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Volvo spoken here Swedish Asian Auto Service, now run by founder's son, has legions of devoted customers in its 25th year.

By: CHRIS KNAP The Orange County Register

Santa Ana When Jay Larsson moved to Orange County from Chicago 10 years ago, his Volvo 760 began acting up in the warmer weather.

Larsson took the car to Swedish Asian Auto Service in Santa Ana, where Steve Lowe quickly traced the problem to the car's plastic radiator.

He replaced it with a metal version.

Since that first visit, Larsson, who now owns four Volvos, has returned many times to the Grand Avenue shop with the posters of racing Volvos on the wall.

Friday he was in again, but not because there was anything wrong with his car.

He'd just bought a 2005 Volvo V50 T5 with the aero package and wanted to show off the car to his mechanic.

What kind of repair shop generates so much loyalty that customers bring in cars that don't need service?

The kind of shop that knows Volvos so well that the service advisers can usually diagnose your problem and price the fix over the phone.

The kind of shop where the owner warns the employees that their most important asset is the customers' trust.

The kind of shop that publishes an after-hours number in case customers have problems late at night or on weekends.

Today is the start of the New Year, but for Swedish Asian Auto Service, it's also a birthday of sorts.

Twenty-five years ago, a Scotsman named Ron Lowe, then Volvo's West Coast service director, and his Canadian-born wife, Jean, opened Swedish Auto Service in Santa Ana.

Business was slow at first. Ron Lowe took jobs as a DeLorean factory rep and a Honda training director to keep his income up while he built his business.

(The DeLorean was powered by a Volvo V-6).

But it didn't take long for Lowe to build a base of thousands of customers.

Volvo owners gravitated toward the fastidious Scot with the squeaky clean shop.

"Formula One, boys," he'd remind any technician whose stall didn't resemble the white-gloved domain of a Grand Prix mechanic.

In those days, Volvos were slow but practically indestructible.

Customers with more than 100,000 miles on their vehicles were typical.

One man, an Orange County Transportation Authority bus driver named David E. Dent, put 880,000 miles on his 1965 122S and got it pictured in a national Volvo ad.

But that didn't mean there weren't problems.

There were the 700 series cars with the burstable plastic radiators.

Some of the transmissions on the first front-wheel-drive 850s were good for just 60,000 miles.

And add axle boots on all the front-wheel drive cars -- a minor maintenance item that can eventually stop the car in its tracks.

Ron Lowe died in 1998, but his wife still runs the office.

Steve, his son, has kept many of his dad's pictures, books and manuals -- depicting stainless DeLoreans and rally-prepped Volvos and a B20-powered dune buggy that Ron designed and built but never once drove in the sand.

Eventually the shop added Asian auto service.

And today if you take, say, your Chevy Suburban in, they'll fix that as well.

But the stalls are still clean.

And Steve still fields about 12 calls a month on the after-hours hot line (technically, his cellular phone) from panicky customers whose cars are acting up and don't know what to do.

"One thing I learned from years of management: If your phone is unlisted, you are hiding something," Steve says.

"That's why we have been able to survive so long."

Larsson, the four-Volvo owner, agrees.

"Every time I call, they say 'Bring it in right away, and we'll take care of it.'"

"They're nice people, too."

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