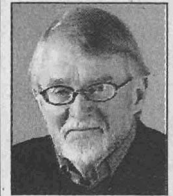


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Family steers auto body shop for 75 years

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NEIGHBORHOODS



There were drinks, hors d'oeuvres and potted plants in the repair bays of Rudy Schmid Body and Frame Shop on East Hiawatha Boulevard quite likely for the first time Wednesday. For a good reason.

The Schmid clan, Rudy's kin through four generations, is observing the 75th anniversary of the landmark North Side business this week. There was a party "out back" and a gift by the family to two favorite causes: North Side Community Policing Center and Charity for Children.

"We've grown a bit," Rudy's

son Paul Schmid was saying the other day as he walked me around the busy, spacious shop that's spread over half a city block along Hiawatha between Park and Carbon streets.

Schmid's is our town's oldest independent body shop, with a million dollars in equipment and real estate invested in a corner that overlooks the Regional Market.

"My parents came here with nothing," Margaret Gang, another of Rudy's children, explains. "They had to work hard for what they got."

Rudy was Swiss, a World War I veteran who trained as a machinist. His wife, Mary, was German. They met and married as refugees in Brazil and came to Syracuse in 1924 to start a new life with Mary's sister, Hilda.

Paul and Margaret say their mother worked as a house cleaner and Rudy had a series of jobs — steamfitter, welder, auto painter — until he and his brother, Ernie, opened the first Schmid shop in the two-car garage behind Rudy's home in Lyncourt in 1930.

Ernie left the shop to become a master carpenter, and Rudy relocated the young business to a former bowling alley in Lyncourt, to South State Street near Central High School and to Pastime Drive off Court Street. He also opened a separate frame and alignment shop on Plum Street.

"This has always been a family business," Paul Schmid says, looking around the break room the other day. We're at the table with his daughter Diane Schmid-McCall, who's in charge of the "paperwork" end of the busi-

ness, and her brother P.J., who oversees the shop.

Paul, who calls himself "the old school," says he retired after he sold Rudy's to Diane and P.J., "but I still stick my nose in." Colleagues say Paul carried on his dad's reputation for tough fairness in a trade known for its cutthroats.

"Everybody liked Rudy and his big, blue eyes," Paul says proudly.

As a kid, Paul was a standout athlete at old Vocational High School, good enough after graduation to earn \$15 a game in a semipro city football league. He toyed with the idea of going to Notre Dame until Rudy reminded him he had a place waiting for him in the family business.

"You're going to work at the

Business grows and remains in family

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body shop," Paul says the old man told him.

Paul's children say they inherited that understanding of their career path. Of his eight children, two — Diane and P.J. — work full time at the shop, other siblings part time. Daughter Jill, a photographer, was filling in at the front desk the day I visited. Her sisters Judy, Paula and Joyce have kept the books part time over the years.

Their aunt, Margaret Gang, speaks up. She used to "do the books" after school when Rudy had the shop near Central High. Her grandson, Paul Gang, now works for P.J. and Diane in the shop.

Paul started learning body work in 1946. In 1960, he took over the business from Rudy, who died eight years later. After the owner of the Hiawatha lot, a small grocer, told him "Schmidy, you need my property," he bought the store and began building his new business around it.

Today, the family has expanded southward in the lot, buying and tearing down two old houses. They also own the former Besdin mattress shop building on Park Street.

The Schmidts are there to correct our mistakes — or someone else's. Ninety percent of



Frank Ordoñez / Staff photographer

MEMBERS OF the Schmid family, (from left) P.J. Schmid, Diane Schmid-McCall, Margaret Gang and Paul Schmid, stand inside a paint booth at Rudy Schmid Body and Frame Shop.

the work involves an insurance claim, resulting in what Diane calls a "challenging industry" where the insurers call the shots on hourly rates (now \$42 versus \$70 in the unregulated mechanical repair shops) and they have to go along or lose the referral in the direct repair program.

Don't get Paul started on that subject, which has changed since he retired in 1991. "You have to play ball," he says, with a grumpy smile. "Our men like to get paid."

P.J. (for Paul James) signed on at Rudy's in 1981. Diane joined her brother and dad in 1986.

The business they eventually took over from Paul had changed from his "old school" when every man in the back shop worked hourly and could do all the jobs. These days, the Schmidts pay salaries and employ 15 technicians with specialties, some of them with more than 20 years' experience.

Paul is an advocate of hands-on ownership — "it runs better if the boss is there" — and devoted workers. He motions to the shop behind us: "That's our secret out there, our people."

Still, P.J. and Diane say, the challenge is there to keep what P.J. calls "industrializing the

process" and do it with skilled workers. Those are harder to find, according to Diane, because "everybody wants to go to college."

She's a college student herself, part time at the State University College at Oswego, studying education, and she's a BOCES adviser who recruits young people from technical programs. "Or we steal them from other places," she adds.

Rudy sometimes recruited body men from among German immigrants who came to Syracuse speaking no English but with instructions to "see Rudy" about a job. The Schmidts — Rudy and Mary — always spoke German at home.

The Schmidts have taken in thousands of our busted, twisted wrecks over 75 years and set them straight and back on the road. The modern shop can treat anything with wheels, or without, from a dump truck to a school bus to a Caddy or Toyota.

Paul chuckles: "One time we got a call to come up to the Dome. The CBS sports crew was there for a game and they couldn't work the door of their trailer. We went up with a jack and popped it out."

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