



GIVE HIM 'LIBERTY'...

Oklahoma Entrepreneur Opens Patriotic Showcase Facility in Tulsa Suburb

by Bob Nieman



"The U.S. government has put the name of my laundry on every quarter in the United States of America," joked owner John Henderson.

John Henderson's path to coin laundry ownership was anything but direct. Over the years, the 52-year-old native Oklahoman had an 11-year career as a manager with Southwestern Bell, as well as another 15 years spent as a news reporter for local radio stations in Ada and then Tulsa.

Along the road, Henderson's independent, entrepreneurial streak surfaced from time to time, first in the form of a six-month trek through southern California in his 20s, seeking fame and fortune with his rock 'n roll band, and later as the operator of his own video production company during the late 1980s and early '90s.

By 2000, Henderson, along with his wife, Zela, and their three sons, Jay, 22, Brian, 19 and Sean, 15, were living in the Tulsa suburb of Broken Arrow, where Zela had landed a position as a physical therapist at the local hospital. John had become a customer service supervisor for Cingular Wireless — and was hating it.

"Which led me to why I wanted to get into having my own business," Henderson said. "It's not that I don't play well with others. It's just that I'm a lot happier playing by myself. When I'm my own boss, if I make a mistake, it's my mistake and nobody else's mistake."

However, the idea to specifically open a self-service laundry came from his oldest son, who at the time was working as a desk clerk at a Tulsa hotel.

"Jay was working there and living at home," Henderson explained. "He knew





Left: The store features an open floorplan with wide aisles.

Opposite top: Liberty Laundry sits on a 200- by 200-foot parcel on a main street in a growing area of Broken Arrow, Okla.

Opposite bottom: The Henderson family includes (from left) John, Zela, Brian, Sean, daughter-in-law Jamye and Jay.

I was looking for something different and wanted to start my own business. He said, 'Dad, I know what you can do. We can't find anybody to wash our guests' laundry.' There were no reliable pickup and deliver services for hotel guests."

This got Henderson researching the commercial laundry industry, which, in turn, led him to the self-service laundry business and eventually brought him to the Coin Laundry Association Web site.

"I started meeting with distributors, getting more information," he said. "We went to a trade show and joined the CLA. In the meantime, I was looking into locations for my store."

But it wasn't until November 2003 that Henderson finally found the perfect site for his new business venture — a 200- by 200-foot vacant lot off of a main street in a growing area of Broken Arrow.

"This parcel was surrounded by apartments," Henderson explained. "I got a super deal on it. I ran demographics on it, and the more I looked into it, the more perfect it seemed."

There are 15 apartment complexes, as well as a 440-space mobile home park, within a mile of Henderson's laundromat. Plus, his business is only a few miles from some of the area's higher end homes as well.

"We have a good mix of clientele," said Henderson, who has five part-time attendants, including his three sons. "This is not all just low-income around here. I get a mix of Hispanic, African-American and white customers, along with East Indian and Asian."

There is also a nice mix of thriving businesses within the immediate marketplace, including a Walgreen's, an

Army/Navy surplus store, a Dollar General, fast-food restaurants, convenience stores, gas stations and a brand new Bass Pro Shop.

"Many major retailers are coming out this way," Henderson said. "There are shopping centers being built up, and it's all within a two- or three-square-mile area of my store."

Liberty Laundry offers customers 12 stack dryers, as well as two 50-pounders.





TURNING POTENTIAL INTO PROFITS

Of course, before there was a store, there was simply a vacant lot with potential. However, transforming the land into a first-class coin laundry took Henderson almost as long as it did to find the parcel in the first place.

"I purchased the property in November 2003, thinking that I would be open in 2004," explained Henderson, whose Liberty Laundry didn't open its doors until April 23, 2005. "Unfortunately, the situation went on and on. I hooked up with the contractor who gave me the lowest bid. He was much lower than the next highest guy. And, sometimes, you get what you pay for.

"It was the good and the bad," he added. "The project never would have launched had I not had the low bid because it was just enough money to get me into this."

The contractor finally broke ground on Henderson's self-service laundry in August 2004, and from that point, the build-out took about eight months. Henderson admitted to making some beginner's mistakes in the construction of his laundromat.

"I'm a trusting man by nature," he said. "And I still am. But, in the future, when we go on to Liberty Laundry II, I will trust, backed up with a really good contract. We didn't put time constraints into the contract; therefore, when the contractor couldn't deliver on time or within budget, it was disappointing."



Fifteen apartment complexes and a mobile home park within a mile provide Liberty Laundry with a nice mix of steady customers.

One interesting aspect of the 2,800-square-foot laundromat is the fact that it has an unfinished, 900-square-foot space next door, attached to it.

"I can't afford to build it out," said Henderson, who originally had planned to construct 3,300 additional square feet of lease space on his property — until the bank put the kibosh on that particularly ambitious business plan. "I'm waiting for somebody who has deep enough pockets and can afford to build it to suit themselves, and then I will cut them a favorable lease."

Despite some bumps in the road, Liberty Laundry was the first laundromat built in Broken Arrow in more than 20 years, according to Henderson. And it is certainly one of the most noticeable ones — with a huge replica of a quarter incorporated into the store's exterior signage.

Henderson came up with the name Liberty Laundry for his business because he liked the catchy alliteration it created, as well as the fact that it helps convey his family's strong patriotism, with Jay recently having served in Iraq as a member of the Oklahoma Army National Guard.

"The name rides that patriotic theme," Henderson said. "Then about two or three weeks later, I was reading a copy of *The Journal*, and I saw an advertisement showing a bunch of quarters that were magnified. The word 'Liberty' on those coins just jumped out and hit me in the face. I said, 'Holy cow! The U.S. government has put the name of my laundry on every quarter in the United States of America.'"

With a great location, a brand new building and now some eye-catching signage to draw in customers, Liberty Laundry was ready for its grand opening on — of course — the Fourth of July.

"We had a ribbon-cutting ceremony," recalled Henderson, whose business is open 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Sunday. "I gave away a kid's bicycle. We had hourly drawings for jugs of laundry detergent. The Boy Scouts presented me with a flag. We sold hot dogs."

And Henderson was even able to re-live his musical glory days by enlisting his rock band to play at the grand opening event.

Since then, Liberty Laundry has relied mainly on strong word of mouth and two local phone book ads to drive


traffic through the front doors. Thus far, the strategy seems to be working, as the new kid on the block in Broken Arrow is up to approximately four turns per day after less than a year in business. What's more, Liberty's burgeoning wash-dry-fold service currently accounts for roughly 15 percent of the store's gross revenue.

However, in addition to making money, Henderson has been even better at saving it, especially when it comes to his utility bills. In fact, from Apr. 23, 2005, until the end of last year, the percentage of Liberty Laundry's gross revenue that was spent on utilities was 13.1 percent, which is about half the national average.

"There are a number of things that came together to achieve that," Henderson said. "We have three skylights in the laundromat — warehouse-style skylights. And I have large windows across the front. This allows us to keep the lights off during the course of the day. The interior of our building is a very light gray color and the floor is white tile, so there is a lot of natural light in there."

Secondly, with regard to his dryers, Henderson was sure to design adequate space for makeup air into his laundromat. And, lastly, his store utilizes four tankless water heaters, which have proven to be quite economical for the Liberty Laundry operation.

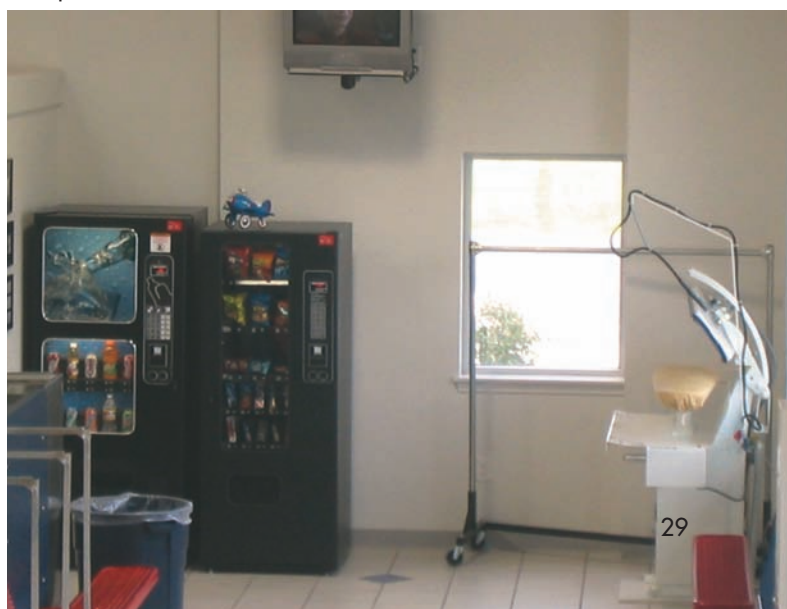
But, despite his early success, Henderson is not quite ready for a second store just yet.

"It's dependent on cash flow," he said. "If I don't have cash flow, then what's the point? I would love to be able to rubber-stamp this place. And I'm constantly looking for locations that might be good for coin laundries. But for right now, I need to build the business. I need for it to pay off." 

Several large windows give the laundromat a bright, inviting atmosphere.



Soda and snack vending machines, along with a utility press, are just a few of the store's additional amenities.



LAUNDRY PROFILE



Left: Henderson's tankless water heating system has helped him save money on his utilities.

EQUIPMENT MIX

Liberty Laundry • Broken Arrow, Okla.

- 8 Speed Queen toploaders\$1.75
- 14 Speed Queen 20-pound frontloaders\$2.25
- 4 Speed Queen 30-pound frontloaders\$3.50
- 2 Speed Queen 50-pound frontloaders\$5.50
- 12 Speed Queen 30-pound stack dryers .25¢/six min.
- 2 Speed Queen 50-pound dryers25¢/five min.
- 1 Forenta utility press\$1 for 15 min.
- 4 Rinnai tankless water heaters
- 1 American Changer dual-hopper bill changer
- 6 R&B Wire Products laundry carts
- 7 customized folding tables
- Porcelain tile flooring
- 1 Vend-Rite eight-column soap vending machine .75¢
- 1 soda vending machine
- 1 snack vending machine
- 2 27-inch televisions and a stereo system
- Children's play area (8 feet by 8 feet)
- Wash-dry-fold service99¢/pound; \$10 min.
- Distributor:
- KeeWes Equipment Co., Inc., Springfield, Mo.
- (800) 383-9274

Right: The laundromat's skylights enable Henderson to keep the store's lights off during sunny days.

