

Columbus grad finds a home at helm of motor home builder

■ Ed Barker was hired at Winnebago in 1969; sales now at \$1 billion.

By PAT KINNEY
Courier Business Editor

WATERLOO — Ed Barker's father told him 37 years ago to get in on the ground floor of a growing company.

Thirty-seven years later, Barker is president of that company — Winnebago Industries.

A native of Waterloo and a 1965 graduate of Columbus High School and the old Gates Business College, Barker completed his first year as president of the company. It has been a steady climb for both he and his employer.

When he joined the company in 1969 it had \$33 million in sales. Now it has \$992 million. The company had 860 employees in '69. It had 3,600 employees at the end of its most recent fiscal year.

In between, America discovered and fell in love with the motor home — now the recreational vehicle — and Winnebago became the public's favorite suitor, rising to the top of its industry.

"One of the biggest things about the motor home business is it's a cyclical business," Barker said. "Therefore, our business



Courtesy photo

Ed Barker, president of Winnebago Industries in Forest City, grew up in Waterloo. He attended Columbus High School and Gates Business College and has been with the company 37 years.

goes up and down as consumers feel good about themselves and whether or not they can spend money."

It is no different, Barker said, than the major employer in his hometown — John Deere — and just as much of a challenge to the company as well as the employees who work there and their families.

Barker grew up on Alta Vista

Avenue in the historic Highland neighborhood of east Waterloo. After graduating at Gates, and concurrent to service in the Iowa National Guard, he worked as a junior accountant for Den Hartog, Roger & Co., and for Sidney B. Smith & Co. CPAs. But he wanted something else.

His father, Gerald, was a U.S. Army veteran and an accountant for Sunray DX Oil Co. in Water-

loo, which operated DX service stations here. He was on the lookout for opportunities as well.

"I was looking around, and my dad happened to see an ad in the Waterloo Courier where Winnebago was hiring engineering people," Barker related. "My dad recognized Winnebago — we were kind of a small manufacturing company." He sent in a resume, went in for an interview

and was hired within 50 days. "My father," who died in 1993, "is probably my biggest mentor," Barker said. "He advised me to grow with a company that has a bright future, that has a growing product."

Barker started as a cost accountant, working his way up to management and controller jobs. He became company vice president and controller in 1987, chief financial officer in 1989, senior vice president in 2003 and president in May 2005.

In large part due to fuel prices, the company is facing challenges now — as it has during past energy crunches. The company came through those times and is looking to do so again. It is banking on new products like the company's more-fuel-efficient Itasca Navion motor home, equipped with a Mercedes-Benz engine.

His favorite memories of the area include fishing and hunting — particularly at Sweet's Marsh near Tripoli. He recalls the intense athletic rivalry between East and West high schools.

"Waterloo's a tough town to grow up in," Barker said. But that's a good thing. It strengthens one for life's later tasks — like running a nearly \$1 billion company — along with a caring dad steering you in the right direction.

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