



TOP 50 PROPANE RETAILERS

LP Gas
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View from above

LP Gas editor, bobtail driver share unfamiliar perspectives during day on the job

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I felt larger than life. Having never ridden in a bobtail or anything remotely similar prior to visiting Linden's Propane Inc., I was in unfamiliar territory looking out at the road from the passenger seat of the Ohio company's 2014 Freightliner truck. I enjoyed seeing the farmland in Wellington, Ohio, from up high as the bobtail drove down country roads on a December day.

Gary Farner, a Linden's Propane delivery driver, says the area was a little unfamiliar to him, as well.

Farner seldom delivers propane to this particular community. He and another employee devote most of their time serving the southern portion of the company's customer base from its West Salem location. Routing software and GPS devices help him with any unfamiliarity, especially on a day when the company has welcomed *LP Gas* magazine staff for a tour and ride-along.

On a typical day, though, Farner says he and the other employee at West Salem deliver fuel in a 30-mile radius.

"It doesn't sound like much, but you add up all the stops, I can easily put 125 miles on my truck each day," he says. "On a rough winter day, that can get nerve-wracking with bad roads."

People at Linden's Propane say Farner is one of



Ohio-based Linden's Propane is one of six operations under Energy Distribution Partners ownership.



Linden's Propane has 90,000 gallons of bulk storage at its new headquarters in Wellington, Ohio, shown above, and a 1,150-gallon vertical tank and dispenser.



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the company's safest drivers. He has only been driving a bobtail for three years, but he takes safety seriously and enjoys taking Certified Employee Training Program (CETP) classes with the Ohio Propane Gas Association to advance his



General Manager Frank Edwards Jr. shows the company's service territory.

knowledge and skills.

"Safety makes sense to me," he says. "It doesn't pay to get in an incident, especially with propane, because things can go really wrong on the road if you're not careful."

As a proponent of safety, Farner took caution while driving around a less-familiar community, double-checking all addresses before stopping to deliver fuel. If we approached a house with a long, winding driveway, Farner would back in very slowly.

After the first two stops, Farner could tell I wasn't too fond of working outside. I would shudder and hesitate a little before climbing down from the bobtail at a stop. Still, I lucked out on this ride, with a mild, sunny day.

While driving through downtown Wellington, Farner mentions how the slow start to winter has been a little alarming at Linden's Propane. He says the Energy Distribution Partners (EDP) company is keeping busy, but it's definitely not like the last two winters he's worked there. Usually, the winter heating season ramps up in October, but this

Meet the driver

Gary Farner started at Linden's Propane in October 2013. He works at the company's West Salem, Ohio, location with one other driver. His first career was in the steel industry. About 10 years ago, he switched lines of work and became a milk truck driver. Farner says he always wanted to drive a truck or operate heavy machinery, so this line of work suits him. In his spare time, Farner enjoys camping with family and friends.



winter it hardly started, even by mid-December, Farner says.

The past two winters, Farner made almost 30 stops a day in December. This season, he made between 15 and 18 stops a day during the month.

"A lot of customers will wait until it actually snows or gets seriously cold to call us," he says. "We seem to be functioning fine on business, even though it's slower. The only difference is we're not pulling the 10-hour days like we did the last two winters."

Linden's Propane delivers fuel primarily to residential accounts, though it has a handful of agricultural and auto-gas accounts.

During the ride-along, we stop only at rural residential accounts to fill 500-gallon tanks. The stops went smoothly. Farner made 40 to 65 percent fills on the tanks on most stops.

I decide to ask Farner how he was able to bear sub-zero-degree temperatures the last two winters, especially with those being his first years on the job as a propane driver and technician.

"I'm an outdoor person and don't like being inside," he says. "The 2013-14 winter was my first. Challenging is how I describe it. But I would say the winter of 2014-15 was worse because the ice outside never thawed. It was constant ice. I'm glad my first two winters were chal-

lenging. It's like nothing could get much worse."

Prior to leaving, Farner tries to say hello to customers, let them know he has their bill and hand them a 2016 calendar, courtesy of Linden's Propane. Only one of the five customers was home, but Farner says that tends to be typical for midday on a Wednesday.

In the West Salem area, though, Farner sees customers more regularly. This is especially the case on cold, snowy days when customers might be waiting for their propane. During the winter of 2014-15, one woman rushed outside as soon as she saw Farner's bobtail, extremely thankful he had arrived to refill her tank.

"She said, 'I could hug and kiss you for coming so soon!'" he says, laughing. "I saw she had a plateful of cookies with her, so I said, 'Oh, that's not necessary, but I'll take some cookies.'"

Farner says that sort of customer appreciation is possibly the most rewarding aspect of his job.

"You wouldn't think it, but they're so thrilled to see the propane guy," he says. "You feel important because they value you. So to me, what matters most is if customers got their propane.

"Even if I make dozens of stops in one day with no break, I'm glad our customers can rest easy with their supply of propane." **LPG**

The Linden's Propane legacy

Linden's Propane started in 1958 out of one man's backyard in LaGrange, Ohio, a rural community in the north central part of the state. Philip Linden founded the business by first delivering 100-pound cylinders.

Sid Wise, a longtime employee of Linden's Propane and the company's current operations manager, says Linden ran a friendly business that was known by many in the community.

Yet the company has faced a sea of changes in the past few years. Linden died in 2010 at age 75 while driving a tanker truck. His wife, Holly, took the reins of the business for two years. She then sold it to Energy Distribution Partners (EDP) in 2012, with the retailer retaining its original name.

"Family-owned businesses have their own personality, rhythms and perspectives," says Mark Zimora, EDP's director of U.S. operations. "Linden's has enormous value. It's a name known in the area. Our business model tries its best to respect [acquired companies'] individual components."

With changes, longtime employees expressed some uneasiness about being purchased by a larger company. They didn't want Linden's Propane to lose its personality within the northern Ohio community. Employees also expressed concern over whether they would lose their jobs with the acquisition.

"Phil Linden always let me grow in the company, so I was scared to death when [EDP] came in," Wise says. "You fear the unknown."

Three years later, Wise says there wasn't any reason to fear the acquisition. As EDP came into Linden's Propane, it sought to preserve the retailer's legacy in the community.

Wise describes EDP as a group of straightforward and honest people.



The Linden's Propane/Energy Distribution Partners team at Linden's Propane headquarters on the day of LP Gas' visit includes, from left, Frank Edwards Jr., Terri Seabold, Sid Wise, Cheryl Good, Mike Sommers, Jackie Markley and Mark Zimora.

"EDP has done a wonderful job that I never would have pictured three years ago when they bought the business from Holly," he says. "What they said they would do, they did. That's what they stuck to."

Season of change

Linden's Propane has seen a boom of new business this past year, gaining about 225 new customers since moving its headquarters about 10 miles southwest – from LaGrange to Wellington, Ohio – last August.

Frank Edwards Jr., general manager of Linden's Propane, attributes some of that success to community-relations events after the move. He says hundreds of community members lined up to visit the propane retailer at its Customer Appreciation Day in September. Edwards kept busy throughout that event, cooking burgers and hot dogs for community members. He says Linden's Propane filled about 2,000-gallons worth of grill tanks at the event for a low cost.

"We knew people were going to come to our Customer Appreciation Day, but we didn't think that many would come," he says.

Attending local fairs also helped boost customer levels. The company now has about 7,000 customers, which is up a couple hundred since EDP acquired the company.

That growth also sparked the need for a larger facility. The LaGrange facility occupied the back portion of Linden's home, which measured less than 1,000 square feet. Wise says the company moved to a 13,000-square-foot plant in Wellington to accommodate growth from the acquisition.

Since the acquisition and move, Linden's Propane has made a couple of other changes to the business. The company integrated a fleet routing system from Vertrax last April. The transition to the system was challenging and it took training, but not even a year later the company has experienced fuel savings, Edwards says.

The company also invested in back-office software to help with operations management, so it no longer uses index cards to file information.

"There have been a lot of changes the past three years," Edwards says. "Moving to future technologies has been rough, but we did it. We're starting to see the fruits of change."