

Linton Sales and Service

By Jason Gaudet, 1998

Being an avid car lover, I had always wondered the origins of my old vehicles. As a resident of Charlotte County, and Volkswagen enthusiast, I had often heard of a dealership in St. Stephen. Owning several Volkswagens, it appeared that one might have actually come from this dealership. So, I developed an interest in researching the history of the business.

One day, while out on a lead of a junked Beetle on the back roads of St. Stephen, I had noticed a yard that contained several Volkswagens, so I had to stop and perhaps offer to purchase the vehicles! A gentleman, by the name of Gary Rideout, greeted me as I inspected the cars. He told me he could not part with his Volkswagens. This was a Volkswagen enthusiast! As the conversation progressed I learned that he had once worked for the old dealership as a mechanic. Excellent! Finally I had a contact! After leaving, without talking him into selling any of his Volkswagens, I had several names and numbers of people who had once worked there. Also I had a name of the dealership, "Linton Sales and Service".

The owner, Berton Linton, had since passed away. Gary told me that Berton's son, Maurice, still lived in St. Stephen and could possibly help me gather more information. Before I had a chance to contact Maurice, I received a phone call in response to one of my classified ads inquiring information about the dealership. The caller was Kenny Johnston, who was once the Service manager for the dealership. He gave me plenty of help and gave me lots of information. Finally, I contacted Maurice. He told me a time-line history of the business and various other businesses that Mr. Linton owned and operated in the St. Stephen area. I also went to the St. Stephen Library, and went through the Saint Croix Achieves on micro film. I wasn't long before I came across old advertisements for the dealership. Then I came across a front page news story that told the story of how this dealership came to a tragic end. Here is what I know of one of the great Volkswagen dealerships which gave us our cars...

Linton Sales and Service opened in 1957 at an old dance hall, called the Red Lantern, located in Old Ridge. The building would see several additions as the business grew. Its primary sales were in the Volkswagen Beetle. However, it did offer the customer with other VW models, such as the Transporter van and the Type 3. All the vehicles were nicely lined up out front (Imagine that!) Inside the building there was a showroom which showcased the new models. The dealership's parts department grew to a very large size. There was a four bay shop area where service jobs were done on the vehicles. In town, the dealership operated its body repair shop for repair customer's small mishaps. There was a small branch of the dealership on Campbell Island. It had around 13 employees on its payroll, ranging from managers to mechanics. Volkswagen sent Berton on a trip to Germany to see the production plant in Wolfsburg and he had also owned several establishments in St. Stephen. New VW models arrived by ship in Saint John and were driven back to St. Stephen. The dealership had various promotions to offer its customers, such as a free radio and seat belts with a purchase of a Volkswagen. They sold various model used cars and for a time, they also sold Studebakers, but we won't get into that.

In the year 1966, everything seemed fine for the dealership. Sales were going up due to the Beetle's rising popularity. In that year, the Beetle received a new 1300cc engine and cost around \$2,000. Some customers would buy two or even three Beetles at a time. Because St. Stephen is a border town, buyers would come from across the border

to buy their vehicles. Things were great at Linton Sales and Service. But then.... early in the morning on June 15, 1966 at around 3:50am, someone had notice fire at the dealership. The fire department quickly responded to the scene, but it was too late to save the building. An electrical shortage was to blame. Because the safe was mistakenly left open, the business lost its accounts payables records. Several vehicles that were inside the shop, including the tow truck, were lost. Not to mention the keys for all the other vehicles. Losses were estimated at \$100,000. The employees were out of work. The dealership was going to celebrate its 10th anniversary in March. Due to the high losses, Linton Sales and Service couldn't rebuild and thus ended a symbol of Volkswagen in Charlotte County.

The remaining Volkswagens found homes. The employees' lives went on. Most of them broke away from the auto industry. Service manager, Kenny Johnston made a business out of servicing the dealership's customer and new VW owners. Volkswagen stopped production of the Beetle in 1979. Yet if not for one man, Berton Linton, we might not have as many of our beloved Volkswagens today. After the fire, he continued on in the auto industry, however decided not to rebuild the dealership because Volkswagen wanted things to be different if Berton was to rebuild. Finding it too expensive to meet Volkswagen's demand and due to the losses he had suffered, Berton had to leave Volkswagen. However, his legacy, in the Volkswagen world, still lives on. He was part of its growth. Selling a car that, at first, seemed to be a small, worthless machine. The Beetle, with the help of Linton Sales and Service, would prove them wrong. The Beetle would change the way automobiles are made and become the largest selling car of all time. A record that continues to grow with its continuing production in Mexico. Berton Linton passed away in 1992. He was a true pioneer in this area's Volkswagen market.

In 1999, we have witnessed the rebirth of an automobile icon with Volkswagen's New Beetle. Though different from its predecessor, the New Beetle is a modern day reminder of the past and a familiar friend from a time long ago.



Linton Volkswagen Dealership, circa 1966

Note: The dealership was located north of St. Stephen, on route 3, near the corner of the Hall Road.