

Manitoba

Auto Wrecking has Changed Dramatically

Not everyone can say they have a street named after them, but Aime Bourgeois can. Eight years ago, Aimes Road was named by the City of Winnipeg in honour of the former owner of Aime's Auto Parts, the first business to set up shop on this short street just inside the Perimeter Highway, east of St. Anne's Road.

Bourgeois retired in 1978, selling the business to Louis Hogue, who runs it with his brother, Emile. But he still drops by and keeps in touch with the new owners and the many customers and friends he has made over the years. Raised on the family agricultural and cattle farm in Bellgarde, Saskatchewan, Bourgeois came to Winnipeg in 1953 to study mechanics at the former Manitoba Technical Institute. In 1954, at the age of 26, he went to work at his brother's garage in St. Boniface. Then he and another brother bought a service station in St. Vital.

"I didn't want to get into the auto wrecking business," says Bourgeois. "But then one day my brother sold an old Nash to a wrecker for seven dollars. The next day he needed an axle (from the same car) and bought it back for fifteen dollars."

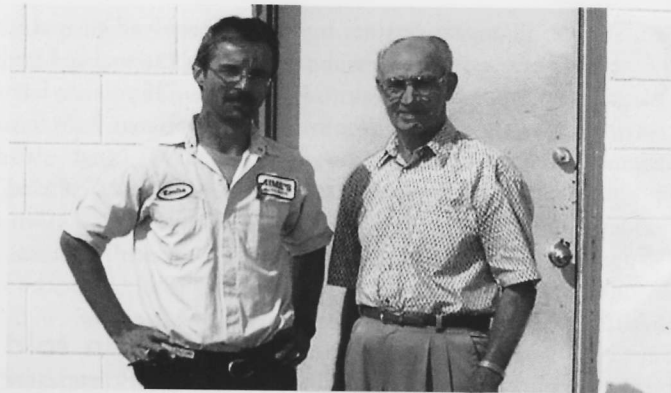
Bourgeois saw the potential. In 1958, with his brother Gerry, Bourgeois opened Aime and Gerry's Auto Wrecking on St. Anne's Road. They started from scratch. In 1960, they learned their business was located on land that would soon be expropriated to make way for the floodway, a big ditch around the city that was created in 1963 to protect Winnipeg from flooding. Bourgeois purchased his current property in 1963. In 1967, Bourgeois and his two brothers each took on one of the three joint businesses. Bourgeois got Aime's Auto Parts.

Over the years, the auto wrecking business has changed dramatically, says Bourgeois. "It has changed so much, I wouldn't want to be in it now." He notes that in his early days in business, he would pay \$25 to \$100 per car and aim to double his investment by selling its parts. Today, many cars are purchased for over \$2,000, and it's tougher to double your money in parts. He remembers an expensive part being a \$125 door off of a 1966 two-door Pontiac. Motors sold for under \$100. In the days of private insurance, before Autopac was introduced in 1972, Bourgeois says it was more difficult to get local cars because you had to deal with insurance companies on an individual basis. Today, there are open auctions.

Even the name of this type of business and its image have changed over the years. In the early days, it was known as auto wrecking. Later it would become auto salvage, and finally auto recycling. With the changes in name came cleaner images and cleaner operations. For example, today you should not see old wrecked cars leaking fluids into the earth.

When Bourgeois ran his business, his was the sixth such business in Winnipeg. Today there are 20, in a world with more people and more cars. He had a handful of staff; now there are 22 employees. He had one phone line and no computer. Today, business is done with many lines and the added reach of a parts hotline, the Internet and e-mail. He remembers the early computers as huge, \$13,000 per year to rent, and not efficient.

Bourgeois's wife, Priscilla, did the books for him from his business's incorporation in 1967 to his retirement in 1978. His



Emile Hogue (left) and Aime Bourgeois (right).

daughter, Louise Catellier, helped out at times, but since he had no sons, Bourgeois chose people he knew well to continue his business. Louis Hogue worked for Bourgeois for nine years before he bought the business, and knew the family well.

Bourgeois always promised himself and his wife that he would retire early. He started preparing when he took up golf in 1966. In 1978 he turned 50, and it was time to move on to other things. He continues to create woodwork lawn ornaments and do volunteer work for the Army of Mary (a Catholic service organization), and the couple have attended a number of spiritual

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retreats or pilgrimages to places including Austria, Germany, France, Rome, Greece, Turkey and Jamaica.

Does Bourgeois miss working with cars? Nope. For example, in 1986, he remembers lifting the hood of his Oldsmobile with the intention of slowing down its idling. But the newer technology in the car was foreign to him, so he simply closed it and left it to someone else.

"I always wanted to retire early and I did," says Bourgeois. "I love golfing. I had to encourage my wife initially, but she loves it too. I love playing pool. I keep very busy. There is always lots to do." Bourgeois continues to keep active and in good health, despite a bout with cancer in 2000.

And Aime's Auto Parts lives on. Of course, these days the company has to carry more insurance than was required in the old days when the biggest worry was fire and vandalism. They need to answer customers' requests more quickly in a more competitive industry. They are computerized and now purchase salvage from across North America. But they continue to build upon Bourgeois's solid business ethic.

"Auto wreckers never used to have a good reputation," says Bourgeois. "But when I said something, I meant it. I never wrote a warranty down. For me, honesty was always important."

By Liz Katynski