



CAVEAT EMPTOR

By Monroe S. Miller

I've been lulled into a false state of trust the past couple of years. I was shaken back to reality in a quick and sure fashion at the end of March. The episode is one we all have been a part of at some time or other. It involves the price of replacement parts.

At times the argument of original equipment manufacturer parts versus those sold by will fitters has been hostile. It is almost always, between these two groups, a discussion of quality and cost. Ten years ago I bought some lower cost bedknives from a will fitter for a rough mower. They were disastrous and required replacement at mid-season. Needless to say, I was infuriated by the thought that someone had taken advantage of me. "Never again," I vowed. The experience, coupled with some serious attempts by manufacturers and distributors to reduce the vulgar price gap, led me back to OEM parts in most applications. Filters, spark plugs, tune-up parts, belts and other similar high turnover items were about the only things that I didn't buy from the makers of particular machines through the various distributors. And truthfully, the OEM parts were the excellent quality you would expect. I assumed they were continuing a fair-pricing policy.

And in most cases, they were. My confidence was justified. OEM parts from some manufacturers have been priced downward in many instances. I've personally visited Toro's parts facility in Minneapolis within the past few months and can testify to their commitment to the parts business. Their fill rate is high, pricing is fair, factory availability of parts is closely monitored and maintained for at least 15 years after the last of a particular machine is produced, and they have an outstanding direct ship program. Jacobsen has made a concerted effort, too. All visits

to Ransomes, Inc. in Johnson Creek have confirmed their understanding of the critical importance of replacement parts. All of these major companies have distributor programs for fast moving parts that are competitive in price.

That is only three companies; there may, in fact, be others with similar attitudes and programs. **But**, there are still some OEMs that over-charge for replacement parts. We were completing the repair and maintenance work on several common machines in late winter. We had ordered all parts from our distributor and, as could be expected, not all were in stock. We checked with a local bearing house on a couple of items, and lo and behold, they had several specific bearings we needed. Then it got interesting. They priced each piece and made the extensions and, in my brilliance, I was sure of an error. A call confirmed that they were indeed correct. I went into an orbit of anger. The distributor cost to me, in the most flagrant case, was \$23.65 for a particular bearing. The bearing house cost to me was \$6.73! Same bearing, same manufacturer, same kraft wrapping, same box, same number, same everything mind you, except price. There was no "special machining" either (I've heard that one before) on the OEM part. Gouging is too kind a word to describe this — rip-off is better and the one I prefer to use. It reminds me of the endless stories of late about defense contractors cheating the American taxpayer.

Sometimes I think we live in a rip-off society. OEM parts are, in instances like this one, merely an example of a larger problem. Anyone who has attended the GCSAA Conference and stayed in a big city hotel knows. A breakfast of coffee, a roll and an orange juice in the hotel can cost \$8.00, not including the tax and tip. Costs go up a dime and we are charged a buck. For

years I've subscribed to the laissez-faire philosophy of leaving business alone and keeping ignorant governmental agencies and bureaucrats out of it. But that attitude is strained in the shadow of incidents like mine this winter. Business, I guess won't control and regulate itself until absolutely forced into it. That bothers me. It also bothers me that too often there is virtually no sense of community left; those in our industry are not alone and our predicament is not uncommon. There is an erosion of ethical standards in feelings that should sadden all Americans. I feel that it goes beyond just an economic situation — it is a moral one. If there isn't a sense of decency prevailing in the populace, no economic system will work like we know it can or should. The salvation of a problem like this one is that in our economic system we do have the self-correcting process we are now observing in our profession with the parts situation.

The unwitting neglect of my sensibilities, while hard to take, is easy to explain. I am basically a trusting person and I trusted this particular manufacturer, as I do the others who manufacture the equipment we use to maintain our golf course. I guess that was wrong. At least it was in this case. I know I have learned a lesson or two. Apparently fair pricing is often not a policy of some manufacturers — subsequently I've heard other tales equally nefarious. Also apparent, unfortunately, is that I was not exactly a shrewd businessman when it came to parts purchases. An incident like this leaves no winners — my trust is destroyed and someone loses a good customer. It seems that over-pricing is a poor policy that is very shortsighted. There is no excuse for any company to turn the parts business into a corral where the elephants trumpet "Every man for himself" as they dance among the chickens. If will fitters are experiencing some success, and they are, it is easy to see why. Burn me once — your fault. Burn me twice — my fault.

Caveat emptor — let the buyer beware.