

Cars too are different these days. The Reynolds brothers are fierce defenders of their beleaguered GM product line, particularly the flagship Cadillac. "Cadillac still has the perfect, beautiful interiors, they have a wide range of color choice still, but they're smaller cars that are quieter on the inside. They get better gas mileage, and most of them are quite a bit faster," says Kevin.

"Cadillac really makes the best car in the world. It makes the best car in the world right now," he repeats emphatically. "We have no problems with them; just nothing happens with them....You ask how cars have changed? I'll tell you something. The main way GM cars have changed is that there's just very few problems with them anymore."

Tom points out a peculiar irony. "That's why they're in the problems that they're in right now financially; people don't need to trade their cars in." Kevin jumps in. "We've got Buick loaner cars down here that are perfectly good cars that we loan to good customers with 160,000-170,000 miles on them. If you change the oil in them, change the transmission fluid, they'll go that long." And John confirms, "We've done half the warranty work each year for the last five years. Every year we look at how much warranty work we're doing and it's half from the year before. And they've increased the warranty," he exclaims.

It wasn't always that way. Back in the bad ol' days, the mid to late 1980s, the GM product line was causing the Reynolds some embarrassment. "You'd sell a brand new Cadillac to somebody and the drive shaft would drop out." Kevin rolls his eyes in agony. "It would be awful. It would be damage control...Somebody just gave you \$50,000 and then something stupid goes wrong?" He shakes his head in bewilderment. Then he adds, "That doesn't happen anymore. They started getting it right about 10 or 12 years ago."

Which brings us to an interesting point that John makes about alternative fuels. "You start using different forms of fuel, you've got 10, 15, 20 years worth of surprises headed your way, of different things, different problems that just crop up. Think of all the catalytic converter problems back in the 80s. You don't see those at all now. So whenever you switch from something that is tried and true now, you're going to be in for a host of surprises."

It was back in 1990 that a Subaru rep left two cars



Photo by Phil Audibert
From left to right, Kevin and Tom Reynolds, literally and figuratively stand by the Cadillac brand. This 1976 El Dorado with its 500 cubic inch engine, the biggest Cadillac ever produced, represents the hey-day of the big American car.



Photo by Phil Audibert
John Reynolds, the fourth generation of the family to be in the business, stands by today's Cadillac, a CTS. It is smaller, lighter, faster and more fuel efficient than its 1976 forebear. But, according to the Reynolds, it still features top quality styling and engineering.

for Kevin and Tom to try out. The rest is history. "Subaru is probably the best business decision Tom and I ever made, even though we're GM dealers," says Kevin. John looks up from texting on his cell phone and blurts, "Subaru means 'unite' in Japanese." Kevin and Tom are astonished by this little-known fact. Tom recovers and says, "Well they united all four wheels, because it's the best all-wheel-drive system made."

His daughters won't drive anything else. Kevin points to the fact that the cars have aircraft and heavy equipment roots. "That's why Subaru go 300,000 miles; those things don't quit."

As it is, in these tough times, Reynolds is selling eight to 10 brand new Subarus a month. And whereas they used to sell 50 cars total per month during good times, that number is down to 35, which is pretty darn good when you consider the 18 percent loss in personal wealth that this country has experienced just since November!

In fact, John says they may be over the hump. "We're looking stronger than last year. Last year, starting about April, it was a rough eight months. We had to make a lot of changes. So far the changes we've made have put us right in line. We've been hitting our goals every month."

The Reynolds have even adapted in the way they sell cars. The old-fashioned, polyester pant suit, white belt and shoes hard-sell technique goes nowhere nowadays. "Sweet talking does nothing," says John. "Sales techniques do nothing; it's actually gotten closer to the truest form of customer service that you can have now, having the right product. The Internet, you can go out and find any used car you want now, any color, any model, any mileage," he notes. "So, the inventory is at your fingertips. The art of salesmanship has turned more into customer relations, the people you know, the nicer you are, the more you know about your product."

What about the future? "I feel good about the future," say Kevin and Tom simultaneously. "I contend that we will always need automobiles," elaborates Tom. "I contend that General Motors will make it. I know we're in a recession today but I don't think we won't come out of this recession. We will come out. So, any recession, any downturn for the car business, always makes the dealer that comes out of it a stronger dealer."

Fourth generation, John, compares the recession to a forest fire. "A forest has to burn down to get rid of the unproductive members and grow back strong." Kevin points to changes already afoot: He's excited about eight

different models of hybrid cars to come from GM. "Once they get their expenses in line, they're going to be producing the same car with no problems at a couple of thousand dollars less per car, and therefore, they are going to be far more competitive with other lines than they ever were before."

And so, Reynolds Pontiac is "doing okay." Not great mind you, but they'll make it. We all will.



"WE'RE DOING OKAY"

Photo by Phil Audibert
On the surface, not much has changed at Reynolds Pontiac-Cadillac-GMC-Buick-Subaru. The showroom has been in this same building since 1972. Before that it was located where the service department is located today in the background. Kevin's son John poses between his father and his uncle, much the way his great grandfather Jack posed for pictures 71 years ago, flanked by his two sons Chester and Roy (below).

"We're doing okay. We're not getting rich, but we're doing okay." Kevin Reynolds responds softly to the question, 'what's it like being in the car business these days?' He leans forward. "Tom and I have a lot of friends who are losing \$50,000, \$100,000 a month, and you know that money runs out quick; where we're making a little something. We don't have as much

REYNOLDS
Pontiac-
Cadillac-
GMC-
Buick-
Subaru

overhead, our buildings are paid for, luckily. We don't live real high on the hog, so we're doing okay." That's a relief.

'One hundred thousand bucks' a month; can you imagine? Hemorrhaging money at that rate, it's a wonder those metropolitan car dealers get any sleep at night. But down here in sleepy Orange, this car dealer on Madison Road for the past 71 years, is surviving just fine, thank you...not high on the hog, like the man said, but surviving...actually doing a little better than that.

There are several reasons for this. One: the Reynolds brothers Tom and Kevin and Kevin's son John have adapted. "The car business is somewhat slower than two years ago," explains Kevin, "but it started getting slower two years ago. So, really Tom and I have gotten used to it. We've made some changes."

Two: They rent cars, and they sell used cars, and that's a growing business in these penny pinching



times.

Three: They have a loyal staff of 41 employees...41 people whose families rely on Reynolds Pontiac for their livelihood. Some have been here 30+ years. Their current service manager, Grant Carpenter, is the third generation to fill that post, coming after his father Larry and his grandfather Lawrence. "We have a lot of long term employees. We don't have much turnover," explains Kevin.

"We're proud of that," echoes Tom.

Four: "Another thing that adds to our survival in Orange is that we are very diversified when it comes to car dealers," continues Tom. "We have a body shop; we have a service department; we have a parts department. And a lot of dealerships think in terms of selling new cars and don't worry about repairing them for the customer."



From the Reynolds family archives

This picture was taken in 1957 as Service Manager, Lawrence Carpenter (foreground) and Johnny Corbin work on a Vauxhall. Carpenter represents the first of three generations to hold that job. His grandson, Grant, is Reynolds' service manager today.

Good point because we've reached an age where customers who routinely bought a new car every year, can't afford to anymore. They're going to buy used or, fix up what they have. Besides, cars are more reliable now. But, more on that later.

Customers...that's what's at the center of all this. "Not but so many people are going to walk through the door in Orange, Virginia," reasons Tom realistically. "You just have to make sure that when they do walk through the door, you take care of them."

Walking through the showroom door at Reynolds Pontiac-Cadillac-GMC Truck-Buick-Subaru Inc. is like going through a time warp. The showroom floor can accommodate three, maybe four cars. Casually dressed salesmen, chat on the phone in their spartan cubicles. A picture of the Indian chief Pontiac, the same one that's probably been here since they won that franchise back in '48, glares down from Kevin's office wall.

The waiting room is not really a room; it's a furniture grouping off to the side. There is no dolled-up receptionist; there is no latte machine, no thick pile carpeting, no children's play area to speak of; no computer work stations for customers to use while someone next door works on their car. The couches are comfortable but not fancy. The TV gets cable, but it's usually turned off. Out of date magazines spill off the coffee table. Today's well-thumbed newspaper lies on top.

The Reynolds brothers privately admit they have resisted pressure from above to convert their showroom and waiting area into a modern designer outfit showpiece like those other dealerships that are, well, losing a \$100,000 a month.

This hominess is soothing. You don't feel like you're paying for fancy window trimming when all

you want to do is buy a new or used car at the best price possible. When you walk in, if they know you, they'll greet you by name. If they don't, they'll make sure they do before you walk out the door. There is a small-town quaintness to this place. Most employees actually take an hour for lunch from 12 to 1. You can find them reading the paper and eating a sandwich in the service department employee lounge or enjoying barbecue at the Hornet's Nest next door.

Kevin's son, John, is the sales manager. He represents the fourth generation to sell cars here. "The car business is in the blood and it's getting stronger and thicker with every generation," he smiles. "Dad and Tom started me working down here when I was 13, sweeping the floors and washing the bathrooms and washing the cars. I've done everything down here. It's a totally different mentality in this town at this dealership than it is anywhere else."

Yet, underneath this Mayberry-style dealership flows a strong undercurrent of cutting-edge technology. The Reynolds brothers are loathe to admit it, but they were the driving force behind establishing an automotive technology curriculum at Germanna Community College in



Photo by Phil Audibert

Reynolds Pontiac has diversified enough to survive these tough economic times. Used car sales, car rentals, a complete body shop, and a high tech service department all contribute to Reynolds' success.

response to the change-over, 15 years ago, to computerized diagnostic tools. "It is very important to send our technicians to school," notes Kevin. "We've got smart technicians. They have to be able to read and absorb like a college student."

And they have to be computer literate. "It's really a different ball game. It's not taking that screw and fiddling around with it until the car sounds good any-

more. That's a joke. I mean everything has to be perfect. It's either white or black. There's no in between on fixing a car."

The same goes for the body shop. The Reynolds have invested big bucks in a laser-guided frame machine that gives a before and after computer rendering of a car, making sure it is lined up precisely. And you would not believe what goes into painting an automobile nowadays.

Jim Embree, dressed in what looks like a parachutist's outfit with a mask, explains that the high-end Belgian-made Sikkens paint is mixed on an incredibly sensitive computerized scale. "We can have up to 19 different variations of the same color," he notes as he compares a blue paint chip to the bent fender of a faded Ford under a light that emits the same color temperature as sunshine. "There is no can of fade," he smiles good-naturedly, but by blending the paint to the seams, you won't even notice. Next stop: the down-draft paint room, which pushes all particulates off the car and into a grate in the floor. Paint is baked on at 166 degrees, then clear coated. The result: "You end up getting a perfect paint job," says Tom.

Because of all this technology and attention to detail, Reynolds has been designated an "Authorized Direct Repair" facility. In other words, if you hit a deer (83 deer hit estimates written this past December alone), you can take your car to Reynolds body shop and they don't have to wait for an insurance adjustor to confirm how much it's going to cost to fix the damage. The insurance companies have placed caps on every conceivable procedure, just like health insurance. You might say that, in a sense, there are two "medical" facilities here: the service department is out-patient; the body shop is in-patient; what John likes to call "the trauma center."



Photo by Phil Audibert

Jim Embree compares paint chips as Alvis Knight holds a light that reproduces sunshine. "The average person has no idea what goes into mixing a can of paint," says Tom Reynolds.

Reynolds: four generations strong

Tom and Kevin Reynolds have never forgotten that day in 1976, when their Dad, Chester, sold the last Cadillac convertible ever made. It was a white El Dorado, Bicentennial edition with white leather interior and patriotic red, white and blue piping.

This is the biggest car Cadillac ever made. They still have one in a different color in the back, a reminder of the now long gone era of the big American car. The hood on this thing goes on for a couple of miles. Heaven knows what it weighs. It has a 500 cubic-inch engine and gets eight miles to the gallon. But heck, back then, gasoline cost, what, maybe 50 cents?

Chester Reynolds sold the Bicentennial car to a stranger over the phone for \$12,000 more than its suggested retail price of \$14,000. Within hours, before the new owner could even pick it up and pay for it, someone called and offered Chester \$32,000 for the same car. Both sons, who had just joined the dealership full time, urged him to take the better offer.

"Hell no," retorted Chester. "I'll never forget it," says Tom. "He didn't even know the guy. But he'd given him his word on the phone, and that was it. It made such an impression on me how your word is your word. I was just getting out of college and he said that...He believed that if you told somebody something you could bank on it."

Maybe Chester learned that principle from his Dad, Jack, who arrived here with his Mom, Daisy Mason Reynolds and two tykes, Chester and Roy, from Botetourt County at the beginning of the Great Depression. And here's something that sounds hauntingly familiar; Jack lost his job with the power company in 1929. He found work pumping gas at a Shell station on Madison Road. When the owner left, he took over the business, and moved it across the street to where Wayne Modena has his State Farm Insurance business today.

Then, with his sons beside him, Jack moved the business back across the street to where the McDonald's is today. By this point, they weren't just pumping gas; they were fixing up old cars and selling them. Then Pearl

Harbor got in the way. Both Chester and Roy upped with the Air Force, returning in 1945. By this point a man by the name of Hay Taylor from Madison County would bring cars to Chester to sell...one at a time. "That's how he got started. As soon as he got it, he'd sell it," says Tom.



From the Reynolds family archives

This picture of Chester Reynolds was taken in 1959, the same year that Castro overthrew Batista and established communist rule in Cuba. Chester Reynolds and his close traveling buddy, Buck Early were almost trapped in Cuba during that coup.

Chester married the former Frances Lonergan in 1946 and was awarded the Pontiac dealer's franchise two years later. He obviously had a knack for selling cars because of the 132 Pontiac dealers in the Washington region at that time, Reynolds was ranked 13th! By now, the dealership was located where the service department is today. You can still see remnants of

Tom. He also liked to have fun...sometimes too much fun. He and Citizen's National Bank President, Buck Early worked hand in glove. "Dad would sell 'em and Buck would finance 'em. They were a team," says Kevin. "They were buddies and it got compounded when they started drinking," says Tom soberly. "They would go out and they thought they had no limitations and sometimes they'd leave town and they wouldn't come back for two or three days or maybe a week."

There are many humorous stories of this pair's antics, the most famous of which was when they were almost trapped in Cuba during Castro's overthrow of Batista in 1959. "The assistant Consular General knocked on their door, and both of them were drinking heavily," Tom tells the story. "They told them 'get out of here.' When Dad walked out on the main street (Havana) he said people were standing around with guns and knives. He said it was rough." Buck and Chester eventually hopped their way home via Buenos Aires. "Buck operated the bank from Cuba and Dad operated his business out of Cuba; that's the joke that was going around," says Kevin. "Uncle Roy and our wonderful employees were running the store up here."

Both of Chester's sons, started working at the dealership in their early teens. In fact, Tom says, "Kevin at a very early age, as his little brother, I could tell he was going to be in the car business." Kevin even remembers the first car he ever sold; he was being ferried to a swim meet by Mrs. Jack Samuels. "And I told her she should have a Cadillac...Dad did the figures, but I was instrumental in getting the job done...I was 12-years old." Son John has an identical story; he sold his orthodontist a '91 Cadillac Sedan de Ville when he was 13!



From the Reynolds family archives

A Reynolds Pontiac parade entry passes a competing dealership on its way up Madison Road in this undated photograph.

the original showroom floor tile in the work bay closest to the door.

Since then, they bought the Gilbert Implements building on one side (today's showroom) and Wyatt Williams' Buick dealership on the left, which now houses the body shop. Currently, the Reynolds compound includes more buildings, a huge parking lot out back, that little lot right across the street, and a satellite unit at Colonial Square.

Cadillac awarded its franchise to Reynolds in 1952. "Dad was an incredible salesman, had a lot of charisma, very well liked," says

agree every now and then? "They defer to me," wisecracks John, prompting a big laugh all around. Kevin, who has pretty much been the salesman all along, refers to his brother as "the rock of this business. He just keeps everything under control."

Tom counters, "Of course we've had arguments because we're brothers, but basically we get along very well because our goals are the same...If we didn't have the same goals, we wouldn't be able to work together." Tom looks over at his brother. "I wouldn't be partners with anybody else but him."