

# James Electric

## James Electric Motor Service: 'Service Extraordinaire' for 40 Years

Written by Mary Savage

Photos by  
KLH Streets Photography

**R**ick James' exposure to the world of small motors and pumps started about the same time he learned how to walk. His earliest memories recall accompanying his father on service calls to fix everything from furnace motors to toasters and chicken pluckers. By the time he was five, Rick knew what his future held – he is one of those rare individuals who came into the world knowing exactly what he wanted to do.

"I knew I was going to fix, build and tinker with things and it was going to be mechanical in nature," says Rick James, president, James Electric Motor Service Ltd. "And after 40 years in business, this is why I get up and go to work every morning. I love solving problems!"

In 1974 and while working for his father, Bob James – the well-known owner of Electric Motor Maintenance – he entered negotiations to purchase the business. His father, feeling that Rick's offer was insufficient, fired Rick on his 24th birthday, along with two other employees. The following Monday the other employees were rehired, leaving Rick without a job.

Now jobless and a recent graduate as an electrical mechanic from SAIT, Rick decided that it was time to combine his academic knowledge and work experience along with his personal desire to succeed. It was time to start a business.

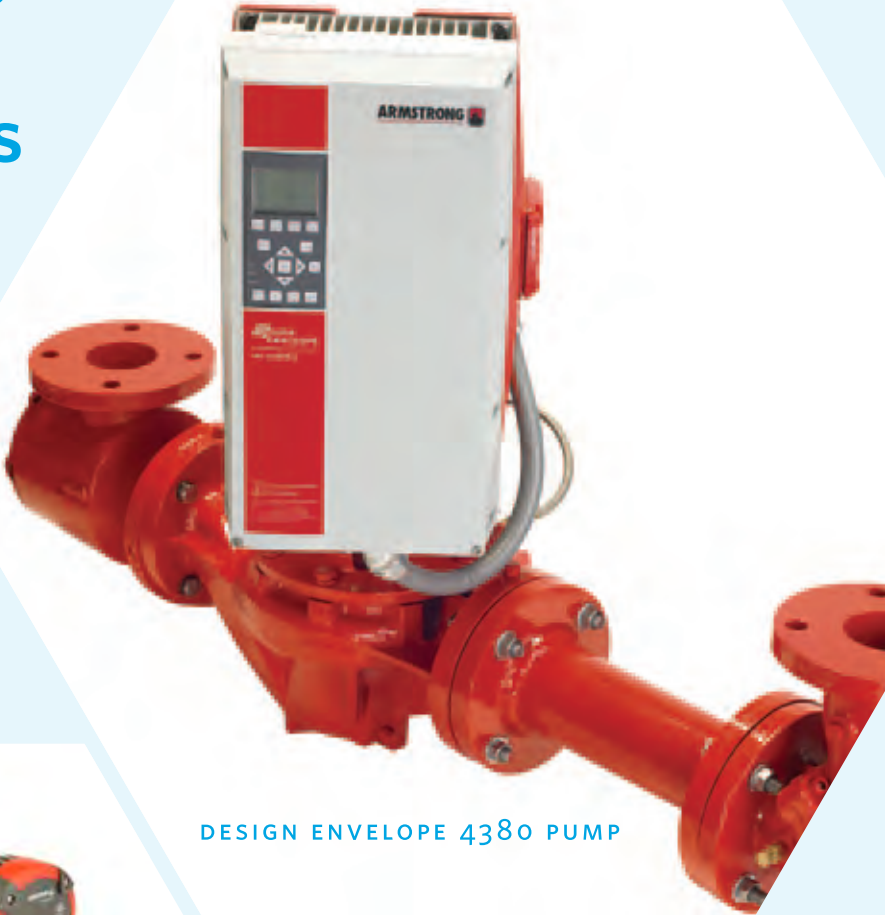
With personal savings of \$1,000, a bank loan of an additional \$3,000 and a used Datsun 510 station wagon, he opened James Electric on October 1, 1974. Due to the bank's fear that they would never



Rick James, president,  
James Electric Motor Services

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see their money again, Rick had to deliver a list of accounts receivable to the bank manager every Friday. And within a year, Rick had paid off the loan. As he grew the business, he never incurred bank debt again. And in a strange turn of events after six years in business, his father was working for him.

“When I started, Calgary was a lot smaller and there was a lot of competition. Since I couldn’t afford to purchase expensive large motor repair equipment, I decided to concentrate on pumps and small motors,” explains Rick. Initially he concentrated on becoming a local service dealer for many of the major North American motor manufacturers, he then set his sights on becoming the local service dealer for HVAC pump manufacturers. “In the early days, we sold and serviced small motors, but quickly changed our focus to pumps – that became our niche,” he adds.

According to Rick, electric motors are the number one industrial manufactured item in the world and pumps are second only to motors. And just about every pump has an electric motor on it, so he bet on the pump business and his goal was to own the best pump repair shop in Canada.

“In order to grow the business, we needed to have local inventory and this meant that we had to stock a large inventory of parts – we could not wait for parts to be shipped from Toronto,” recalls Rick. “We secured the first pump manufacturer and then added a second line, but only after I flew to Toronto with a signed purchase order in my hand.”

During the early years, James Electric focused on small HVAC pumps, which meant initially working on smaller low-rise buildings. Gradually and through the addition of a group of well-trained employees committed to customer service, the business evolved to include providing repairs for some of the most reputable service contractors in Calgary as well as commercial buildings, schools, hospitals and hotels. But it did not come easy.

It was almost a decade before Rick felt they were making significant headway, and then one afternoon proved to be a turning point. Rick was standing inside the Bank of Montreal building in downtown Calgary – talking to the maintenance manager and trying to secure their business.

“I had given him my spiel, but he wasn’t interested in our services, so I said to him, ‘I realize you already have

people who fix your pumps and motors, but I’ll bet you have something in this building that doesn’t work. Show me that equipment and I’ll fix it’ and in an instant, everything changed,” asserts Rick. The customer whisked him down to the lower mechanical room to look at the booster pumps that supplied water to the entire building.

“I wanted to know about the equipment that other people couldn’t fix – because I knew we could – and since that time we have repaired or replaced just about every booster package in the majority of the highrise buildings in this city,” he says.

“In fact, you can’t walk into a building in downtown Calgary today and not find my name on some piece of equipment – it would be almost impossible. We take pride in the fact that we have worked on every major building in the core at one time or another,” he adds.

“Without the aid of our employees I could not make that statement, day in and day out 24/7/365 days a year our staff will do whatever it takes to service our customers. I may be the owner but my employees are the ones who I am most proud of, they are the ones who, through their efforts, keep the customers coming back,” Rick asserts.

James Electric specializes in anything and everything that has to do with HVAC pumps, motors, fans and blowers, and with an inventory in excess of \$3 million can honestly live up to the motto ‘All The Parts – All The Time.’ “I look at every part as a customer: sooner or later that part is going to satisfy a customer and without it I won’t have a satisfied customer,” says Rick.

Recently Rick called a customer to ask them about a pump on their ‘domestic cold water booster package’ and while they were discussing the replacement options, a second pump failed. It was now 2:00 p.m. and there was no water service to the upper floors of the building. Two James Electric technicians were sent to the site where they removed the piping from the first pump, while another technician was constructing a new pump at the James Electric shop. Within four hours the building was back in business: the new pump

## Mechanical Recovery in Record Time...

“When the flood hit last June, we did all the pump repairs inside Stampede Park including the Grandstand, the infield, the Big Four and the Saddledome – we were among the first people inside the Saddledome,” recalls Rick.

“We were asked to inspect the damage to the pumps and motors in the flood-affected buildings in Stampede Park, every building excluding the Saddledome. Years ago, we had fixed the pumps in the main office on the Stampede grounds, so I knew what we were dealing with. After our inspection, I called the consulting engineer and told him we had everything we needed ‘in stock’ – to repair or replace every pump in every building – with the exception of one pump,” recalls Rick.

James Electric also repaired the pumps at the Holy Cross site, the zoo, Talisman Centre, city hall and the list goes on. “Once the water had been drained, we were able to access the pumps and repair them. Many of the pumps were simply pulled out of the buildings, repaired in our shop and returned to the buildings again,” asserts Rick.

“It’s because we had the people, the equipment and the inventory, and when we needed to order any parts, we had priority shipping and our orders were processed immediately,” he remembers.

When Rick and his crew were asked to repair all the pumps at the Holy Cross site, there was a conference call to determine how the repairs should be handled – should they purchase new pumps or repair the existing ones?

“They left it up to us to make the right decision on their behalf – whether to repair or replace – we had experience with the pumps in those buildings and we had the parts in stock to complete the repairs,” says Rick.

They also knew they had a limited time-frame so each pump was evaluated and the decision to repair or replace was based on the overall condition of the pump and the replacement cost. The vast majority of the pumps were repaired.

“And about a month later, when the first set of repaired pumps had been returned, the insurance adjuster called to thank me ... they couldn’t tell if the pumps had been repaired or replaced,” Rick says proudly.



and piping were installed and the water was turned back on. A few days later a second new pump was installed and James Electric was able to complete all of these repairs using parts out of their inventory.

James Electric has grown from a one-person, 500 square-foot shop to a 35,000-square-foot sales and service centre employing over 55 people. When Rick started the business, he never considered the option of failing; it’s simply not part of his DNA. “I knew from the get-go that we would succeed. I’m very persistent and I’m a perfectionist – I like things done right. And I always tell my employees we have one shot to do it right and after that it’s on our nickel,” comments Rick.

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of equipment that leaves our facility should look and pre-form as if it were new,” he adds.

Internally, Rick has created a series of binders that cross-reference every pump, piece and part used in the majority of HVAC pumps built in North America. “We convert a lot of pumps and we’ve developed a conversion manual that contains all the different pump conversions,” says Rick. “Everything we need to know is in the binders: how to do the conversion and what equipment to use.”

The employees simply punch the conversion number into

the computer and every part that is needed is listed – it’s automatic – and it’s an internal system they developed in-house to build kits and modify pumps based on modifications that were designed by James Electric staff.

“We know the dimensions of every HVAC pump made in North America, what it’s capable of producing, what parts are needed to repair it – everything. We know more about some of these pumps than the manufacturers who build them,” notes Rick.

“Our job is to give our employees the right tools and training to do the best job possible and we have a group of individuals who take their jobs very seriously,” he adds. “We are always looking to improve our business, our operation and our processes – even after 40 years.”

James Electric has also worked hard to obtain industry certification as well as compliance with safety standards and practices. They obtained ISO 9001:2008 certification in October 2012. They have continued COR certification through Alberta Construction Safety Association and they are members of contractor safety organizations such as ContractorCheck, ComplyWorks, PICS Auditing, and ISNetwork.

And it comes as no surprise that James Electric has received the Consumer Choice Award for the past seven years. They are committed to the community, their customers, employees and providing a safe work environment.

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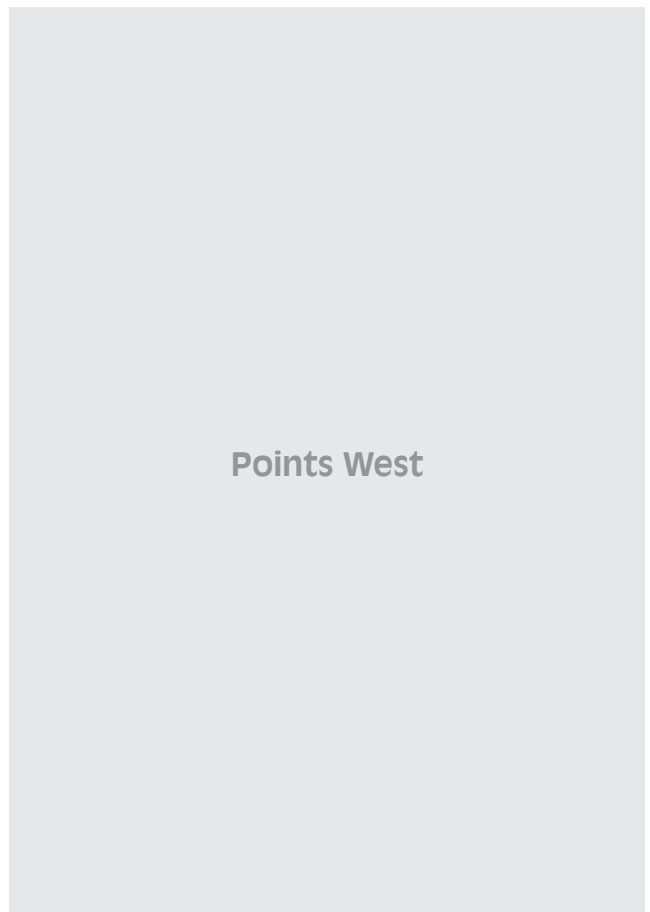
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The team at James Electric

“Over the years, we’ve hired some very skilled people that have helped us grow and our customers have also contributed to our growth,” he says. “We’ve been successful because of our people, our customers and our drive – if we were willing to accept second best, we wouldn’t be here.”

Looking back, Rick is proud of his staff and the business they have helped to build, their commitment and his undeterred vision to provide the best products available today. “Aside from my family, my greatest accomplishment is growing a business from nothing into one of the largest of its kind in Canada and in the process, gaining the respect of my peers and business associates,” he says with a smile.

The business has consistently achieved growth – year over year – for 40 years. “We choose to specialize in pumps because it’s the heart of every building and our mandate is still the same: to provide better service than anyone else,” observes Rick. “We also picked an industry that was recession proof: we are in the pump repair business and regardless of how many people are working in a building it requires heating and cooling and our job is to keep those pumps running.”

As Rick looks to the future, he recognizes how much the industry has changed – how specialized everything’s become. “Business is more complex today and we must continue to develop ways to ensure our people can solve problems and develop innovative ways to stay on top of the industry. The pump and motor industry is moving very quickly – it’s changing drastically every day – and we cannot afford to let it pass us by,” he notes.

“If a manufacturer builds a bad design, we are on them – akin to a watchdog for the industry,” says Rick. “What they do affects us and if we find a problem, we bring it to their attention and in some cases we help them fix it. It’s looking at the bigger picture because our success depends on the success of our suppliers, so it is important to us that they succeed as well and how we work together – not independently.”

In 40 years, there are very few things that have remained the same with the business, but Rick still asks himself the same question every morning, “What problem am I going to solve today? When I’m no longer solving problems or contributing to making the business more efficient, then I’ll stop coming to work,” he adds with a twinkle in his eye. •

# James Electric

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