

Cab Owners Look for New Start

By Ellen Crosby
Special to The Washington Post
Thursday, May 13, 2004

Seven months after picking up their first passenger -- an event that received nationwide publicity -- Barry and Helen Lynch, owners of the British Taxi Co. in Leesburg, have turned off the meter for good. The story of how the couple came to own two of the famous London black taxis and attempted to transform the novelty into a profitable business is best summed up by Barry Lynch's nickname: "The Accidental Cabbie."

Not only has the company closed its doors, but the Lynches are also leaving Leesburg. Sort of. They and their two children -- and the taxis -- are moving to Leesburg, Fla. They plan to relocate their taxi company in Orlando, about an hour's drive from Leesburg.

Barry Lynch's love affair with the boxy black cab, as much a symbol of London as is Big Ben, became serious during an August 2001 business trip to the city. Lynch was born there but left when he was 6.

He said he thought that the taxi, variations of which have plied London's streets for more than 100 years, was "the coolest car in the world." And he wanted one.

"It's a handmade car," said Lynch, an affable man with a ready laugh and a habit of talking expansively with his hands. "The only purpose-built cab left in the world since Checker stopped making them. Most U.S. cabs are ex-police cars."

The original plan was to buy a vintage taxi for private use. But two months after he came back from his trip, Lynch was forced to abandon the idea when he was laid off by Concert, a telecommunications firm headquartered in Reston. He didn't find work again until January 2003, when he joined a friend in the mortgage business.

The taxi moved to the front burner, with a difference. Now Lynch wanted to buy a new cab to advertise his business. "I thought we'd paint something like 'See Barry the Mortgage Guy' on the sides and drive around," he said.

He called London Taxis International to begin the process. Someone else was a step ahead of him. LTI had a U.S. distributor -- Larry Smith, founder of the Boston-based Finagle a Bagel chain -- and Lynch would have to work through him. The British company was already working on a taxi that could be sold in North America, making such basic changes as left-hand drive, a redesigned fuel system and side marker lights to accommodate U.S. requirements.

"We were going down the same path," Lynch said. So the Lynches went to Boston and ordered two cabs for delivery in June 2003.

"Initially we thought we'd hire them out for weddings and special events. But the wheels were sort of turning," he said. Problems getting the taxis certified to U.S. specifications pushed the delivery date to August. By then, the couple had decided to postpone taking the second cab until October.

On Sept. 4, 2003, Barry Lynch picked up his first customer, a Leesburg man headed to Washington Dulles International Airport. He asked Lynch to meet him when he returned to town that evening. "Then I got a call from a national newspaper who wanted to do a story on us," Lynch said. "So they sent a photographer to Dulles."

Lynch said the client, who was expecting a quiet ride home after a long day of travel, was a good sport about the publicity, which resulted in considerable teasing from his colleagues.

"His company has offices all over the U.S., and they put his picture everywhere," Lynch said. "They even pasted his head on the body of the 'Terminator.' He was sort of our poster boy for a while. Since then we've become friends."

Many of Lynch's stories end with a similar punch line about friendships that evolved thanks to his cab. Tom Hrabal, co-owner of Hrabal Creative, a fledgling Leesburg advertising agency, contacted Lynch after seeing the taxi around Leesburg.

"We met for lunch and he said he wanted to do our publicity," Lynch said.

So Hrabal and his wife, Lisa Baldwin, came up with a series of catchy black-and-white ads. "They said things like 'Our drivers speak English as well as American' or 'We still know our way around the Colonies,'" he said.

The ads earned the company a prestigious 2004 "Addy" award from the Advertising Club of Metropolitan Washington. "It was nice to help another Leesburg start-up," Lynch said. "Ironically, they got the award only a few weeks before we closed our doors."

Though the ads, a Web site and other publicity helped bring in business, there wasn't enough to turn a profit. Lynch never paid himself a salary, plowing everything back into the company.

December, his busiest month, brought his most memorable fare on Christmas Eve. "I picked up a woman and her child who were going to a shelter for battered women," he said. "They were clearly leaving their home for the last time. Her entire life, including her Christmas presents, was in three plastic bags."

He refused her money. "Then, 20 minutes later, I'm taking a couple to [L 'Auberge] Chez Francois."

Lynch said he has enjoyed "seeing moments of life in Loudoun County." But there is no "flag down" traffic in Leesburg as there is in Washington. Nor can he wait in the taxi rank at Dulles.

"Washington Flyer owns all the airport business," he said. "The only way we can show up there is if we've got a prearranged pickup. There's no wandering through the terminal saying, 'Psst, buddy, want a ride?'"

The number of fares plummeted after the holidays. While waiting for passengers, Lynch busied himself with another passion: writing the historical mystery he's spent years researching, using a laptop he kept in the cab. "My wife says, 'Barry, finish that thing,'" he said. "If I hadn't gone into the cab business, I wanted to own a mystery bookstore."

Although discouraged by their dwindling business, the Lynches nevertheless took delivery on the second cab in February. "I figured we could always sell it later on eBay," he said.

But by March, they were barely making enough money to cover the hefty auto insurance premiums. The strain of long-term unemployment -- though Helen was employed, Barry hadn't

found full-time work, and the mortgage business brought in little income -- also weighed heavily on the couple.

On March 30, they decided to throw in the towel. "I wish we didn't have to do it," Barry Lynch said. "We didn't have any unsatisfied customers."

They will try again in Orlando, where they expect business to be more brisk. "We don't want to leave," he said. "And people don't want the cabs to leave, either. But maybe we can make it in Orlando and then come back and establish a satellite office in Leesburg. Now wouldn't that be totally cool?"