

**FOLLOWING IS AN ARTICLE THAT WAS PUBLISHED IN "VANCOUVER'S CORPORATE LIVING MAGAZINE" FALL 2002 ON BOTH GORDON BIRD AND DALE HOWES, THE OWNERS AND CREATORS OF TRAVELAND RV SUPERCENTRE.**



**Dale Howes & Gordon Bird**  
***Traveland Leisure Vehicles Ltd.***

by Jim Stephens

"A long and winding road;" the Beatles' lyrics aptly describe the allure of exploring the beauty and character of North America, and as this pastime grows so has the availability and luxury of travel trailers and motor homes. Catering to the demand for comfortable and reliable recreational vehicles has been a major success story for Dale Howes and Gordon Bird, owners of Traveland Leisure Vehicles Ltd.

Celebrating their 25th anniversary this year Dale and Gordon have taken their business from a shoestring operation on a gravel lot to a state of the art industry leader employing 60 people and handling top lines of motor homes, travel trailers and fold-up trailers. Brand names such as Mountain Aire, Beaver, Winnebago, Jayco, and Coleman can be found on display in and around the beautiful 30,000 square foot showroom sitting on five acres in Langley.

Watching Dale and Gordon in action, it's easy to see why their partnership has lasted a quarter century. Their journey to success began while working together as salesmen at Chimo Trailers in Abbotsford. Leaving a frustrating sales meeting in early 1977, Dale encountered Rick Hollinger, the Triple E representative. Rick advised him that Collier's, a local competitor, was on the market, and Les Collier confirmed this, naming a price of \$20,000.00. "I had ten thousand available," says Dale, "it doesn't sound like a lot now, but in 1977 it was a big commitment." Gordon and Rick also invested ten thousand each and the deal was made, with Rick becoming a silent partner. "Sometimes a little fate and things just happen. When you least expect it they come together," is how Dale describes this major transition in their lives. Paying Collier an initial \$10,000.00, they took over as the local dealer for Travelaire leisure vehicles operating from the small gravel lot.

The outlet was handling mostly used equipment, and Dale and Gordon quickly realized that the new unit inventory was all wrong; 17 foot units at a time when 20 and 22 were increasingly in demand. They soon struck a deal with Bert Sladen, the owner of Travelaire, to stock the right units on consignment. Throwing themselves into the new business, they prepped and delivered the trailers with minimal staff and overheads and within four months they paid the balance and were in a profitable position.

"Business had its ups and downs," Dale relates, "but by 1978 we were selling 100 new Travelaires a year." With success comes growth and expansion. Another Travelaire dealer in Vancouver came on the market in 1979. Purchasing this operation from its owners, Ralph and Edna Abrams, they eliminated a competitor while solidifying their presence in the local market. By this time Dale and Gordon had bought out Rick's interest on the advice of Les Collier who was mentoring them through the early stages. "Les was a great help after the buyout, staying on to help us with the transition." The partners retained the Abrams' son Milfred to run Vancouver while they continued in Abbotsford, and he is with them to this day.

In mid-summer 1981 disaster struck the fledgling entrepreneurs. Having just purchased a small lot and relocated to South Fraser Way, the interest rate crisis that stalled the market on many homes and businesses caught them in its net. They were on a floating mortgage rate, and when this more than doubled to 20%, they went from solid profitability to nine months of continuous loss. "The bank sent a head hunter, Brent Hilton, who was basically a collector. He was used to people screaming and pounding the desk," Dale recalls, "but I simply asked what he wanted us to do." With this approach Dale and Brent developed a rapport, and with help from the Federal Business Development Bank they worked out a payment plan and saved the operation. "We sold off our Corvettes and our wives' cars and operated from cash. We didn't get a pay cheque for nine months, but made sure everyone else got paid," Dale relates in describing those desperate times. This crisis also affected the manufacturers. Having ceased ordering from Travelaire through this period they had only five new units left by May of 1982. The factory had an over supply and offered them on consignment. "All of our competitors had the same problem, but this reversed the pattern for us. We had all the inventory."

Things continued to improve until 1986, Expo year. "Business went flat. No one traveled because the best show was in downtown Vancouver. It was a disastrous year for the industry". But they weathered this storm as well and went on to consolidate their operation at the present location. As Dale relates, "this was one of the few occasions that Gord and I didn't agree. He suggested the Langley purchase and I thought it was a bad idea." But Gordon prevailed and the deal was made. Operating from two double-wide office trailers, they opened for business on January 5, 1987. The lot had no road access from Highway 10, but people were stopping on the shoulder and jumping the ditch to look at units. Frustrated with a lack of action by the Highways Department, they put in a culvert and gravel driveway, only getting approval three years later. The name change to Traveland came in 1988, and with the help of an RV dealer focus group they designed and built the beautiful facility that in 1994 set new standards for the industry. Dale and Gordon had joined the focus group in 1990. With only 18 other dealers, all in the U.S., the group meets three times a year to discuss business methods and exchange ideas. "We really had our eyes opened," says Gordon, "every time we meet we learn one or two things that help us improve, I strongly recommend it."

The philosophy of business at Traveland is customer service oriented. Customers return year after year with some dating to the 70's. "Our customers are great people," Dale explains. "You have to listen to them and go out of your way to help. It's a complicated business these days with all the high tech equipment in the units." One repeat customer indicated that he's tried other places but keeps coming back. "Their service is fantastic, they take great pride in their work." The product lines handled by Traveland are crucial to their success. A decision was made in the 80's to handle nothing but the best brand names. Anything less they consider to be a disservice to the customer. Dale is quick to point out that "If you give good quality and stand behind it there are a lot less headaches. If we didn't have the Coleman line, for example, we just wouldn't sell folding trailers." Gordon echoes this. "We were the first people in Canada to handle Coleman and it's been great for us. They have 48% of the market in North America." This philosophy has earned them a reputation for quality and integrity that puts Traveland in the forefront of the industry.

Internal training and promotion have also helped maintain these high standards. With some employees into their third decade of service, the next generation of their families are now contributing to the Traveland environment. Gordon and Dale believe that their employees are their success. A mentoring system is utilized with experienced salespeople training newcomers who work their way up from entry positions. This allows them to pick up the product knowledge and people skills that are integral with the type of staff Traveland wishes to present to the public. Each product line is handled exclusively by a team that specializes in Class A and C motor homes, travel trailers, or fifth wheels. Key people contribute to the efficient operation of this thriving enterprise. Service Manager Bill Verhagen has been with them from the outset. "It's a great place to work, the owners are wonderful,"

and his son is coming up through the ranks. Margaretha Favre has enjoyed 15 years in which she has grown from payables clerk to Controller. Too many other names to mention have similar tenure with the organization and this in part explains the tremendous customer loyalty they enjoy.

Another success has been the rental fleet. Through contracts in Europe, 65 motorhomes are kept busy from May to September. Dale maintains that rentals have become a vital part of the business. "It's very high-risk and involves a major inventory investment. The European clientele expects top quality equipment. After six years they still look upon us as newcomers, but we've already proven ourselves." Dale pointed out the residual benefit of having top notch used units available when they come off the rental fleet after two years.

The company also gives back to the community through sponsorship of minor hockey and Athletes in Action. But what lies ahead? Neither Gordon nor Dale, at 57 and 47 respectively, are contemplating retirement or reducing their day to day involvement. "We like to be hands-on owners," says Gordon. "I'm the detail guy while Dale is more sales oriented." He adds, "The secret to our success is that we work harder than most and expect a lot from our people. We surround ourselves with the best." Bullish on BC, the partners believe that this province will lead the way in their industry.

Their philosophy of teamwork and loyalty that built a thriving business will ensure further successes for Gordon Bird and Dale Howes. You may contact Dale & Gordon at Traveland Leisure Vehicles Ltd. 20529 Langley Bypass, Langley, BC. 604-530-8141.