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HEADLINE: Family owned garage enters seventh decade in business

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BODY:

Mar. 31--Signs that indicate Smitty's Auto Service is entering its seventh decade in business can be found everywhere at the third-generation family owned garage on Gordon Highway.

Everywhere, that is, except right above the customer service desk, where a red sign with white letters proclaims the company's 60th anniversary.

Smitty's president, J.W. "Chuck" Smith III, hung it there in 1996, but forgot to take it down.

"Unbelievable," he said when the sign is pointed out. "It doesn't seem like it was 10 years ago." The sign's dated reference, and thick accumulation of dust, does nothing to squelch the pride in Mr. Smith's voice.

Nor should it.

The Cox Family Enterprise Center at Kennesaw State University estimates only 30 percent of family businesses survive to the second generation -- and that only 30 percent of those make it to the third.

Several things have kept Smitty's going strong since its founding in 1936 by

J.W. Smith, not the least of which is the family members' willingness to step out from behind the desk and get grease under their nails.

"It was imperative that we grew up under the hood," said J.W. "Jimmy" Smith Jr., who retired as the company's second generation owner in 1996. "We had to learn the business from the ground up, so that if somebody left the shop and quit, we wouldn't have to shut down." Chuck's wife, Betty, who works as the company's office manager, can attest to that.

"The first thing he (Jimmy) did was make me clean fenders with purple stuff," she said. "When I went home, my hands were raw." The Smitty's location at 1428 Gordon Highway was not the first. J.W. Smith opened the business as a Sinclair service station at the corner of 15th Street and Milledgeville Road before moving it to 2222 Milledgeville Road during World War II.

"It was a right vibrant part of town," said Jimmy, who represents District 8 on the Augusta Commission. "It was a main route from New York to Florida. Lots of tourists and lots of trucking business." He became heavily involved in the business at age 14, taking nearly three months off from studies at Richmond Academy when his father was injured trying to put out a gasoline fire that severely burned the garage's elderly mechanic. Jimmy took over the operation full-time when his father retired in 1964, just three years before the garage moved to its current location on Gordon Highway.

Chuck and his younger brother, Darren, who runs the family's Smith Tire Co. operation across the street from Smitty's, also eased into the business as teenagers while attending Butler High School.

"We were here before school and after school," Darren recalls.

While not every Smith family member is actively involved in the business, nearly every one has put in time at the garage at one time or another. Most have worked side-by-side with Frank Nunley, a Smitty's employee since 1954 and the only one to work for all three Smith family generations.

Mr. Nunley, now 73, is regarded as the garage's morale booster, but also has another valuable role.

"I clean up after all of them," he says half-joking, half serious about the

repair technicians.

J.W. Smith died in 1977, but his motto of giving customers "a dollar of service for every dollar you charge" remains the company philosophy.

"People that traded with my dad, their children and grandchildren are still trading with our family," Jimmy said.

Smitty's is heading into its fourth generation of family ownership as the company's lead technician, Chuck's son, 31-year-old Chuck Jr., is on track to take the reins.

That would be a noteworthy event, said Joseph Astrachan of the Cox Family Enterprise Center.

"Less than 3 percent of businesses do that, so it's pretty significant," he said.

Chuck said he believes the company's best days lie ahead.

"I'm sincere when I say I think it's going to make 100," he said.

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