

R.R. Walker and Son observes 45th anniversary in Edinboro

Phil Walker can remember 45 years ago when his father, R.R. Walker, first began selling John Deere tractors to Edinboro farmers. He was 12 years old and recalls that most of the area farmers used horses to plow their fields at that time.

"Farmers had the general attitude that tractors would never replace horses," Walker said. "They were so skeptical and suspicious that my father finally taught me to drive the tractor. Then when he went to demonstrate how a tractor could plow or drag, he'd tell them that if a 12 year old could run one, they certainly could, too. And before you knew it, farmers were trading in their horses and team equipment for a John Deere."

On Friday, February 8, R.P. Walker and Son will observe the 45th anniversary of serving area customers in their agricultural implement business. The business originally began in 1935 as a partnership between brothers Russell and "Jinx" Walker and Roy Eastman. Three years later the partnership dissolved and the next year R.P. Walker sold his farm and moved his John Deere agency to downtown Edinboro.

"In 1939 we moved downtown and used to do repair work in the barn where the laundromat now stands," Walker recalled. "Then in 1956 dad sold the building and

built the present building here on Route 99. Later on we added on a new shop to the back of the building."

Walker has to smile when he thinks of comparing the early model tractors to those sold today.

"In 1935 the biggest tractor we sold had 42 horsepower and cost a farmer \$686," Walker remembered. "Today they have tractors that get up to 250 horsepower and sell for about \$10,000. Originally they all came equipped with steel wheels. Then in 1938 the first rubber-tire tractor was put on the market."

Although the tractors of today can pack more than six times the horsepower of their proto-types, Walker revealed that the 130 horsepower tractor is the biggest seller in the Edinboro area.

"Most modern farmers have never handled horses. They don't know what it's like to drive a team," Walker said. "Used to be that a farmer would be able to plow three acres a day with his team and he'd consider that doing good. Now a farmer can plow two acres an hour with a tractor—and the bigger outfits can go even faster. A farmer today can do more with his tractor in one hour than his father could do with a team of horses in 12 hours."

After he learned to run a tractor himself at 12, Walker began selling the machines four years later. Now he sells

snowmobiles, snow-blowers, farm equipment, replacement parts, as well as a full line of lawn and garden equipment.

Walker's father was active in the implement business up to two weeks before his death last summer at the age of 88. Walker remembers that his father was a member of borough council for 33 years—president for a long time and also instrumental in building the water wheel on French Creek.

Phil Walker's sons Dave and Buster are both active in the family business and a part of the 45-year heritage. Dave, the oldest son, 32, managed a branch store in Erie for ten years before moving back to Edinboro in 1978. He received a B.S. degree in Business Administration from the University of Michigan and now acts as salesman and manager of the lawn and garden part of the business. Buster, 30, currently runs the Walker farm and serves as a salesman of agricultural equipment.

Walker's wife, Sue, keeps the books for the business and also acts as parts manager behind the counter. Walker affectionately calls her his "right hand man here," saying that she has done everything on the farm from milking cows to spreading manure over the years.

Other workers in the Walker "family" include

Wendel LeSuer, who has been service manager of the business for 22 years; Albert English, service manager of the lawn and garden department for 18 years; and Virgil Krauter, assistant service manager for 16 years. Looking back on the 45 years that the business has served the Edinboro community, Walker believes that farming has come a long, long way to now stand as "the most efficient industry in the world today."

"A lot of it is due to the research and development of machines that can do the work of many, many men," he said. "Good management and hard work along with these machines have enabled farming to outstrip any other industry in the world."

But with this efficiency comes a sense that farming is becoming more impersonal—just as the "warmth" from a tractor cannot replace the living, breathing warmth of a family horse.

"It used to be that neighbor would help neighbor thrash the grain and fill the silos," Walker recalled. "There was always a feeling of fellowship when everyone gathered together for the big meal after the work was finished—it was like a neighborhood festival, a real social affair. Now it's gone from the American scene and people my age miss it."

It may be gone, but after 45 years these roots of old Edinboro are not forgotten. They will live on in memories and a heritage that will be passed from son to son—and not even 45 more years can change that.