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## **Interview with John Blouin**

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## "The Blouin Dealership of Augusta, Maine"

WL: This is Warren Leunig on 17 October 2008 and interviewing John Blouin of John Blouin Auto Sales. Let's start with a little history of yourself and how you got to this point.

JB: I was born in 1956 and my dad was a new car dealer. He was a Chrysler-Dodge-Jeep dealer, no he was Chrysler-Plymouth-Jeep. And when I was twelve years old, I started going to work at the garage and Henry Roderick was the general manager for my dad who ran the business for my dad or with my dad. So I started working in the car dealership when I was twelve years old washing and waxing cars. Then I worked in the body shop and then I worked in the parts department and the service department. Then when I was about seventeen years old, I went into work in the sales department. And then throughout my career of going to school and coming back I would work on vacations and during the summers at the car dealership. I would sell cars and then in 1979, I left Madison College to come home and work in the family business. It's kind of like the tale of two brothers. My brother and I both worked here. And then at one point my brother went and worked for O'Connor General Motors GMC truck and I stayed at Blouin Chrysler-Plymouth-Jeep. And later on my brother Paul started a used car operation called "Cars for Less" and then he bought the Honda franchise and became Paul Blouin Honda and then later on he sold that after he built the new building to Charlie Shuman and he opened up Paul Blouin Suzuki. I stayed working at Blouin Chrysler-Plymouth-Dodge-Hyundai through the years and used to be Chrysler Plymouth Jeep. In 1981 we gave up the Jeep franchise and got the Dodge franchise and in 1991 I added the Hyundai franchise and then I operated that until April of 2007 when I sold the Chrysler-Dodge, Hyundai and all the buildings and sixteen acres of land to the Darling Family out of Bangor. I started this [used car dealership] in May of this year. It's kind of like my dad started out as a used car dealership with Augusta Motor Sales and in 1953 my dad bought his dad out from the used car dealership and then he went on and was Blouin Buick and then he became a Chrysler-Plymouth dealer and gave up Buick and then he built a new building in 1968, which you see in that picture right there. He added on to that building in 1975 and then in 1985, he and I added a nine bay addition and in 1998 we bought the lot across the street, which was later a used car place and it later became Paul Blouin Honda. So we have always been in.... we are one of the oldest car families in Maine. We go back three generations. (55)

WL: I thought it was pretty interesting that you switched from GM products to Chrysler.

JB: Back in the 1950's, 1955, I think Buick was having problems with the transmissions on their cars and my father...there had been two Chrysler-Plymouth dealers in town and one of them kept always going out of business and my father hired someone to be a spokesman for him and went down and saw Chrysler-Plymouth and said that if they would give him the Chrysler-Plymouth franchise with twenty-three post office box zones, he would be the sole Chrysler-Plymouth dealer and he would give up Buick. And that is what they eventually did. (65)

WL: Can you give a little background of your father?

JB: Yeah, my dad started out working in the business with his father and he was also an airlines pilot and one of the unusual things was that not only was he a Northeast Airlines pilot but he was also a car dealer. And then when Delta..., when Northeast and Northwest merged and they became Delta Airlines, my father's seniority went up and for all those years he was both a car dealer and an airplane pilot, a commercial airplane pilot based out of Boston. It was with people like Henry Roderick that ran the business when he wasn't there and my father had a lot of people that worked with him and he gave them a good opportunity and they worked hard and he trained them and they shared the success of the business with him. So, that was true through all of the time and that's always been the key to success for probably any business but especially the Blouin businesses or the people that have worked there like Henry and later on the whole crew of people that worked with me. When I started there in 1979, all the people <sup>that</sup> were with my dad, they stayed with me and continued on. Some retired and obviously, some as the years went on, they might have passed away but it was always that commitment to the customers and to the employees that was a successful formula for us. It's true today at my brother's store, which is Suzuki cars and trucks and he sells motorcycles also and ATV's and I have a used car business here and I sell all kinds of makes and models. (90)

WL: I know Henry started working for your grandfather, do you know ~~and~~ background of your grandfather, like how he came to the United States?

JB: Yeah, he came down through Canada and my grandmother came over from France so it was kind of a melting pot about European French and Canadian French meeting together here together in Augusta. And my grandfather was in many different businesses. He was in furniture business, he was in the restaurant business, he was in the hotel business, he was in the..., did I say furniture business and he was in the used car business. And he had a lot of apartments also.

WL: Do you know where he came from in Canada?

JB: No but I could find out for you. I could ask my mother.

WL: That would be interesting to find out. I know he worked at the dealership into the 50's when your father started working there.

JB: In 1953, my father bought his father out and it was my father's business from 1953 on. (108)

WL: I guess I have some questions about car dealerships in general. Something I have always been interested in is how the cars are ordered. I see a lot of cars that just sit out on the lot and I always was curious if these were cars that customers ordered and didn't pick up or were they cars that were just shipped to the dealer in general and just sat on the lot?

JB: Most of the inventories on the car dealers' lots are ones the car dealers ordered. They sat down and decided what colors and equipment and configurations they wanted to have for their stock. Some of them can be special ordered but I would say two or three percent might be ordered for a customer in mind and the rest of them are ordered for stock. (122)

WL: And generally, when you order cars, do you order in groups so that cars have similar options, so if you were Chrysler and you were selling Chrysler Newports and if you wanted some for the lot and you ordered 10 Chrysler Newports at a time and they would all have similar options?

JB: Well you would stagger your orders and you might order cars over every week or month. In the old days, you would order a monthly allocation or in the case of imports, the cars are already built and then they sell you what they've already built. The imports have a tendency to have more packaged group options where they might have the low, the middle and the high line, and the American car manufactures had a number of different build configurations.

WL JB: Back then when you were selling Chryslers, do you know where the cars came from?  
JB Sure, there were built at plants throughout the United States and Mexico and in Canada.

WL: I've always found the assembly process interesting.

JB: It's fascinating.

WL: And I know Chevrolet had a big plant in Framingham, Massachusetts and Chrysler had a plant in Massachusetts too. What would you do if the car was delivered and on the way here, the car got damaged? Does the car get sent back or do you have to file a claim?

JB: Well it depends on how much damage it was. If it was minor damage, they may repair it in transit. Or when it got the dealership, they might repair it. And those standards changed throughout, about what was an acceptable level of damage to have. (150)

WL: I figured too that in those cases insurance would cover the cars.

JB: Well if it was too much damage or something say over 1500 dollars or something they would call it a major damage unit, they would return it to the factory, they would send it to an auction, they would fix it and they would sell it and disclose the damage.

WL: I know when my grandma bought her car at the dealership and there was some weird case with a lot of vehicles on the lot and the new vehicles had these little marks on the paint and they ended up having a biologist come up and found out that it was the geese or the birds that were flying over. The droppings somehow were landing on the cars and it was just going right through the paint. And they had to repaint 30 vehicles. And it was ....pretty strange.

JB: So from the time I started working at, in 1979 started out with probably doing a million, 1.9 million in sales and I got up to about twenty million in sales though over the years and now of course I sold it to Darlings and I'm kind of back where my dad kind of started with used cars. (170)

WL: Do you think you'd ever go back to a regular franchise?

JB: You never can tell. I think probably I did that for thirty years or so and I probably do this for the rest of my time period but you never can tell.

WL: I know there is a lot of work that going into having an actual...Chrysler dealership and I know there is so much where as you go to a used car dealership and there is a lot less inventory, its kind of more.

JB: Well you know in this situation I can buy and stock and sell whatever I want. When you have a new car franchise, then the new car manufacturers dictate certain things to you as a franchisee and that's not the situation I am in anymore with the manufacturer's suggestions and recommendations and things like that. (184)

WL: I see you have some SUV's on the lot, I know I see them for sale. I'm curious since gas prices are now close to three dollars a gallon so do you think more people might go back to some SUV's.

JB: In the three decades I've been in the car business, I've seen the gas crisis, roller coaster three or four times. It depends. I opened this used car business in May of this year, 2008 and I thought everyone would want to buy a 6,000 dollar thirty mile per gallon four cylinder car and we have found just as many people who want to buy a pick up truck or buy a convertible or buy a car to have fun with. And that may be indicative of the people who that have wanted to buy a 6 or 7,000 dollar used car that's like that. Those people might be in the least available position to trade at this time. But we found, if you take every car out on the parking lot right here, they only average ten miles per gallon difference, unless you go with a hybrid or something like that. You know, four cylinder automatics, six cylinder, you know most of the cars and trucks get somewhere around seventeen miles per gallon. If you get a car that gets thirty miles per gallon, that's ten or twelve miles per gallon more and to do something in getting the forties and fifties, it has to be hybrid technology. Unless there are some three cylinder stick cars that might get 40 on the highway but it winds up being, if you buy a hybrid, it might be 4 or 5,000 dollars more for the car and you really have to drive it a lot to get the savings. And you know, gas is down and what did you say you just paid {WL: 2.90} so you know, will America continue to want, just a short while ago, they couldn't make enough Hemi engines to put in the trucks and in the cars. They were trying to increase the big engine production. So we have gone, America likes their cars and trucks and they like them to be powerful vehicles. I think some of that is changing with a new world consciousness about energy. But you know, there is also the safety like on the news today that someone crossed the centerline and they were driving a small four cylinder automatic station wagon and those

people passed away and the people that were in the larger vehicle weren't seriously injured. And in that particular case in today's paper, the person who crossed the centerline was the person driving the small car that isn't with us anymore. Notice, they're the ones who crossed the centerline but the safety still comes down to the inherent safety that's designed into the vehicles but it also winds up being a physics experiment. If you're in a hybrid car that weighs 28 hundred pounds and you meet a 5,000 pound SUV, you know, it's a massive weight and speed issue. (238)

WL: When you were at the Chrysler dealership, did you ever have times, I know because I am interested in 1960's Chevrolets and sometimes someone wanted to order a vehicle and the options they wanted were options that weren't just available right at the dealership. They had to be approved by the zone office?

JB: In supply and demand situation, if they don't have the capacity, they can't build them. So if they can only build so many four cylinders or so many convertibles or whatever it is, it's a supply and demand situation and then the zone office allocates to the different dealerships, who gets what cars.

WL: Do you know where the zone office was for this area?

JB: Yeah, it was Mansfield, Massachusetts. Then they moved it to New York. (254)

WL: I know the Chevrolet zone office used to be in Portland for New England, well northern New England and then they moved it to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Did you ever have a time where there was a shortage of vehicles where the factory couldn't supply?

<sup>Sure</sup>  
JB: Always. There is always some shortage of something.

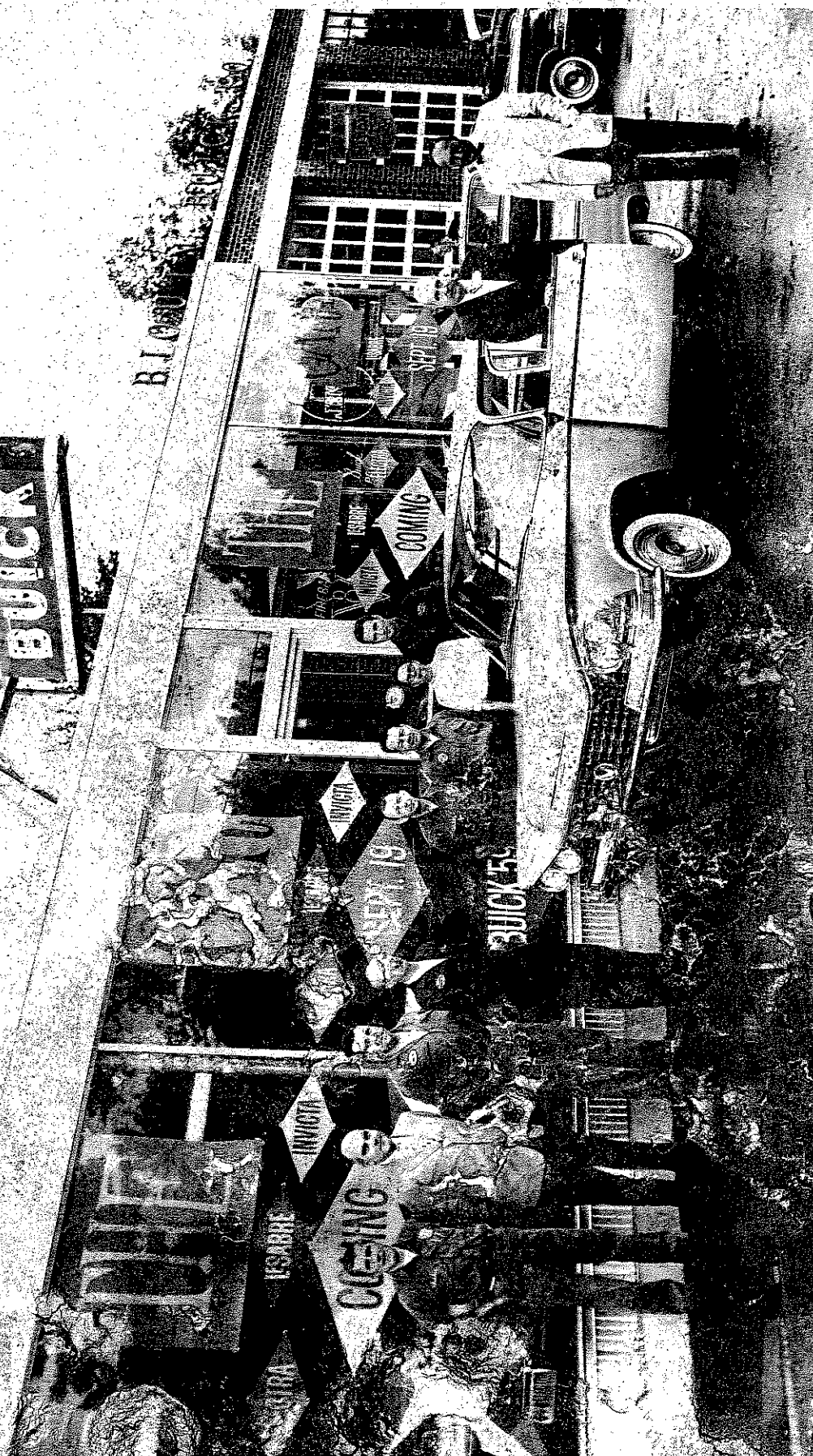
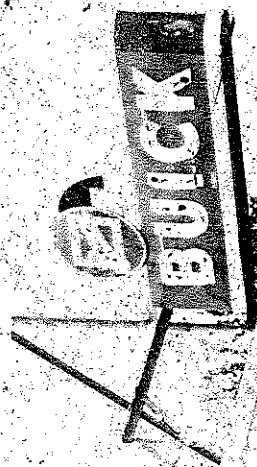
WL: Would you have to get cars from other dealerships and how does that work if you have a dealership and a customer is looking for a specific car and then you do a search a find a dealer in say Lewiston that a car that would work...

JB: Do a dealer swap. You'd call them up and say you wanted to buy the car. And a lot of times they would say what have you got to give me. Cause you are trying to swap a car with them. Sometimes they will say, "I don't want a car, you can just come buy this one" or they might say, "No I won't sell it to you because I want to keep it". (273)

WL: Do you ever have any, and this would be really unusual, times where the two cars would be an even swap and you can just swap them evenly.

JB: Sure. Yes, could be.

WL: I guess we have covered everything I was looking for. (281)



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