

# Fast Learner

Starting out on a shoestring, Mary Ann Catron has achieved her lifetime goal.

Shortly after graduating from high school in Tennessee in 1959, Mary Ann Catron, a bright teenager filled with aspirations and visions of making it big in life, began working for Southern Propane of McMinnville.

To her good fortune, it was an ideal type of job.

In short, it was a golden opportunity, a job where a conscientious, hard-working woman with a propensity for learning quickly could control her destiny, could move up the career ladder gracefully, and be promoted and rewarded in kind for an exceptional performance. It was also the type of job that, over a seven-year period, provided her with the on-the-job training and experience to later organize and build one of the state's most successful retail propane entities.

"Within weeks, Joe Crawford, who owned the company, began delegating various responsibilities to me," recalled Catron, now the owner and manager of Spargas, a five-branch independent (based in Sparta) now serving customers in a 31-county area of central Tennessee. "He didn't like handling the operations or service end of the business. So, along with doing the bookkeeping, I started selling gas appliances, heating systems, doing some buying, learning a bit more each day about the business and technical side of the propane business. Fortunately, I was a fast learner, eager to succeed, and it really paid off."

When SP's employees, returning from various LPG training schools, brought back brochures, manuals and product spec sheets, Catron would take the literature home with her, pore over all of the data and study it for hours. When sale reps visited the office, she would corner and engage them in lengthy question and answer discussions about technical industry matters. Finally, in 1964, she became the first woman in the state to pass the state LP-gas licensing exam."

"In those days, a woman's role in the LPG business was very passive in nature," she declared. "No one knew what the word *discrimination* meant. Women didn't hold down jobs such as the general manager of a propane outlet. Most were happy to just have a job. In my case, I wanted more out of life, to get ahead. And, thanks to Joe, who later sold his business, I was able to advance, to improve my position in life in many ways."

Then, in 1966, after Crawford revealed plans to sell Southern Propane, and encouraged by her husband Lyle and father (William Austin), Catron decided to launch her own propane retail operation. It would be headquartered in neighboring Sparta, 25 miles north of McMinnville, near her birthplace (Cummingsville).

"Frankly, all I had to finance our undertaking at the time was \$65 in capitalization," she revealed. "That, and the trust of suppliers who, thankfully, were more than willing to subsidize us until we got on our feet financially. Thanks to having purchased a lot of appliances, gas and LPG equipment from them in the past, I had a good, a solid relationship with a lot of suppliers, which simplified things. Still, it was a great



Mary Ann Catron of Spargas. She started out on a shoestring.

display of confidence in us, on their part. Over the long haul, their faith in us has been well rewarded."

The reception that the new company received from people in the area around Sparta was totally unbelievable, Catron recalled. She and Oval did most of the service work, her husband Lyle hauled the gas, and the trio never looked back. Later, she hired three former SP employees, Leslie Lytle, Leroy Barret and Bennett Scott, who helped them build the business.

"We worked a lot of long hours in those days. In the early going, we were setting 8 tanks a day and calling on prospective customers from dawn to dusk, even at night. The hard work paid off. A business either grows or it dies. I don't believe in it dying. Each day, all of our employes are out there, prospecting, trying to grow the business. Customers can call me 24 hours a day, at the office or at home, because that's how we do it."

In fact, Catron spends 12-14 hours each day on the job, working in the office and driving 500 miles weekly to Crossville, Carthage, Livingston and McMinnville to help employes at Spargas branches in those towns.

"The last 28 years have been a labor of love," she says. "And, if I'm in good health, I would like to stay in the propane business another 25 years." □



Spargas of Sparta, Tenn. serves customers from five outlets.

## Spargas: A Mini-Profile

261 Mayberry Street Sparta, TN 38583  
Phone: 615 836-3226 FAX: 615 836-2339  
Outlets: 5 States: 1 Retail customers: NA  
1995 fy retail gallons: NA Plants: 5  
Employees: 30 Bobtails: 6 Transports: None  
Storage: 600,000 gallons

Owners: Mary Ann & Lyle Catron, Oval Hitchcock.