



Roadmaster is celebrating its 50th year in business. Pictured are Vice president David Robinson (left) and Jerry Edwards, founder and owner, who at age 77 still comes to the shop every day when he isn't traveling for business.

Towing Gear Maker Roadmaster Puts American Manufacturing First

There was a time when “Made in America” really meant something. It was more than just a statement of origin; it was a symbol of our country’s dedication to manufacturing excellence and an homage to the hard-working men and women who made the U.S. number one. Even other countries coveted American-made products because they knew they were crafted with care and were designed to last.

But things began to change considerably over the past few years, U.S. manufacturing veterans often point out, as numerous domestic companies were shuttered when low-wage Chinese firms were awarded contracts that would have otherwise gone to American firms. Today, they maintain, it’s difficult to find any product that’s 100% American-made, including “American” cars and trucks containing varying percentages of foreign content. In fact, as most are well aware these days, many are built offshore.

Fifty-year-old Roadmaster Inc. is one of the few remaining American manufacturing holdouts. From tow bars and baseplates to auxiliary brake systems, suspension products and a wide range of accessories, nearly every product the company offers is

“I hate buying from China. I’m an American. I believe in our people. I believe in our system. Besides that, if we want to make a change (to a product) we can do it in five minutes, not five months.”

— Jerry Edwards
Roadmaster founder and owner

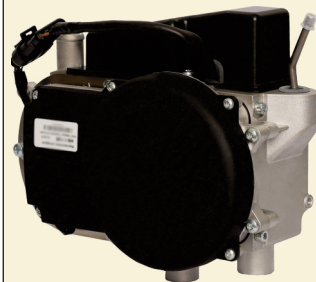


engineered, built, tested and assembled right under one roof with 175 employees in Vancouver, Wash.

And though prevailing wisdom would suggest that at least some overseas outsourcing would make good business sense, Roadmaster founder and owner Jerry Edwards is having none of it. “I hate buying from China,” he said. “I’m an American, and I believe in America. I believe in our people; I believe in our system. Besides that, if we want to make a change (to a product) we can do it in five minutes, not five months.”

Edwards’ views on American manufacturing and manufacturing at Roadmaster in particular are more than just chest-beating. Born in Tooele (say “too willa”), Utah in 1943, Edwards learned early on the meaning of hard work. His father was a deep-shaft

IN BRIEF



The Autoterm Binar Compact that powers Elwell Corp.’s Timberline Diesel-Fired Hydronic Heating System.

Elwell Corp. Debuts Heating System For Winnebago Revel

Elwell Corporation, Washougal, Wash, introduced the addition of the Timberline Diesel-Fired Hydronic Heating System to the Winnebago Revel, a 4×4 class adventure van, according to a release.

The Timberline is designed specifically to provide premium heating and hot water in even the most adverse climates, according to a release. This system efficiently manages energy based on the user’s desired comfort level using the diesel-fired Autoterm Binar Compact heat source, which is optimized for seamless use whether in high altitudes or at sea level. Comfortable heat is provided by automated air handlers that run softer or harder depending on the climate’s demands. A supplemental 120V heating element is also available for use when the motorhome is plugged into shore power.

“Our goal is to provide comfort and peace of mind wherever your adventures take you. We spent a lot of time designing and developing an easy to use control panel with all the software behind it to manage the system in the best way,” said Ken Elwell, president of Elwell Corporation. “We want the customer to be able to set their desired temperature and enjoy their adventure with peace of mind knowing there will be warmth and hot water when they need it and the system will efficiently manage the energy required.

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miner who mined lead for the war effort; his mother worked for the government at a facility that stored military equipment. By the time he was 15, Edwards secured his first job, sweeping floors at Vista Liner, a local truck camper manufacturer, after school. He recognized opportunity almost immediately.

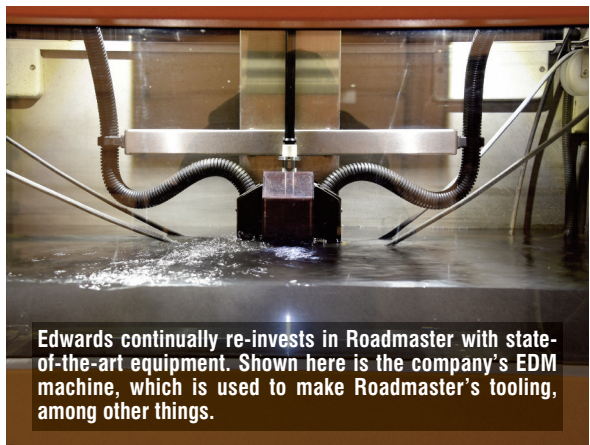
"Their cabinets were six months behind," Edwards recalls. "I went to the owner and told him, 'Let me build the cabinets and you'll never run out of them.'"

The owner's answer was predictable. "What makes you think you can make cabinets?" Edwards exclaimed, impersonating his boss's gravelly voice.

But, likely having few other alternatives, the boss reluctantly agreed – and with help from his high school woodshop teacher (who was looking for part-time work), young Edwards soon buried the shop in cabinetry. "I had a natural ability," he said. "I built jigs so everything would fit properly and go together more quickly. We were building them so fast that the owner came to me two months later and said, 'Stop! Stop building cabinets!'"

Edwards' talents didn't go unnoticed. After improving other processes within Vista Liner and eventually becoming shop foreman, one of the company's biggest customers told Edwards he was starting his own camper manufacturing company in Idaho Falls, Idaho, and wanted Jerry to run it. He was 18. As it turned out, this would be the first major event that would secure Jerry's place in the RV industry for the rest of his life. "The company was called Freeway Campers," said Edwards. "Our best camper, with everything in it, cost \$2,200."

Edwards remained in Idaho Falls for six years before a company called Vista International (no affiliation) purchased Vista Liner, then Freeway



Edwards continually re-invests in Roadmaster with state-of-the-art equipment. Shown here is the company's EDM machine, which is used to make Roadmaster's tooling, among other things.

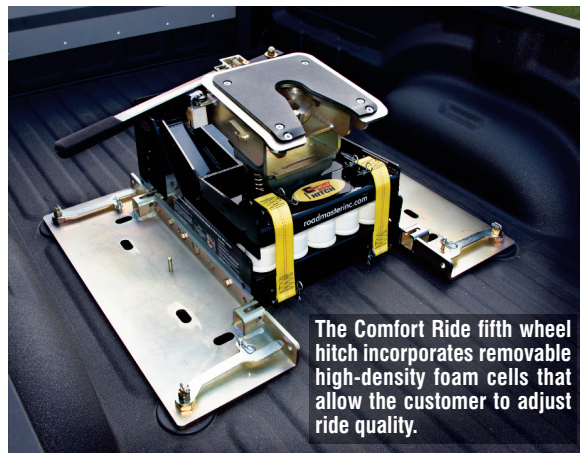
Campers. "They moved me to Hillsboro, Ore., to run the Aladdin Trailer Company, then bought out several companies in Elkhart, Ind.," said Edwards. Perhaps as a result of growing too big too fast, Vista International ran into financial troubles, and Edwards left to start his own company, Vetro RV and Repair, in 1970.

"I had \$3,000 and a toolbox," Edwards recalled. "I needed a place to work, so I went up to Ernie Whitehouse, who owned a lot of property over on 82nd (in Portland, Ore.) and I said, 'Ernie, if you lease me that 2,500-square-foot building, trust me – I will ALWAYS pay you.' So he leased me the building and I got started finding jobs."

Vetro began to grow steadily and, by 1978, added new RVs to its list of offerings. "My service center was next to a dealer, which went out of business due to the gas crisis," Edwards explained. "They had all these units that belonged to the bank sitting on the lot. So, I went to the bank and said, 'Look, I'll sell those units for you.'"

Edwards went on to become the No. 3 dealer in the country for Monaco, and the No. 1 dealer for Sun Raider. Later on, Foretravel approached him as well. "They wanted me to be a dealer for them, but I had to buy four units, which I couldn't afford. So, I borrowed the money from a wealthy customer, then sold those units and paid him back."

Edwards' continuing success led to more opportunity. "Motorhomes and trailers didn't come with awnings back then – they were an aftermarket accessory," he explained. "So, we had been installing them at the shop (Vetro) for our customers. A&E Systems, who was the largest manufacturer of awnings at that time, asked if I wanted to become a dealer for them. I told them I didn't want to be a dealer, but I'd be a distributor."



The Comfort Ride fifth wheel hitch incorporates removable high-density foam cells that allow the customer to adjust ride quality.

After a few months of negotiation, Edwards got his wish, naming his new company Roadmaster Distributing. "I hired salesmen, got them on the road, put up one warehouse up in Puyallup (Wash.) and another in Idaho Falls," he said.

"We were doing such a good job, a guy from a company called Coast RV, who was a big distributor, came by and said 'I want to buy you out.' I said, 'Oookay,'" he said, laughing, "because the OEMs had already started buying awnings and putting them on, so I knew the (aftermarket) demand was going away."

Wisely, Edwards kept the Roadmaster name, because he had always had plans for it. "I actually registered the Roadmaster name a long time before any of this, because in the 60's, I thought about starting my own trailer manufacturing company and calling it Roadmaster – so I grabbed the name and registered it."

It wasn't until the early 80's, however, that the brand would find its permanent home. In 1982, a deep recession forced Edwards to close the Vetro repair and dealership businesses, which allowed him to focus on his latest project: Tow bars.

Having been a dealer for the Duncan Eaz-Aligner product, he bought the patent for a folding tow bar from a local engineer named Darrell Davis. Edwards redesigned the tow bar to make

it more suitable for assembly line production, then produced the first run of what would become the StowMaster tow bar out of a small industrial unit not far from Roadmaster's current headquarters. "We had six people, and we were making about three StowMasters a day," Edwards recalled.

"We had our first FMCA rally down in Del Mar, Calif. I tried to get space in the building, and they said no. So, I said, 'Can I get space outside to sell a motorhome?' And they said yeah. So we went down there and got that space, and I took the old truck I had and filled it with 150 tow bars. I set the motorhome and the truck up out there, and I started demonstrating the tow bar. Then I had flyers made and put one on every motorhome at the event."

The organizers weren't pleased about his marketing tactics, but Edwards sold every StowMaster he brought with him.

That first tow bar grew into a complete line, including best sellers like the Sterling All-Terrain and its newest tow bar, the illuminated



The illuminated Nighthawk is Roadmaster's newest tow bar. It is rated to tow up to 8,000 pounds and weighs just 35 pounds.

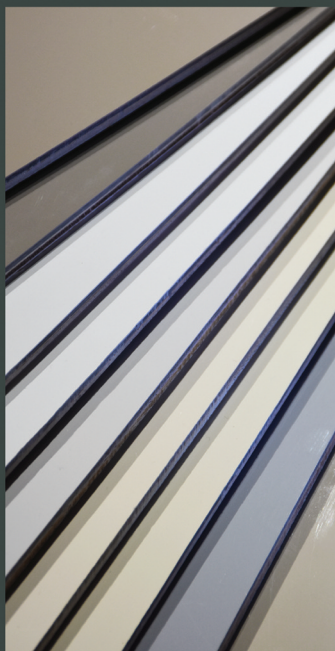
Nighthawk. Along the way, Edwards remained focused on product strength and value. His tow bars incorporate CNC-machined billet stainless steel and were the first in the industry to be tested using Finite Element Analysis to identify potential weak points before production.

"Before that, you just threw steel at everything and made it heavy. Now we can make things stronger and lighter," Edwards explained.

"A tow bar is something that takes a lot of abuse," he continued. "Ours will last longer than anyone's. And I believe in giving the customer his worth." To that end, Roadmaster even offers rebuild kits for its tow bars, and will clean/rebuild them for customers at any event

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LCI Debuts Weatherproof Toy Hauler Ramp Door

Lippert Components Inc. (LCI) on Aug. 21 announced the debut of its new water-resistant, weatherproof ramp door for RV toy haulers.

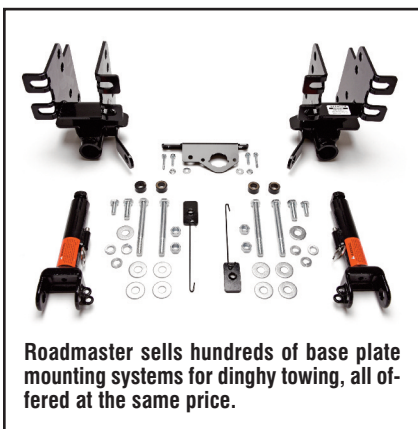
The LCI weatherproof ramp door was developed as an effective solution for when ramps are exposed to extreme weather and downpours, according to a press

release. Its interior components do not retain water and were designed to channel out any rain that gets inside, so moisture does not get locked in and lead to long term damage to the ramp.

In the past, ramp doors would hold moisture that would remain there for nearly the entire lifespan of the ramp. The LCI

weatherproof ramp door was engineered to release any moisture that penetrates the ramp so water dissipates quickly.

With the LCI weatherproof ramp door, RV ramps will become resistant to undesirable precipitation that could cause considerable damage over time, the company said. **RVB**



Roadmaster sells hundreds of base plate mounting systems for dinghy towing, all offered at the same price.

the company attends. “That’s why I still go to the rallies,” said Edwards. “If a guy has a problem, we can take care of it.”

By now, you’ve likely noticed that Edwards is not one to rest on his laurels, and is always looking for new opportunities and avenues for expansion. This led to the decision to break ground on a new facility in 2007, just months before the economy took its legendary nose-dive. It was the worst possible time to plan for expansion, but Edwards and company Vice President David Robinson, still managed to turn lemons into lemonade.

“We refinanced a lot of things to get better rates,” said Robinson. “We took full advantage of our inventory; we had deep inventory going into (the recession). That was a huge help to have that cushion. We worked with our vendors to get better terms, talked to our suppliers to see if they could work with us on lead times, things of that nature.” The company also began to diversify, building metal partitions for the interior of squad cars, and replacement parts for volumetric cement mixers, which eventually led to building complete trucks.

As with most companies, the recession also changed the way Roadmaster does business. “We pay for our material when we get it,” said Edwards. “We don’t go on terms. Right now, everything we own, we own.” Undoubtedly, this philosophy has kept Roadmaster afloat on the cusp of the current pandemic crisis, and business is booming. “One thing we’ve always done is put money back into the company,” said Edwards. “We make it all—starting with raw materials all the way to finished goods. You have to build the quality in, you can’t add it on later.” **RVB**

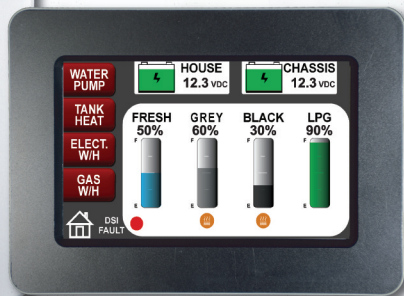


The Universal Brake Monitor is designed to protect the towed vehicle’s brakes and reports any braking activity to a wireless monitor in the motorhome.

KIBNET NETWORKING SYSTEM

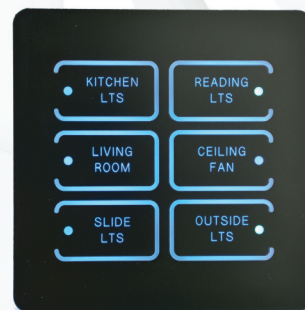
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