

GROWING UP TOYOTA

By Brin Wall

Nineteen sixty-seven. It was the summer of love and a time of war. President Lyndon Johnson led the country, and a new rock trio, the Jimi Hendrix Experience, filled the airwaves. General Motors enjoyed about 50 percent of the American market while Toyota had a less than 0.5 percent share with just over 600 dealerships.

It was also the year a Kentucky dealer named Bill Swope realized the potential of the Japan-based company and on Feb. 9, he entered into not one but two franchise agreements: Swope Toyota (Elizabethtown) and Toyota of Louisville.

“Then, my father thought it looked like a good deal,” says Carl Swope, dealer principal of Swope Toyota. “Now it’s the premier franchise in the Swope network. To be a Toyota dealer today is what it was to be a Chevy dealer in the ‘60s—the envy of the industry.”

It’s an industry that Swope knows well, as he was raised in it. Other kids wanted to go to the amusement park; he wanted to go to the dealership. “I did a lot of odd jobs,” he says, “jobs no one else wanted to do. When I was eight or nine, I was washing boats (which

the family sold at the time). They wouldn’t let me wash the cars; it was too technical.”

As Swope grew, so did his responsibilities. At 16, he began selling motorcycles; by the time he finished college in 1979, he had graduated to selling cars at Toyota of Louisville.

When he took over the Elizabethtown store in 1986, it was very different than today’s retail facility. The parts system was manual. The only computer, a behemoth with dual floppy drives, was outside the general office. The bookkeeper, who used calculators and adding machines, didn’t want it in there, says Swope. “Technology has revolutionized the way we do business. Now we can’t sell a car without an Internet connection and at least five PCs.”

Over the years, the number of cars the company sells has skyrocketed, but it’s been measured growth, according to Swope. “That’s the thing about Toyota, nothing changes dramatically. It happens consistently and always for the better.”

What hasn’t changed is how Swope sells cars, “one-on-one through personal service,” he says. “That’s what keeps me passionate about this business.” ☺