



Star Equipment

Celebrates 50 Years in the Construction Equipment Industry

By Jessica Hoover

Star Equipment Ltd., a construction equipment dealer with locations in Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Waterloo and Ames, celebrated their 50th anniversary on September 6. The company started out in 1968 at the original headquarters in Des Moines and was founded by Max Bowman, his wife Beverly and their longtime friend, Roger Bills. Max's son and current President of Star Equipment, Bruce Bowman, was only eight years old when his parents started the company and remembers helping out as a child.

"We used to pick up nuts and bolts that the mechanics dropped and put them back in the bolt bin because we didn't have enough money to make things go," Bruce said. "We were a relatively small organization back then. We started with a very small building on a small piece of property."

Starting the Company

Max had been in sales positions for a large portion of his life before he founded Star Equipment. It was at one of his previous workplaces, All Wheel Drive, that he first began selling skid loaders to the Iowa market in the mid-60s. After Max left that job to begin his own company, he chose Universal Manufacturing Company (Uni-Loader) as Star Equipment's first line of skid loaders. Within the first two months of opening the business, Uni-Loader was acquired by CASE Construction Equipment, which led Max to start again with a company called Owatonna Manufacturing Company (OMC). OMC is known today as Mustang.

"That's how we got into the business, and we really started out being what they called a light to general construction equipment house, which is everything that is kind of underneath a heavy iron dealership," Bruce said. "The old joke we always told was that we started with a shovel and stopped just short of a heavy iron dealership as far as what we would sell. So we had shovels back when it wasn't so easy to get shovels and concrete hand tools and that type of stuff. Just about anything that a concrete contractor or a general contractor would want, we had."

Star Equipment has been an air compressor dealer since 1969, Multiquip dealer since 1978, telescopic dealer since 1983, Takeuchi dealer since 1984 and even played their hand at selling aerial lifts in 1972, which the company discontinued

in 1999 but started selling again in 2017. The company also has been in the concrete finishing business with Allen Engineering from the very beginning and later on added Whiteman, Wacker and Somero.

"Now as we have grown larger we actually are one business that houses three divisions," Bruce said. "One is our general product lines or our core products: the skid loaders, generators, water pumps, that stuff. Our second division is IMT for service trucks, lube bodies, articulated cranes, and Elliot HiReach boom trucks. Our third division is GPS machine control through Topcon. Years ago – I think it was 1969 – Max took on an almost unknown company at the time called AGL. They developed some of the first sewer lasers for putting in the pipe line on grade. Dad was kind of the pioneer bringing that product into the market. For the needs of our customers, we went out and looked for a broader line. So we have the entire Topcon product line that we sell, and we still have the whole AGL product line that we sell as well."

Branching Out

Star Equipment's products are not the only things that have changed over the years. Since the company's inception, they have opened three additional locations along with their headquarters in Des Moines.

The original building in Des Moines started out at only 2,000 square feet and has grown to multiple buildings with a total of 18,000 square feet located on five acres of land. The Cedar Rapids location opened in 1987 with a 5,000-square-foot building, which has grown to 15,000 square feet on five acres. The original Waterloo location opened in 1995 inside of an old ice cream shop before moving to the current location on Airline Highway, with an 8,000-square-foot building on 19 acres. The most recent expansion was the location in Ames in 2008, where the building is 17,000 square feet on seven acres of land. As Star Equipment expanded, the staff grew from three employees to around 86 employees currently.

As Max starts to go into retirement, the company has begun the second generation of family ownership. Max's sons Bruce, Brett, and Brad have taken over the leadership positions of Star Equipment: Bruce is President, Brett is Vice President, Treas-



Max and Beverly Bowman

urer and General Service Manager, and Brad is Vice President and Branch Manager in Cedar Rapids.

"I do some selling but I generally handle all of the business side of the company," Bruce said. "Brad loves to sell and Brett likes to turn wrenches, so everything works out."

Increased Technology

Under the new leadership, Star Equipment has been making the switch to

becoming a more technology-driven company. The phones and computers for each location are all interconnected, and employees can take orders over the phone, fax, email or text. When dealing with equipment rentals, employees are able to take photos on their smart phone when the equipment goes out and comes back to evaluate its condition. There will also be an update to Star Equipment's website coming soon that will support the company's high-moving product orders. Customers



Brett, Brad and Bruce Bowman 1994

can receive all of their invoices via email, and they will be able to go online to check their account balance and pay bills. The website works on any smart device such as smart phones and tablets.

"We're heading toward an electronic world," Bruce said. "You can fight it, but there's no reason to because you're going to lose. We're doing everything we can to keep up with that although the pace is increasing exponentially. Keeping up with that is a tough job."

A Commitment to Customers

According to Bruce, Star Equipment has been in the industry so long because of its commitment to its customers. The company prides itself on knowing each of its customers, sometimes even for generations. Some of the Star Equipment's first customers now have children who are buying and renting from the company. "There's no question that our father instilled in us that it's not about the product you sell; it's really about the service you



Roger Bills and Max Bowman

give," Bowman said. "We've kept moving forward and continue to grow in spite of the fact that there's several competitors with significantly deeper pockets than we have. We're never going to have 900 branches like some big box stores have."

"We don't have a revolving door of managers. Our customers know most of us by name. When they need something at night, they have our employee's cell phone numbers they can call. They can call our main number, and there's a 24-hour auto-

mated answering system on that, which notifies any one of six people that are on call at each branch.

"I think that's what it really boils down to – doing everything we can do to make it easy for the customer. What has kept us going for 50 years is our core management team and the values that were instilled by Max over the years: taking care of the customer and doing what's right."