

# The Fishers of Cincinnati

## Where Material Handling Is All in the Family

*Six people in four companies have set high standards of integrity and performance.*

*by Dan Reilly, editor*

**J**ust mention the words *material handling* at a family gathering of Jim and Peggy Fisher of Cincinnati and you're sure to get plenty of lively reaction and expert advice. Six members of the family now working in four different companies have amassed a total of 150 years of commendable material handling industry experience and accomplishment.

Jim and Peggy first met when he was 10 and she was eight years old. They had their first "date" on a church hayride. "I joked that I was going to save her until we grew up," Jim said. And he did.

Jim was in the Navy at 18, and while home on leave, he and Peggy decided to go steady. He returned to sea duty, and two years later, they



Want to know more about the lift truck business? Just ask any of these members of the Fisher family of Cincinnati. They have a combined total of 150 years of experience in training, service, parts and rentals, and today work for four different industry companies. Left to right: Steve, Beth, Jeff, Peggy, Mark and Jim Fisher.

were married. When Jim finished his four-year Navy service, they returned to Cincinnati in 1958 with their new baby son, Mark.

"I was working on heavy equipment for a dealer when on the last day of November 1961, I was informed there wasn't enough work. Now with two sons, Mark and Steve, a wife and a new home, I was in a panic. All I could think of was to get a job fast!

"The next day I was hired at Portman Equipment Company. This was the best stroke of luck we could have had. I was hired by Larry Balanchuk, my boss for the next 25 years until he retired. William C. Portman had just started the company the year before and I was fortunate to be able to grow with a company of the highest caliber," Jim said proudly.

Jim started at Portman as a shop mechanic and worked long and hard hours. Over the years he was promoted to a number of service and training supervisory positions as he moved up the management ladder. He later served as training director and general manager of training. In 1995, Jim was promoted to vice president of Portman Equipment Company, which has been long regarded as one of the material handling industry's premier distributorships.

Jim believes that working at Portman Equipment has been a wonderful opportunity not only for him, but his whole family. Portman was growing at a rapid clip and Jim worked night and day, seven days a week to keep up with a demanding schedule.

**Working in family time**

"Peggy was concerned that I was missing being with our three young boys," Jim reflected. "Because I didn't get home until the boys were in bed for hours, Peggy would pack a picnic dinner and come to Portman after every one had left for the night. We would have dinner at the conference room table as a family. I would help the boys with their home work



These photos taken in 1994 show one of Jim Fisher's many talents: training lift truck operators and technicians. Starting as a shop mechanic at Portman Equipment Company in 1961, Jim has risen to become vice president of one of the industry's top distributorships.

or just play on the floor with them. Peggy would help with filing, writing warranty claims and whatever else she could do to help make my job easier and keep our family connected and close. She learned the business so she could understand what I needed and how to be of more help to me. She would then pack up everything and take the children home.

"I would feel free to stay and get everything done without the concern that my family was being neglected. In 38 years, we never had a discussion on 'Why do you have to work so late? Why can't you be home more?' It removed the stress and I could concentrate on doing a good job."

In 1972, president Bill Portman decided to start the company's own in-house training and asked Jim Fisher to be the first trainer. In developing the training programs, Jim did all the presentations at home first. After Peggy had her third son, Jeff, she went on to college to be an art teacher. She had the teaching skills and Jim had the technical skills. Peggy and the boys would sit on the couch while Jim would go through the training he was developing for mechanics. The Fisher boys, then 14,

12 and 9, were already becoming interested in training and lift trucks.

In the last 28 years, the Portman Training Center has trained more than 60,000 students in technical, train-the-trainer and operator safety training.

"The past 38 years have been incredible watching and being a part of Portman Equipment as it grows and prospers; growing from the five original employees to more than 400 and generating more than \$75 million last year. Now under Wym Portman as president and his dad Bill as chairman of the board, it is truly a full-service organization instilling integrity in all its employees. It's been a privilege to have been a part of it all," Jim said nostalgically.

**Retirement isn't the end**

Jim Fisher's retirement from Portman Equipment Company has been announced for June 2, 2000. However, he has no plans to stop working.

Portman Equipment has asked him to return on a consulting basis and he will continue offering his services in lift truck accident litigation as an expert witness, a task he has often performed over the past 10 years. Jim will also be joining Peggy in her consulting business, Fisher Enterprises.

Remember how Peggy would help Jim with filing and paperwork while he enjoyed precious time with the boys? Well, she has superbly capitalized on that early learning experience and others in the years that followed. From 1971 to 1979, she was assistant service manager at a Cadillac auto dealership; from 1979 to 1982, Peggy was assistant to the vice president of services at Bobcat Enterprises; and in 1982 she started her own consulting company.

In 1984, while consulting at Miami Industrial Trucks, Dayton, Ohio, she was asked to join the company as service manager. She was promoted to vice president of service a year later and was in charge of the prof-

itable operation of the service department. In 1988, she returned to her own company and consulted with numerous companies in the after-market business of service, parts and rentals.

At the request of Miami Industrial Trucks' president, she returned in 1992 for a three-year stint aimed at further improving

service department profitability.

In 1996, Peggy returned to her consulting business, and since then has worked exclusively for MCFA Mitsubishi/Caterpillar dealers in North and South America. She has evaluated dealership operations and helped with systems and procedures, along with developing ways to increase dealer profit margins. She has

conducted scores of seminars on how to operate profitable service and rental departments. These programs have been held in numerous cities in the U.S., Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. People from some 20 countries, from as far away as Japan and as close as her home town Cincinnati, have attended these programs.

### **The family tree**

*The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree.* The Fisher family is great proof of this adage. Mark, 42, started in the industry as a mechanic and has been with Portman Equipment Company for 24 years. Today he is service coordinator at Portman's Lebanon, Ohio, facility. He is support operations manager in all areas of the service department; provides technical support for Lebanon technicians; and controls all shop work and warranty expenses. He and his wife, Kathy, have two children, Ashley, 16, and Ben, 14.

Steve Fisher, 40, has worked all of his 22-year material handling career with OKI Systems Ltd. in Cincinnati, which was founded by Gary Thompson, who started his own career with Portman Equipment Company. Steve began as a technician trainee and was a road technician for about nine years. He was promoted to lead technician in the shop; field service manager, and for six years was operations manager. One year ago he was promoted to corporate customer service manager. Steve and his wife, Kelley, have four children: Stacey, 16; Erin, 15; Stephanie, 13, and Ryan, 10.

With 21 years of experience in the material handling business, Jeff Fisher, 37, started with OKI Systems in Cincinnati as a co-op employee from vocational school. He worked as a shop mechanic until he graduated from high school and then was promoted to a field service mechanic. He was later promoted to field service supervisor and then parts manager. After 16 years with

OKI Systems, where he enjoyed working with his brother Steve, he decided to join his dad and brother Mark at Portman Equipment. He worked at the company's Erlanger branch for several years; when the branch in Lebanon, Ohio, was built, he transferred to that location, which is only a few miles from his home. He is presently a field service mechanic. Jeff and his wife, Beth, have two children: Zak, 11, and Justin, 9.

Jeff's wife is the sixth member of the family involved in the material handling business. She worked at the Portman Equipment Training Center from 1985 to 1990, starting as a secretary while attending school. For two years she was training coordinator and for three years an instructor on powered industrial trucks. She later joined OKI Systems for three years, conducting both train-the-trainer and operator training classes throughout the Cincinnati, Columbus and Indianapolis areas. She later returned to Portman Equipment where she was a instructor in train-the-trainer, and operator training on aerial lifts, rough terrain and a full range of powered industrial trucks.

Over the past 15 years, Beth has trained more than 10,000 operators and 250 trainers on various types of equipment with many of the courses including program development specific to the customers' needs. Beth formed Perpetual Motion Inc., Industrial Training Services in Loveland, Ohio, in April 1999 after changes in the OSHA regulations regarding operation safety training. As company president, Beth said she saw the possibility with new technology available that Perpetual Motion could unite with a customer and tackle this new regulation through cooperation.

What's a family gathering like with the Fishers? "There is great deal of 'shop talk' but since we work for competitive companies," Steve Fisher answered, "we are always very careful not to talk about names of companies and details. Integrity is

the key to our family and how we can work for the competition and never cross the line and reveal company business. Sometimes my wife, Kelley, kicks me under the table and let's me know it's time to talk about something besides lift trucks!"

In reflecting upon their 43-year marriage and family, Peggy Fisher beams. "I have received many hon-

ors and awards, but none means more than a happy marriage, fine sons, great daughters-in-law and fantastic grandchildren. Jim and I wanted to raise sons who found joy and happiness with their families and homes, but also received excitement and pleasure in a job well done. They have met all our hopes and dreams," she smiled warmly. ■