

Keep Moving Forward



William R. Hague is known throughout the water treatment industry as the founder of the company that bears his name. WC&P recently had an opportunity to hear the history of the firm and the man from Bill himself and we enjoyed every minute of it!

Nature abhors a vacuum...

The year was 1952. There was a war on—Korea had become a full-fledged conflict and the government had imposed a draft. Bill Hague decided to enlist in the military. Because of the damage from a childhood crushing arm injury, he was refused. In the same year, he met Joyce. (They later married—on August 10.) A several-month honeymoon followed, right up until Hague's draft notice arrived on Dec. 23. The newlyweds had a hurried Christmas as Bill was told to report on the 26th for his induction physical. The strapping young man had worked after school, holidays and weekends in heavy construction since the age of 14, so he was fit as a fiddle. "They tested me and discovered an aptitude for radio repair. It made me laugh because that vocation runs in the family—me and everyone else with the initial H!" Bill remembers with a chuckle.

Bill became a salesman after the war for Kirby Vacuums. At every home show and regional fair where he was demonstrating Kirbys, there was a Miracle Water dealership booth and he became acquainted with them. One day as he was working his Kirby booth at a fair, one of the Miracle guys came over for a serious talk. "He said they'd fallen on hard times. They'd lost installers, the IRS padlocked their doors, things were bad."

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By Karen R. Smith

Miracle's rentals intrigued Bill, who was building his own house at the time and wanted a water softener. "It seemed like a good opportunity. Right then and there, I became a dealer." The transaction required Hague to buy 27 units and a store sign.

Bill thought the rentals would build equity, while he continued to sell vacuums. "But fairly rapidly, the water treatment systems were thriving, so I got out of the Kirby business and went with water treatment entirely," he recalls.

Miracles do happen

As a Miracle Water dealer, Hague built the business up consistently and was always one of the top five dealers in the company. He became so well known for his successes that other dealers tried to woo him away to sales manager jobs in their operations, but he had other

ideas. Eventually, he turned in his franchise, preferring to start with the assembled units as a middleman. "I guess you could say I saw the handwriting on the wall. There just didn't seem to be much future where I was."

On the hardware side of the business, the more Hague looked at water treatment systems objectively, the more he thought they could be improved. He began putting ideas together and then hired an engineer to bring those ideas to fruition. "We came up with WaterMax® for the dealer network. We manufacture everything in each unit and we hold all the patents," Hague explains.

Manufacturer and innovator

Taking this dual role made Hague unique at the outset. "Most who thrive in this business are manufacturers; there were 100 back then," Hague says, thinking back on the process. He notes that the WaterMax line of equipment started with a blank piece of paper. "We had to rethink accepted standards and build it our way."

The innovations he pioneered changed things for dealers, too. "Back in the day, a Miracle Water dealer would need \$25,000 to \$30,000 worth of parts in inventory. He had to at the time—there was no other way to do business. Now, the average Hague dealer has a single box with one or two of every part we make. I doubt if it's one thousand dollars worth of parts, total."

Hague is proud of the design decisions he's made, making WaterMax *The Right Solution* because the two- and three-compartment designs can have six types of media in a single unit. "Unlike other water treatment systems, there is no need to change filters annually. In fact, we've

had units in customers' homes for 13 years with no problems and no changes." Actually, Hague dealers do not unplug units for service—it's a modular system, requiring only an unplug and unscrew.

In one media configuration to treat city water, Hague begins with media that serves as a whole-house, self-cleaning dirt and sediment filter. The filter meets Wisconsin regulatory requirements by filtering down to 20 microns. Next, the use of carbon reduces chlorine tastes and odors.

Down in the bottom, fine mesh resin is used to soften. That fine mesh resin provides more surface area for softening than does standard resin. Also, fine mesh can be vacuum-packed in the tank, resulting in even more softening capacity. The design as a whole is focused on using a minimum amount of salt, water and time for every regeneration.

"We have so many smart things going on with our units," Hague says. For instance, WaterMax always has reserve capacity in the bottom of the resin bed. That means when the upflow regeneration hits that bed, our units are being regenerated with sparkling clean, fresh water." Then there is the patented capacity guard that will not allow the homeowner to run out of treated water. If a dozen people drop by for the weekend

unexpectedly, the unit covers the need.

Absolute brining is also unique to WaterMax, which enables the unit to adjust the salt dosage to the exact amount required for each regeneration. WaterMax never wastes salt or water.

Half a century and more

Hague is proud of many things—notably his 53 years of marriage to Joyce and his business success. "I've been able to build a good strong company. We don't owe anybody money." The 100 employees (one just retired after 36 years) build Hague products in a compact, circular production line. Bill saw the circular technique in Taiwan and realized the advantages of having everyone see everyone else's work. In a 10-hour shift Hague builds and boxes 520 units, testing 100 percent of production.

The company continuously evolves, seeking innovation at every opportunity. New machines are added regularly. Bill's latest venture was developing a new process to weld mineral tanks with machinery being built in Germany.

Training also undergoes constant review and improvement. PK, or Product Knowledge as it is now called, is a comprehensive course that everyone goes through and comes out as a real believer in Hague products.

Some things never change

Hague knows that even today the water business is a door-to-door industry. "People try to pretend otherwise," he says, but that's the nature of it. "The water business is a wonderful business. Yes, you have to work at it; you have to get salespeople out there to put on those demos; you have to have promote expert service and you have to build a potent rental business."

In the beginning, Hague notes, "I had to use my own money to develop a rental program." Today, Hague dealers have the advantage of the Rental Growth Program: Hague supplies the money to help dealers build equity in their businesses.

The future looks bright

The challenge now is finding those who want to work for success. "If they have that commitment, we will enable it," Hague promises. "Everyone who works, succeeds."

Several years ago, on the advice of his financial and legal advisors, Hague sold the firm to his three sons (Bob, David and Jeff) and is officially retired. That means he's at the plant most weekdays, by his own admission. He and Joyce have spent some time at home, but are making several travel plans and hiking whenever they can. ♦

