

## THE HISTORY OF AUTOBELL CAR WASH AT 41 YEARS

Some of America's most successful businesses were spawned from an existing or related business. Dave Thomas, a Kentucky Fried Chicken manager, founded Wendy's because he couldn't find a decent hamburger in Columbus, Ohio. Southern Pacific Railroad formed Sprint Telecommunications when it started laying phone wire along its railroad right-a-way. National Cash Register Company (NCR) just wouldn't heed the futuristic advice of a young Thomas Watson, so he started a company called International Business Machines (IBM).

Such is the saga of Charlotte, North Carolina-based Autobell Car Wash Inc. In 1969 Charles Howard of Charlotte was in the sixth year of running his California Car Wash Equipment distributorship. Business was good, but Howard had to send customers to California to see car wash equipment demonstrations.

Howard surmised that if he had his own car wash in Charlotte, he could make equipment demonstrations much more convenient and efficient for his customers and himself. So in May 1969, in the 5000 block of Charlotte's South Boulevard, he opened the first Autobell Car Wash.

Howard accomplished his demonstration goals, and his California Car Wash Equipment Company became Howco Inc., which thrives today as a distributor of car wash equipment and supplies and consultant for the car wash industry. And over the last four decades, the Howard family has built Autobell Car Wash Inc. into America's third largest privately held, conveyor-operated car wash company with 58 stores spread throughout 26 North Carolina, 2 South Carolina, 4 Georgia, and 4 Virginia cities.

Numerous benchmarks and turning points highlight the 41 years since Autobell was founded. First was the 1969 hiring of Charles's son Chuck, a Wingate College student at the time, to do service work. Also, Howard added gas pumps six months after opening the original unit.

In 1973, during the Arab oil embargo that saw long gas cues filled with anxious customers and with the advent of convenience stores that sold gasoline, Howard established "flex-serve" at the four existing Charlotte Autobells. Flex-serve gave customers a ride-through wash with the options "full service" or "exterior only."

*[continued...]*



**1969**



**TODAY**

Autobell expanded methodically throughout the 1970s and began a new decade with seven stores. In November 1986, Autobell founder Charles Howard passed away, leaving 10 stores under the ownership and care of his son Chuck as the new Autobell President. Chuck and his son Carl greeted the 1990s with 11 units in 6 cities and a burning desire to successfully continue Charles' dream. Autobell saw its most prolific periods in 1997, 2000, 2001, 2003 and 2004, adding five locations in each of these years.

With Chuck still at the helm, third-generation Howards are now firmly entrenched in running Autobell, with Chuck's daughters Leigh and Kelly joining son Carl in the business. Autobell growth in the 2000s continues at a steady pace within North Carolina and other neighboring states whose needs best fit its business plans. In 2003 Autobell ventured outside North Carolina for the first time by opening four units in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia; in 2007, the company entered the South Carolina market and added a second wash in that state in late 2009. Autobell's first Georgia location opened in July 2008, with two more added in the state in 2009 and another in early 2010.

The Howards have never closed an Autobell Car Wash, a solid testament to their vision, community commitment, and business acumen.