



WAGG'S LINEN & UNIFORM— FIFTH GENERATION, FULL SPEED AHEAD

Founded in 1902, this industrial/mixed operator north of Toronto emphasizes service and technology

By Jack Morgan

Billy Wagg settled on a life in the linen, uniform and facility services industry around the age of 13. At that time, he began sweeping floors after school at the family-owned Wagg's Linen & Uniform in Orillia, ON, Canada. Aside from musing about his odds of success in the National Hockey League, Wagg never looked back. By the time he took over the company in March 2015 after eight years in various management roles, even the arrival of new babies couldn't deter Wagg from helping a customer in need.

BORN TO RUN WAGG'S

"This is a funny story," says Wagg, president of the eponymously named company. "When my youngest (child) was in the hospital. We were heading home. Before we went home, we

came here (to the plant), and she was in a carriage. I had to help some customers. And you know...her first stop was here."

How's that for dedication? As a fifth-generation owner/operator, Wagg is fully committed to growing the family business that his great-great-grandfather founded at the turn of the 20th century. "Yeah, the industry's in my blood to carry this on," he says. "That was kind of the vision."

Wagg joined the family business full-time straight out of high school. "So basically, I started from the ground up sweeping floors, counting soiled linen, loading the washers and feeding ironers," he says. "Then I transitioned. I looked over the plant and then did a couple of routes and helped with that. Then I went out on sales for a few years, built a couple of areas up and came back and did some operational things. I was director of operations at that point.

Other family owner/operators we've interviewed typically prefer either working outside the plant in sales/service/administration or inside the laundry managing production. Wagg says he's equally comfortable in either role—an asset for a hands-on owner

overseeing a staff of 45 people. "Honestly, I'm 'old school,'" he says. "I love it all. I love getting out and talking to people. But again, I think a lot can be done from the inside. So I am a bit of a mix that way."

Wagg's vision didn't include a timeout for college. Aside from some industry-related training, he's worked full-time to make his vision of success for Wagg's Linen and Uniform a reality.

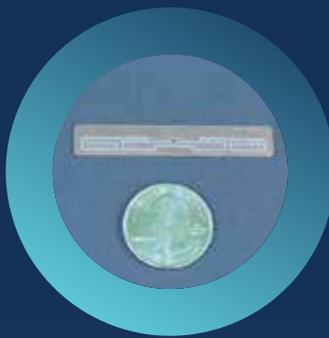
FOCUS ON COMPETITIVENESS

Fair enough, but you don't grow market share in Central Ontario in the 2020s through dedication and hard work alone. It takes a strategy and a willingness to invest in innovation. To that end, Wagg, who's now served nearly nine years as president, recently oversaw the implementation of radio frequency identification (RFID) tags and related tracking systems for the company's rental garments. Wagg's completed the conversion about a year ago, with RF tags and related equipment from Positek RFID. Wagg says he's pleased with the results so far. "It's verified our inventories, and there's a lot of benefits," he says, adding that the

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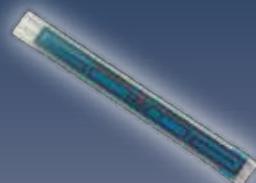


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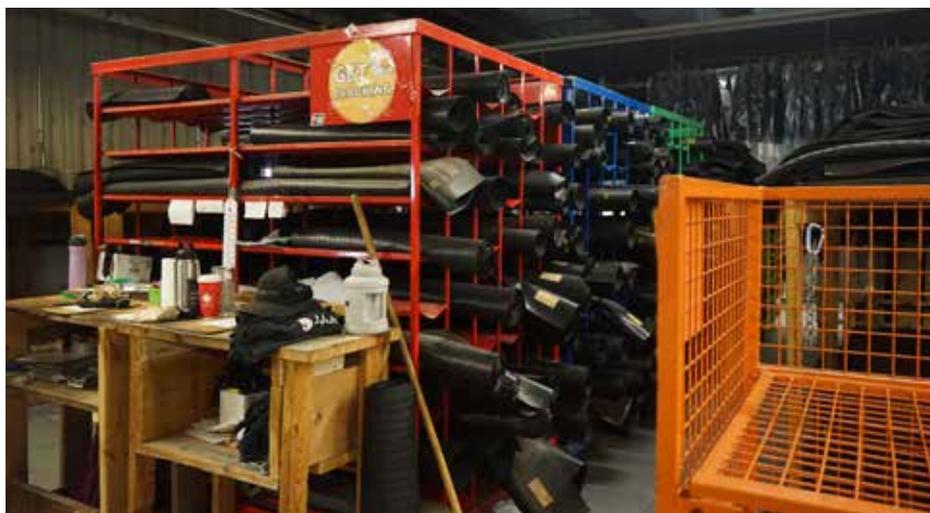
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ABOVE: (clockwise, top/left) An RFID reader system for carts and the tracking of textiles in the plant. A washer/extractor in the wash aisle; A tunnel finisher for garments; a storage area for mats; a view of the plant's wash-chemistry equipment. On the cover: employees inspect and fold shop towels and bar mops.

company has tagged flatwork items as well. Next up, they plan to do the same with the company's mat inventory—a big share of the business in this snow-prone city of 31,000 people at the confluence of Lakes Simcoe and Couchiching. Wagg's, located roughly 80 miles north of Toronto, has a product mix of roughly 55% mats, 25% industrial, 15% food and beverage (F&B), and 5% healthcare textiles.

To leverage technology further, the Wagg's team could add a tunnel washer to its mix of washer/extractors. While the company's 25,000-square-foot (2,322-square-meter) plant isn't that large, Wagg says the footprint could accommodate a tunnel at some point. The question now is cost and the need for added capacity in a plant that's already well-equipped with conventional washers from Pellerin Milnor Corp. Wagg saw a Milnor PulseFlow™ tunnel demonstrated at the 2022 Clean Show in Atlanta. "We have the sketches," he says. "We've got all the drawings. We have the capacity. We were there. We definitely seriously looked at it." Wagg acknowledges that adding a tunnel now would require a "big investment." He wants to build up the business more before taking that step. "The payback and the efficiency are there," he says. "But I don't know if we are set up at this time to go forward with it." In the meantime, he adds that Wagg's recently added a 750 lb. (350 kg.) Minor washer/extractor instead that's provided additional capacity as the area economy continues its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. We got a look at that machine and others during a walk-through of the Wagg's plant last summer.

IN THE PLANT

Our tour began in the soil-sort area. Here, slings of soiled goods (primarily rental textiles) are moved off of trucks from the plant's 10 routes. The surrounding area is a haven for tourism. Wagg's customers include restaurants, plus light industrial or retail businesses

such as mechanics' shops and car dealers. "Our service radius is roughly 100-150 kilometers (62-93 miles)," Wagg says. "So we've got a unique footprint of where our service territories are." The company currently services 3,000-plus customers across the region, but at this time, they haven't yet ventured into metro Toronto, he says.

At the plant, incoming soiled goods are sorted and counted, using a Colmac Industries Inc. vacuum and light-frame soil "Accucounter." These items also pass by an RFID antenna for continuous tracking during processing in the plant. Once they are sorted, the textiles are raised onto a hoist to an overhead rail system. Wagg's father Kirby and grandfather Bill built the plant in the 1980s in an outlying industrial area of Orillia, Wagg says. The company previously operated at several other locations before settling at the current site at 24 Ontario St.

The plant's rail system moves goods to the wash aisle and drops them onto carts for movement to the washer/extractors. Here we see two 450 lb. (204 kg.) open-pocket washer/extractors, one 750 lb. (350 kg.) open-pocket machine, two 275 lb. (124 kg.) washers; and one 125 lb. (56 kg.) open-pocket pony washer for stain rewash and small lots. All of these machines are from Milnor. Wash chemistry is provided by WSI and the chemical-injection equipment is from Softrol Systems Inc.

Post-washing, goods move via a Milnor shuttle system to carts and are then loaded into two 310 lb. (140 kg.) dryers. There also are two 400 lb. (181 kg.) Milnor dryers. The plant processes roughly 80,000 lbs. (36,200 kg.) per week.

Stepping into the mechanical room, we see a 50 HP boiler, a heat exchanger, two 600 gallon (2,271 liter) hot water storage tanks, a heat-reclamation system and a shaker screen system for removing lint. The plant's overall water use rate is roughly 2.4 gallons per lb.



ABOVE: (l/r) Gordon Lightfoot, a former employee of Wagg's Linen & Uniform, accepts a Wagg's baseball cap from the company's current President, Billy Wagg.

Wash Aisle Wayfarer—Wagg's Celebrity Alumnus

On May 1, 2023, popular music lost one of its best-known singer/song-writers, Gordon Lightfoot, who passed away from an illness at 84. While scores of media outlets celebrated Lightfoot's life and hit songs, such as "If You Could Read My Mind" (1970), few mentioned that he was an ex-employee of Wagg's Linen and Uniform, Orillia, Ontario, in the late '50s and early '60s.

Billy Wagg, the fifth-generation president of Wagg's, says Lightfoot was a close friend of Wagg's late grandfather Bill Wagg. One story that Billy shared was that the two friends borrowed a Wagg's van for a weekend outing and had a near-fatal accident. The van rolled over and the only thing that saved the two occupants was a uniform rack that prevented the vehicle from crushing them.

Soon after, Lightfoot rose to fame, first in Canada in the early '60s and then in the U.S. in the '70s with hits such as "Sundown" (1974) and "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" (1976). Lightfoot continued to record and tour well into his senior years as a pop music legend. But in the early days, his success in show business was far from certain. A late '50s yearbook photo that Billy shared with *Textile Services* noted that, "Gord" Lightfoot's "Ambition" was to work as a "Drummer." His "Pastime" was "Singing" and his "Pet Peeve" was "Squares." His "Probable Destination"? A "Diaper washer at Wagg's."

While Lightfoot soon left the laundry business for music, his stardom never eclipsed his friendship with Bill Wagg, or his ties to the Wagg family. Both relationships thrived for the rest of Lightfoot's life. May he rest in peace on that "Carefree Highway" to the great beyond.

AT RIGHT: Before his musical career took off, Gordon Lightfoot posed for a photo with his family in front of a Wagg's fleet vehicle. The photo (circa early 1960s) includes (l/r) Lightfoot's first wife, Brita Ingegerd Olaisson, their daughter Ingrid and son Fred. Some sources say that the breakup of this marriage inspired Lightfoot's first international hit—"If You Could Read My Mind." The couple divorced in 1973.



Moving to the clean area, we see a Chicago Dryer Co. ironer. It's fitted with a Skyline stacker/folder. There also are two Chicago towel folders, and an autostrapper for binding stacks of finished goods with a ribbon of plastic.

Employees place garments on hangers for processing in a Leonard Automatics Inc. tunnel finisher. Finished garments and flatwork go through a Positek Lighting portal, equipped with two packout stations for linens and uniforms.

Prior to final packout, employees inspect goods and place them on carts with a sheet attached that shows the account and quantities required by each customer. Staff then roll the carts onto any of 12 box trucks or a tractor-trailer for delivery. An outsource software company provides the plant's route-accounting software. Wagg next walks to an unused area near the finishing department. This is the plant's work-out area. Here we see weightlifting machines and other fitness equipment that's here for the employees to use before or after their shifts or during lunch breaks, he says. It's efforts like this, plus the family atmosphere of a fifth-generation business that keeps morale up and staff turnover down, Wagg says. After the tour, we headed back to the plant's boardroom for some additional questions. These include a topic that's

another contributor to workplace harmony, their rigorous stance on safety.

GROWING FORWARD

Wagg outlined the plant's safety program, which emphasizes staff input as well as a commitment to incident prevention by management at all levels. Wagg's has a safety committee, led by the plant manager. The committee conducts a monthly "walk around" in the plant to assess potential hazards, such as loose wires or water on the floor. They also conduct routine inspections of fire extinguishers and other safety equipment, Wagg says. While management actively supports the program, Wagg's takes a "bottom up" approach to safety that encourages all employees to report any safety concerns they see right away. "We don't just wait for the end of the month," he says. "If there's a light bulb out, or if there's any tripping hazard or spill, we handle it immediately. That's a protocol that we take seriously." Any incidents are recorded on a chalkboard in the plant. Wagg notes that the plant has gone more than 1,000 days without a lost-time accident.

Similarly with route drivers, uniforms and special shoes are required, along with daily "circle checks" on vehicle issues, such as under-inflated tires, that could pose hazards. An online GPS

tracking system in each vehicle monitors driver behavior, such as harsh braking, unsafe acceleration, etc. Another software system optimizes routes for maximum efficiency. Each truck is equipped with a backup camera, and Wagg's is considering adding "dash cams" to its trucks. Wagg hasn't yet finalized the purchase of this system, but he believes his drivers would welcome the cameras because a video record of their activities could help absolve them of liability if they weren't at fault in an accident situation.

While Wagg's has taken significant measures to ensure safety on the road, as well as in the plant, the challenges surrounding incident prevention are greater in an older facility like the one the company currently operates with its limited natural light and space for employees to move easily from one area to another. Wagg notes that at the time the company built the plant, several other sites were consolidated there. "So we've been here ever since," he says. "It's an older building. But it's working for us. There's obviously always going to be some maintenance and things."

Wagg has no immediate plans to relocate or expand on the current site, but that doesn't mean he's not interested in those options as a long-term opportunity. He has close ties to another independent, Arway Linen and Uniform

BELOW: (l/r) General Manager Kurt Woodward with President Billy Wagg, Wagg's Linen & Uniform, Orillia, ON, Canada. Wagg (center) visited recently with industry colleagues Arway Linen and Uniform Partner Mario Stagliano (left) and Director of Operations Mark Harad-Oaks (right). A Wagg's route truck.



Rental Services, Philadelphia, which is now developing a new plant and closing an old site that it's outgrown. "It's impressive to see what they're doing," Wagg said, speaking of Arway executives Mario Stagliano and Mark Harad-Oaks. "It's a bit of a motivation." Stagliano returned the compliment, noting that, "Billy and the team are amazing people. It's very refreshing to have a team like Wagg's as a resource as we continue to grow our business. We kick ideas back and forth. Billy has recently been sending links to sites with automation in different industries. I know where his head is at when he sees these things. It's exciting knowing there are other next-gen operators looking to the future of their business the same way we are. Billy is all in!"

As it happens, the Arway team is also working with Billy's father Kirby, who's shifted to consulting work with Performance Matters, though he remains an "inactive" executive of Wagg's Linen & Uniform. "Kirby has also been very influential for Arway," Stagliano adds, noting that. "We are excited about our partnership with Performance matters! Love the Wagg's crew!"

In addition, Billy has close ties to fellow Canadian operator Tim Topornicki of Topper Linen and Uniform Service, Toronto. Billy quips that he'll "look in the mirror" when he has a question, but it's clear he's big on networking with industry colleagues, including TRSA members. In fact, Billy credits Topornicki with encouraging him to participate in TRSA programs. "He got me very involved with TRSA," Billy says of Topornicki. Three years later, Billy is active on both the Hospitality/Food and Beverage and the Industrial Workwear Committees.

Of course, Billy's ties extend to the Wagg's staff as well, including longtime employees who've helped minimize the turnover afflicting many linen, uniform and facility services companies. "We've got a really good team," Billy says. "Our reps are a really good crew. And in plant production, we've got

good management that takes care of the office, the plant and the route reps. That speaks to a 'good culture,' and that's what we've built here." Some employees have worked under three generations of Wagg's, he adds. "We've had employees who have been with us 20-30 years," Billy says. That kind of dedication can make a difference in a market that Billy says is about 75% of its pre-COVID levels. Leading a team to

meet such challenges takes dedication from top management. Billy's willingness to divert from home with his newborn daughter in order to help a customer show's that he's passed that test. Wagg's and its fifth-generation leader are moving full speed ahead! **TS**

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