

TOM JAENICKE

**Industry consultant, gifted collaborator
remains on cutting edge of propane market**

BY ELLEN KRIZ // SENIOR EDITOR // ekriz@northcoastmedia.net

Think of any job in the retail propane business, and Tom Jaenicke has probably done it. During his 55-year tenure, Jaenicke has filled cylinders, driven bobtails and serviced equipment. He's managed local and regional operations for small independents and several national retailers. He ran a sales division that eventually became a major distributor of propane equipment and appliances. Later, he founded his own consulting firm to apply the breadth and depth of his experience, all the while serving the industry's collective good in volunteer roles.

When asked about his greatest accomplishments, Jaenicke is quick to credit others:

"All of my accomplishments were done by other people that worked with me and around me," he says.

But those who have benefited from his expertise, insight, leadership and unwavering commitment to the industry know it's precisely this collaborative spirit that drives his many contributions.

Of the 44 propane professionals inducted into the *LP Gas* Hall of Fame from 2012-22, Jaenicke has worked with 27 of them.

With the induction of the Class of 2023, he becomes one of them.

▶ A STUDENT OF PROPANE

The son of a tool and die maker in the auto industry, Jaenicke grew up on a farm in Michigan.

After high school, Jaenicke followed his father into the skilled trades and pursued a tinsmith apprenticeship through General Motors. During his off-hours, he worked at a propane operation in Bay City, Michigan.

After four years of apprenticeship,

Jaenicke achieved the status of journeyman tinsmith.

But the propane business captured his heart.

"I just enjoyed working with people and customers and that relationship," he says of his first propane job.

His interest in propane compelled him to leave the tinsmith trade and continue his career at Fuelgas, a propane marketer with 20 locations across Michigan.

He wore a lot of hats there – bobtail driver, cylinder filler, service technician, salesman – and, after several years, was promoted to manager of the company's Houghton Lake location. He ran a transport division and 2-million-gallon propane plant in the 1970s, when product shortages and price controls ruled the market.

Ownership transitions shaped Jaenicke's propane career in the years to come. As company footprints grew, so did his responsibilities.

Marathon Oil acquired Fuelgas, and expansion goals required another layer of management in the field. Jaenicke became the company's first area



Jaenicke and his wife of 37 years, Kim Kolb.



manager, covering most of northern Michigan. He eventually moved south to work the state out of the corporate office in Flint.

At that time, Jaenicke assumed responsibility for Fuelgas' appliance division and, with colleagues, established a wholesale equipment distribution company called NRG Distributors.

As ownership continued to change, Jaenicke found himself working for Mapco, Williams Energy and, finally, Ferrellgas, where he served as regional vice president, vice president of western operations and vice president of sales and marketing until 2005. He had handed off NRG Distributors to colleagues, and that business eventually became part of Ray Murray Inc.

By the time Jaenicke left Ferrellgas in 2005, he had spent more than 35 years learning every facet of the retail propane business.

"I learned a lot, taught a lot and just enjoyed meeting ambitious, smart people in this tiny industry that not many people outside of it know about," he says.

He also learned during his off-hours, pursuing educational goals some would consider eclectic for his career path, he says.

Over the course of his propane career, he attended four different colleges, taking courses that applied to his work at the time, but did not seek or obtain a degree.

"It seemed I was always learning more in the propane world than I did in the classroom," he says.

▶ A SECOND CAREER

When Jaenicke left Ferrellgas in 2005,

his propane education was far from over.

He founded his own consulting company, ATomiK Creative Solutions, unsure at first what it would involve. But he did know what interested him, and he had established a strong network of colleagues and friends.

The satisfaction of connecting with propane consumers that initially drew him to the industry guided his next steps, and staying in touch with their ever-evolving needs has remained an “anchor” throughout his career, he says.

“I was able to choose the things I really enjoyed doing and throw them into a basket and make a second career out of it,” he says.

Jaenicke’s first client, the Propane Education & Research Council (PERC), sought inroads into the residential market, so he connected PERC with builders and encouraged the use of propane beyond the natural gas mains.

A focus on technology advancements

during his time at Ferrellgas sparked curiosity about how smaller propane companies would enter the digital world.

“I grew up in the industry in the era of newspaper inserts, Yellow Pages and other types of conventional advertising that were available. But now the whole world was changing,” he explains.

That curiosity became an object of sustained attention in his consulting business.

In 2015, Warm Thoughts Communications appointed Jaenicke vice president of propane marketing services. He introduced the Northeast-based marketing agency to propane retailers and state associations across the country, helping Warm Thoughts expand its footprint and prompting the industry to recognize the importance of websites, social media pages and other digital marketing tools.

► SERVICE TO A FAULT

Jaenicke has always remained heavily in-



Jaenicke is a staunch advocate for propane.

involved, “maybe to a fault,” he adds, on the volunteer side of the industry. He served a term on the PERC Council and chaired its first consumer education advisory committee, which formed the “Energy Guys” marketing campaign. He also serves on the board of directors of the Michigan Propane Gas Association and

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the National Propane Gas Association, in addition to having chaired NPGA's convention and governmental affairs committees and the services section.

He worked with Nancy Coop, *LP Gas* Hall of Famer and founding chair of the Women in Propane Council, who credits him for first proposing the idea of a

women's business council.

He also met Pat Hyland, then editor in chief of *LP Gas* magazine, in a volunteer capacity. Across decades of collaboration, Hyland says he's witnessed Jaenicke's "quiet leadership" and ability to build consensus in an industry with diverse perspectives. Jaenicke's gift for productive dialogue, whether with industry col-



Jaenicke founded a winery in Michigan.

leagues or propane consumers, prompted Hyland to bring him on as a marketing columnist for *LP Gas*.

"Tom's been around long enough and is experienced enough to recognize the marketing component traditionally has been a shortcoming in our industry. He knows that's something we can do better collectively as an industry than we can do individually," says Hyland. "That's why I brought him on as a columnist at *LP Gas*. Our readers needed it, and he had it."

LP Gas columnist and editorial advisory board member are just a few of the titles Jaenicke holds today.

Over the course of his career, he learned winemaking under the tutelage of five different winemakers and opened his own winery, Charlevoix Moon Vineyard, in northern Michigan. He jokes that, after selling the successful business a year ago, one of his new titles is "unemployed winemaker."

He still works with Warm Thoughts Communications in an advisory position and says technology is more important in the propane business than ever following the COVID-19 pandemic.

He provides mergers and acquisitions advisory services through Blue Peak Resources, and now spends much of his time as executive director of the Renewable Propane Alliance, a nonprofit dedicated to establishing a market for renewable propane.

"That's really of a high level of interest to me," says Jaenicke. "It's another thing in this old industry that's new and different. Something comes along all of the time. For 55 years, I've never been bored." **LPG**

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