

Jenkins Machinery Co.

One of two original Ransomes distributors, partners Howard Jenkins and Ben Fuller switched from big equipment to turf.

by Bruce F. Shank, executive editor

Ten years ago Howard Jenkins was enjoying a successful career with a Caterpillar Co. dealer as divisional vice president, general manager. He knew backwards and forwards construction equipment distribution, sales, and service. But, he had just a homeowner's knowledge of turf.

Within two years he owned a Massey Ferguson dealership east of Oakland, CA, and soon was one-half of Ransomes' distributor network in the U.S.

Today, Jenkins and his partner Ben Fuller own one of 33 Ransomes distributorships in the United States. Jenkins Machinery Company is putting finishing touches on an office addition to its Concord facilities, located strategically among San Francisco, Sacramento, Stockton, and San Jose. Jenkins also has a branch in Long Beach, CA, and sales rep in Oahu, HI.

As the oldest, continuously operating Ransomes distributor, Jenkins has witnessed the development of the Ransomes distributor organization as the British manufacturer of reel mowers and tractors fought to take its place next to Jacobsen and Toro.

Earthmovers to mowers

Maybe it was the simplicity of a small Massey Ferguson dealership in Concord, then a sleepy rural community 35 miles east of San Francisco, that attracted Jenkins away from his Caterpillar job.

"This was a little country agriculture store in 1976," Jenkins reflects, "in transition from small agricultural to industrial as Oakland's and San Francisco's population spread eastward. Construction was beginning to pick up. The two-lane rural highway in front of our store became a major highway."

Then came the turf connection. A company called Pengro in South San Francisco needed tractors for its new line of reel gang mowers from Great Britain. The mowers were made by Ransomes and it told its three North American distributors at the time;

Pengro, Turfco in Florida, and Duke in Canada; its reels were best adapted to Massey Ferguson and Ford tractors. Jenkins sold the Massey Ferguson tractors to Pengro for its territory, the western half of the U.S.

Ransomes was no youngster to the mower business, having manufactured the first reel mower in 1832. But the company had confined its marketing to reel products and to British-connected countries, such as Australia, Scotland, South Africa and Canada, until the 1970's.

Jenkins observed the potential of the Ransomes line and purchased Pengro. He also took on a former asso-

ciate at Caterpillar as partner, Ben Fuller, to help him manage the company as it expanded.

A support network was created to enable the company to service customers in states as far away as Texas. It is based upon a complete parts inventory, an 800 telephone number for service, travelling service seminars, and mechanic-to-mechanic phone support.

"If we have to fly a mechanic to a customer in another state we will," Jenkins states. "Of course, we do all we can over the phone to make sure the trip is necessary. But, we believe perceived problems are as important



Jenkins and Ransomes/Massey Ferguson combo that put him in the turf business originally and now represents his growth market.



Partners Fuller and Jenkins (left to right) both came from Caterpillar dealers.



Stanley Vidmar parts chests hold 400 pounds of small parts in each drawer, save space, and do away with the loose bins.

as real problems when a customer has a critical piece of equipment down."

As sales grew, Jenkins and Ransomes saw the need for a line of rotary mowers. In 1978, Dane Scag, chairman of Wisconsin Marine, and Ransomes signed an agreement for Ransomes to market the Bobcat line outside the U.S. One year later, Ransomes signed a four-year agreement to purchase Wisconsin Marine and began to combine its reel line with the Bobcat rotary line in the U.S.

This created a problem for Toro and Jacobsen distributors who carried Bobcat, since the Ransomes' reel lines competed against them. Bobcat's distributor organization had to be rebuilt to include the Ransomes reel products.

It was also a mixed blessing to Jenkins who now had a line of rotary mowers but he stood to lose a large part of his territory to new distributors. Jenkins weathered the storm and now concentrates efforts on California, Nevada, and Hawaii even though he has strong ties with old customers in Oregon, Arizona, Texas and Washington.

Eye on California

"California is definitely a unique market," Jenkins claims. "There are 24 million people in California, 17 million in the Los Angeles area and four million in the San Francisco area. The state has 700 golf courses, thousands of landscape contractors, but comparatively little maintained turf. With an average of only 17- to 21-inches of concentrated rainfall per year, irrigation is essential for turf."

Nevertheless, turf is Jenkins' growth market. He plans to add more "short-lines" to expand his turf business. Also, Jenkins claims, "Ransomes is dedicated to be a full-line turf manufacturer."

The industrial line, tied closely to residential construction, is improving. In addition to Massey Ferguson, Jenkins carries Fiat-Allis, J.I. Case, and other complementary products.

California was a good location to begin a distribution base for Ransomes. California buyers offer very little resistance to foreign products.

Serving the California market may also be unique. "You need a fresh paper approach to business out here," Fuller states. Fuller, who is also a councilman in Benicia, CA, concen-

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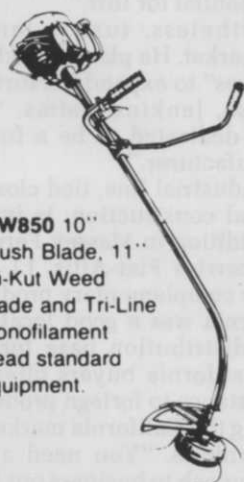
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trates on government bid work and leasing. "When you go to a bid opening often there are six distributors there just to sell one mower. You have to know the rules of the game. Fill out the form wrong and you are disqualified.

"You have to work with the municipality or golf course," Fuller points out. "Roughly 20 percent of private golf clubs prefer to lease to conserve cash. Leasing brings cash flow more in line with depreciation and is very common in the big equipment business. It makes no difference to us if a customer leases or not, since we simply sell the equipment to a leasing company instead of to the customer."

"You have to be competitive in both price and service," Fuller continues. "You can't accuse a customer's mechanic of doing a bad job of maintenance, you have to educate him in a helpful way."

"Service is a service, not a money-making item for us," claims Jenkins. "We try to stock every part for every mower model we have sold, even frames. We make our own hoses and have tool and die shops make parts for discontinued models."

Small parts are stored in space-saving cabinets made by Stanley Vidmar, Allentown, PA. The parts inventory is kept on computer with weekly printouts. A new IBM 36 computer system will replace the present system when the new offices are completed.

One victim of the competitive California market is two-step distribution, where a distributor has a group of dealers under him. "Two-step distribution is a thing of the past in large grass machinery," says Jenkins. "You just can't give away 20 to 25 percent to a dealer," Fuller exclaims.

Proof is the people

One thing Jenkins is clearly proud of is the employees commitment to Jenkins Machinery. Four out of the original six employees are still with the company. Retired general sales manager Jim Dean, still comes in part time to handle promotional mailings and market surveys. Jenkins staff today numbers 27 and maintains an informal family-type atmosphere.

Jenkins still leans toward the reel mowers he took on six years ago. "With the population density here customers feel safer with reels." "Besides, rotaries have become a commodity item," Fuller points out.

"Turf is clearly our growth market today," Jenkins concludes. **WT&T**