling the front end, bursting the radiator, buckling the hood and shattering the windshield.

Taurus #2 meanwhile does a 180 and slides to a stop on the shoulder. Although the bashed-in door is jammed and won't open, the car is still drivable. Its driver expels a long pent-up

breath of relief and runs to check on the driver of Taurus #1, who is shaken, bruised and bleeding from a few cuts, but otherwise unhurt, thanks to the deployed airbag and the shoulder harness seatbelt. Taurus #2 dials 911. Help is on the way.

After the fire department and rescue squad have done their thing; after the state trooper has rolled up his measuring wheel and completed his report; after the tow truck has winched Taurus #1 out of the muck; after its driver is released from the hospital following a night of observation...a unique process spools up. And it is a process that can stretch from Rhoadesville to Romania!

Let's follow along.



Above, a giant forklift pick cars up lengthwise, making it easier to place them in rows in the yard. Although just the forks themselves cost \$5,000, Tony's Auto Parts soon makes up that amount in time and labor savings. At left, many alternators and starters that have been pulled from wrecked cars go to re-builders, who refurbish, clean and check these parts before sending them out to auto parts chain stores for sale.

Photos by Phil Audibert

Gone is your old-fashioned automobile graveyard, replete with mean dog and crotchety owner. Gone are the rusted hulks of ancient cars. Gone too are the iridescent shimmering puddles of spilt oil and heaven-knows-what toxic fluid.

This is the world of automotive salvage and recycling. In this particular story, the wounded car, Taurus #2, will live to see another day. The dead car, Taurus #1, will too, but only as parts. And it is possible that these two cars will meet again under much more favorable circumstances.

Tony's Auto Parts at the intersection of Mine Run Road and Route 20 is a pretty nice junkyard as junkyards go. You don't see it from the main highway because of a row of evergreens. And because it sits in a swale, it's not readily visible from the other points of the compass thanks to convenient tree lines, hill sides, buildings and a fence. Cars are parked in neat



Every part removed from the car is tagged with a number that tells the source of the part and its exact location by building, row, shelf and slot.

Photo by Phil Audibert

rows separated by well-maintained and drained gravel "streets." They've even put down old hay to hold the mud during wet weather.

"Technology and organization," is Tony Wilson's mantra. "Technology and organization: what we're doing as an industry is streamlining the process." He clacks furiously on a computer while simultaneously talking to a client on the phone. Gone is your old-fashioned automobile graveyard, replete with mean dog and crotchety owner. Gone are the rusted hulks of ancient cars. Gone too are the iridescent shimmering puddles of spilled oil and heaven-knows-what toxic fluid.

Automotive salvage and recycling has cleaned its act up and has gone headlong high-tech...or at least this one has. "There's not anybody out here who's going to be in the auto salvage business if they don't stay up with the times from a technical end," says Wilson. "Without the technology, they can't afford to buy the inventory, market it and sell it."

In our fictitious wreck above, the insurance adjuster has decided Taurus #1 is not worth repairing. It has been taken to Fredericksburg to be sold at an insurance auto auction. However, Taurus #2 can be repaired. The car's owner has chosen a local body shop to do the work.

Let's follow the dead one first. It is put up for sale along with a slew of other wrecked cars. And although there is a physical location where that auction actually takes place, "the majority of the time we buy from that back office there," says Tony pointing to a cubicle behind his work station. In fact, it is the computer that spots the car, not the person. The computer knows what Tony likes in a salvaged damaged vehicle. It knows this because it has kept track of Tony's past bid-

ding history. "It remembers every request that we have," he says as he enters information and launches searches. The computer even factors in the cost of doing business, past sales and buying history, and sets bid limits accordingly.

Ford Tauruses are popular cars. The surviving parts of this car (in this case everything except the front end, radiator, hood and windshield) have a high likelihood of selling. Photos are downloaded, and Tony, through his part-time buyer and inventory man, Frank Howell, purchases the wreck for, let's say, \$3,700. That's a far cry from the old days when you could buy a wreck for \$200 and sell the engine out of it for \$300. But times have changed.

Tony's Dad, former Orange County Supervisor, Grover Wilson, who started all this years ago with a towing business, fetches the car from the auction house and brings it back to the yard in Rhoadesville. Upon Taurus #1's arrival, the first thing they do is check for leaking fluids, although the likelihood that something is still leaking from this car is rare considering it has been in a holding yard and an auction house before coming here. Leaking fluids, such as anti-freeze, battery acid, and in particular mercury from switches is a good way to get the Department of Environmental Quality into a twist.

Next, everything is tested. If the battery is dead, they hook one up. Do the locks and windows still go up and down? Does the heater heat, does the A/C cool, does the power steering turn, do the power mirrors adjust. "It saves us," points out Tony. "If we send a mirror out and it doesn't work..." He shrugs. "I've paid someone to inventory it, I paid somebody to dismantle it, paid somebody to box it, and now it's there and it's not right?" He shrugs again. Tony used to run a full-service repair shop. In those days he relied on salvage yards to provide clean operating parts. "I've been on both sides. I finally got through to the guys working out here that we rely on this information so heavily."

Howell, Tony's buyer and inventory guy, walks round and around the crippled Taurus, entering notes into the computer. He looks at the mileage, then looks at the oil change sticker in the top corner of the windshield. Did this owner schedule regular oil changes? Is there trash all over the floor, or was this car owner neat. How's the rubber. It all makes a difference, because almost all of it can be resold and recycled.

Nothing gets by their keen eyes. If Howell misses it,

then the guy who dismantles the car will catch it. If he misses something, Tony himself will catch it. Three times they inventory this car. "From one end to the other, we know exactly everything that's on it, the condition that it's in," says Tony. They even note the size and location of a small dent on the door. It is measured by whether it is bigger or smaller than a standard credit card. The dent gets a number.

In fact everything is identified by a number; the bumper, the headlight, the right side mirror, the left side mirror, the door, etc. Naturally, the car itself has a "social security number," that will follow it and all of its saleable parts until what is left is sold for scrap three years from now.

Time to drain the fluids, and they drain them all: windshield washer fluid, engine oil, coolant (toxic to pets), transmission oil (which they use to fire the furnace), power steering fluid and of course, gasoline, which they remove by carefully drilling a small hole in the bottom of the fuel tank. They suck the volatile fuel out, run it through screens and a magnet to catch any debris, then through a filtering system to what's known as a gas buggy. "We use every bit of it in our delivery trucks, and if we have any surplus we let the guys use it in their own vehicles." Batteries are pulled and sent to Interstate to be, yes, recycled.

From there, the vehicle goes into the shop where they pull "the main 10 or 15 parts that we know we're going to sell readily all the time." This includes what the re-builders use to stock auto parts stores: alternators, starters etc. They also pull headlights, parking lights, mirrors, wheels, tires, engines, and transmissions, and every single one is priced and tagged with



Things can get busy for Tony Wilson and Kathy Woodson as they juggle phones and computers for the various business enterprises headquartered at the Rhoadesville shop.

Photo by Phil Audibert

the vehicle's number and the part's location by building, row, shelf and slot. The rest stays on the vehicle. It is then moved by a giant forklift that picks the car up lengthwise and places it in its final berth in one of 16

rows outdoors.

An instant message comes in on the computer. Another Taurus owner has had an accident; he needs a driver's side door. Welllllll, whadya know, it's our old friend Taurus #2. His body shop has sent out a request for a used door. The computer at Tony's says there are four in stock, including this latest addition. It locates the car by row and position within that row. An employee dismantles the door, brings it up front, and washes it. "I don't want it sprayed off," insists Tony; "it needs to be hand washed and clean."

The next morning, the clean Taurus left front door is delivered to the body shop, where theoretically it could be attached to the very car it hit that fateful night on Route 20. It doesn't matter what color the door is. "They get the recycled door, they can take it in, strip it down, prep, paint and put it on," says Tony. "It's going to feel like, look like, be exactly like the door you had before the car was in the accident, and at a savings to the insurance company and to everybody."

The alternative is to order a brand new door from Ford. But, Tony points out, a door is a complicated mechanism; it doesn't just open and shut; it has electronics and mirrors that adjust up and down and side to side, some with directional signals and puddle lights, and windows that go up and down and locks and wires and speakers and every other darn thing. The labor to assemble a new one is prohibitive. So, they install what's known in the business as "like kind and quality...as good as what was there before the accident."

Here comes another request from another body shop over in the valley. It is for a Subaru Outback rear bumper. The computer searches. No matches in this

shop, but here's one in the "core group." Tony explains. "We're going to make every effort to find what they need," even if it means giving the business to someone else. Acting as a middle man, Tony will steer the body shop "to a vendor that we trust." Sometimes he adds a finder's fee, (10 percent of total), but if it's a small matter, he'll charge nothing knowing that they'll return the favor someday. And if they can't find the part in the core group, Tony presses some keys on the computer. "We can go down here and hit 'locate' and cover about 2,500 yards in the United States.

"Technology and organization," continues Tony. "Every part here has a location, bar none." We take a walk to what used to be a milking parlor. Rows of steering columns hang upside down, some with their airbags still eerily deployed. In the old days all GM alternators or all Ford starters were heaped together in bins. That was the extent of the organization. "I came down and I emptied

Different hats, different phones

"'03-Chevrolet-pickup-needa-left-front-door," rattles Tony Wilson at break neck speed while clacking away simultaneously at the computer. Tony doesn't wear different hats; he just has different phones.

"Wilson Auction Company," yodels Tony's right hand helper, Kathy Woodson. If it's THIS phone, it's an auction call. If it's THAT phone it's a salvage call. Two men walk into the office, looking for a price on some used tires. "You price 'em," says Tony to Kathy. She peers over her desk. "I say 20 bucks apiece." Deal.

Man it's busy around here. Only 15 percent of Tony's trade is walk in; the rest is either over the computer or the telephone. "This company, we're going to continue to move forward and progress in the automotive recycling industry, however, when is it going to get to the point that it's not profitable?" he asks rhetorically.

Don't worry. Tony Wilson has it covered. He's also a licensed contractor, and now...a licensed auctioneer. And that explains why he can talk so fast. Anyway, this tradition of starting new ventures runs in the family. "My whole family, we've always been self-employed for the most part."

Kathy hauls out a photo of Tony's grandparents. "That's where it all started, right there." Grover and Mary Wilson. "He had a second-grade education. He could sign his name and that was about it," chimes in Tony. His grandmother had a high school education and could write a deed or a contract on a first draft. Self-employed ever since he was 34 years old, "Granddaddy always bought and sold." He provided Tony with his first piece of land. And today, Tony lives with his wife and two children in the same house he was born in, an historic home at the intersection of Mine Run Road and the Constitution Highway.

Tony learned the automotive trade at an early age. He credits his uncle Chris Wilson, just up Route 20 a



This picture of Tony Wilson working at the back end of a tow truck was probably taken in 1989 when he was 20 years old.

Contributed photo.



Hedging his bets, Tony Wilson has branched out into auctioneering just in case the automotive recycling business becomes too risky.

Contributed photo

half mile, where as a boy, Tony would pump gas. His dad, also named Grover, started Wilson Wrecker Service. Tony waves vaguely at the buildings and yard. "We were partners in this since I was in high school." He turns and looks at Kathy. "How long did we argue?" Big laugh, because Tony and Grover have a relationship that involves fussing at each other about 80 percent of the time. "We got along okay," continues Tony, "but I wanted to progress and I had my focus on what I thought we could do." Besides, his Dad was a county supervisor. "County politics kept him extremely busy... more time-consuming than people could ever imagine."

The towing business had morphed into automotive repair, used car sales, and salvage. It was 1987. Fresh out of Orange County High

School, Tony Wilson enrolled at Germanna Community College, had even written the check to the registrar. But there were cars to sell and repair and tow and strip, and he said "I can't do this...So, what I did instead is, I've always taken full advantage and gone to everything and anything related to the field that I'm doing." Training programs, plus an uncanny ability to focus.

Focus...if there is one word to describe Tony Wilson it is focus...just like the Cable Guy..."git 'er done."

Within the past 12 months or so, Tony launched the auction business. "We don't want to pull away from Tony's Auto Parts, but we feel with the organization...that we can get it done." The auction company sells everything from antique cars to estates and farms. He has set aside a 30 X 90 foot covered space for holding the auctions and has graduated from auc-

tioneer's school, where they did not need to teach him how to talk fast. And although they will write a hand ticket on every item as it is sold, "we don't do it unless we can do it with a computer."

There it is again...technology and organization.