

# profile:

By Mark Ward Sr.



# PATRIOT FUELS USA







"I'm a wholesale man." So says Rodney Walker, president of Patriot Fuels USA in Lineville, Alabama, a rising company with sights set on marketing fuel across the southeastern United States. That goal is in reach as Patriot Fuels USA serves a growing number of rural jobbers who are often neglected by larger consolidated suppliers—and because Patriot Fuels USA is headed by a true entrepreneur.

Though focused on fuel wholesaling, Walker helms multiple enterprises. At four retail locations, Patriot Fueling Centers have leveraged automated technology to create a concept now being franchised. Walker also owns separate companies in construction, quarrying, and cattle ranching. He himself is a commercially licensed helicopter pilot who takes his four-seat Robinson R-44 chopper on business and has flown in assistance of the county sheriff's department, the state Department of Agriculture, and local rescue squad missions.

Walker's journey started early. "As a kid, I pumped gas and helped customers at an old-fashioned local grocery, Burdette's Grocery in Talladega, that belonged to my grandad's sister and her husband," he recalls. "I also had several friends in school whose families were in the oil jobber business. So, I grew up around the fuel business."

Like many who are successful today, Walker credits the influence of key mentors. "My dad taught me that I have a duty to my customers to always provide fuel when and where they need it—and to see my customers and me as a team who mutually depend on each other," he relates. He also cites the guidance of hometown mentor David Willingham who "has been in the fuel business all of his life and always pushed and encouraged me to take that path and fill a need in our local community."

That path to today's Patriot Fuels USA has followed multiple branches along the way.

Walker began in construction some 35 years ago while still in his twenties. Next, he opened a rock quarry. Then came Walker Lands & Cattle LLC. Today the operation boasts 750 Black Angus cows, 26 bulls, and 600 calves, and has been ranked for ten years as the nation's top dealer of Gooseneck cattle trailers, selling cattle trailers all over the United States including Hawaii.

"Diversification has played a big part in getting to where I am in life," says Walker. "For example, I love cattle ranching and could talk about it for hours. But even though I'm the sole owner of all my businesses, I have a great group of people who manage each one. I know each business well so that I can provide overall direction—and I know the books on each one in detail—but I don't try to micromanage." ►





Fulfilling his childhood love, Walker in 2006 diversified into retail fueling with his first store. Ten years later, in 2016, he built his first Patriot Fueling Center in Lineville. “Business was great,” he reports, “so that in 2018 we opened a site in Wetumpka and in 2020 in Alex City, both in Alabama. Currently we have a fourth center under construction in Montgomery.”

Then in 2019, Walker formed a wholesale terminal supply group under the corporate name Patriot Fueling Centers USA Inc., doing business as Patriot Fuels USA. Early last year the operation got underway when it obtained an Alabama Supplier License and Federal Excise Tax License, after several years working hard to pass the stringent process to get them, and since then has become also licensed in Georgia, Mississippi, Florida, and South Carolina.

## Growing the Old-Fashioned Way

In the relatively short time since its inception, Patriot Fuels USA has already achieved average sales of \$10 million per month and volumes of up to 250,000 gallons per day across a territory than spans six states: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, South Carolina, and Florida. The company offers rack sales at 16 bulk terminals—five in Alabama, six in Georgia, and five in Tennessee. Fourteen terminals are open for sales, while two are newly owned by Patriot Fuels USA and currently under renovation.

Walker’s company has achieved such growth by offering what he calls “old-fashioned customer service.” First, he identified an underserved niche. “We cater to multi-generational wholesalers and jobbers, especially rural jobbers, who buy about 300,000 to 1 million gallons per month,” he explains. “Due to consolidation among suppliers, smaller jobbers aren’t being served as well by the big wholesalers that are looking for big gallons.”

As a result, Walker continues, “the ‘smaller oil companies’ feel like they’re being pushed to the side. But at Patriot Fuels USA, we can give these jobbers personal service. We have two full-time sales reps—with plans to hire another—who give our customers the personal touch. They pinpoint an area to visit every day and visit three to five customers or prospects. And at times, I also go myself to see our customers.”

Another hallmark of the company’s marketing strategy is not competing with its own customers. Patriot Fuels USA does not sell to end users, only to fuel resellers who in turn supply their own customers. Walker and his team provide the inventory through their terminal locations and then customers pick up their fuel at the rack.

“We believe in marketing the old-fashioned way,” adds Walker. “Customer service means knowing each customer by name, not a number. We’re here for our customers 24/7/365. They can call

any one of us, in any time of need, and we do all we can to help them. This is very different from most of the giant corporations that sometimes allocate customer service based on return on investment and how many dollars a customer might spend. We treat everyone like we want to be treated and live by the Golden Rule each day.”

That philosophy extends to the company’s own suppliers. “Our fuel supply comes from the refineries on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana,” Walker reports. “We have great relationships with our vendors because we strive to help our vendors rather than just asking what they can do for us. Without them, we can’t operate or survive. Like my dad always told me, you can’t sell fuel from an empty wagon.”

Walker cites his company’s relationships with Planation Pipeline and throughput partners Buckeye Terminals, Vecenergy Terminals, Apex Terminals, and Kinder-Morgan. “And we also have great relationships with other suppliers,” he adds, “who we call on to help with ethanol or spot trades, to help us fill a gap in the supply chain.”

The Golden Rule likewise applies internally. Walker views his people “as a team that works together and helps each other grow and be better. My approach is not to put people in shutters, but to build each other up. We attend trade shows and meetings together, where we can bond and talk about things. We have monthly meetings to discuss the future of the company. And we’re always a phone call or text away to lend each other a helping hand.”

A culture of treating customers like family begins at home. To that end, Walker credits the dedicated team that runs Patriot Fuels USA. Stacie Hudson is vice president of marketing and excise taxes—and Walker’s fiancée, with a 2023 wedding planned at the scenic Walker Cattle Ranch. Sales manager Bobby Crenshaw draws on four decades of petroleum industry experience, industry experience, while Walker’s stepson Sean Grissett is a full-time sales rep who visits customers daily. Haley Upchurch and Kaytlin Upchurch handle office and accounting tasks. Margo Hill is our area store manager and we have a great team at our stores also.

“I’m supported by a great group of people,” Walker states, “including the people in charge of our construction and farm

operations.” Among these are Todd Tramell, Eugene Eller, Cory Howe, and Juan Mosquez. The cattle ranch runs more than 1,300 head of stock and is a top national dealer in cattle trailers, while the construction company is a commercially licensed general contractor with projects that span convenience stores, fast food restaurants, insurance agency offices, and excavation and grading services.

### Leveraging Synergies

The future for Patriot Fuels USA, says Walker, “is to continue to grow. We’d like to cover all markets in the Southeast. To do that and serve new and existing customers, we plan to expand our lines of credit and increase our inventory. We’ve developed a business model that can succeed by organic growth, rather than growing by acquisitions of other fuel suppliers.”

Part of the model is leveraging synergies between the wholesale operations of Patriot Fuels USA and the retail operations of Patriot Fueling Centers. The latter currently encompasses three operational sites in Alabama and one under construction in the capital city of Montgomery. Walker explains that the four Patriot Fueling Centers are not travel centers or truck stops but are fully automated truck and auto fueling centers.

The prototypical Patriot Fueling Center sits on three to five acres, is sited on a state highway in a rural location, features a forecourt of eight to twelve MPDs, and has a freestanding store of 1,320 square feet. Notably, the fully automated sites are cashier-less and offer robotic self-service for convenience store items. Further, the Montgomery site now under construction is sited on 20 acres that will allow future travel trailer parking, as well as fuel on the Alabama River.

“Where I see great potential for synergy with our wholesale side is in franchising our Patriot Fuel Center concept,” states Walker. “Last year we finalized the paperwork to set us up as a franchisor. Now our first franchise store is under contract and being built in Opp, Alabama.

From the inception of the Patriot Fueling Centers, we wanted to offer other hometown people a way to get into the fuel station business.”

The automated concept allows franchisees to operate a Patriot Fuel Center that is open 24/7, but without overhead for labor ►







and without the challenges of employee turnover and recruiting and training new help. At the same time, Walker can expand the Patriot concept without capital outlays of \$2 million to \$4 million per location to build direct-operated sites.

“We can help the ‘little guy’ open a fueling center for their area, without going through a lot of red tape,” says Walker. “And when the center is open, automation means it will be open all the time, even as other stores have a hard time hiring people. Our franchisees will need fuel from local jobbers, and those jobbers can come to us for product. So, the franchise concept is a win-win-win for franchisors, their jobbers, and Patriot Fuels USA.”



## Joining the Family

With a diverse set of companies—fueling to mining, and construction to cattle—Walker admits that “establishing a first-generation family business is one of the hardest things you can do. Of course, the people around you are the people in your life who you can trust and depend on. But it can also be easy sometimes to lash out about various problems. And your family hears about these problems after work when everyone else has gone home. So, you learn to tolerate each other and be supportive, despite the long hours needed to make a company successful.”

Walker also admits that as founder and leader, “I guard myself against being unfairly harder on my family than on others, because you have a natural tendency to expect more or want more from your family. I’ve learned to see myself as a ‘family coach.’ My goal is getting my family across the finish line and winning the race. To do that, you have to master the art of bringing everyone

together—family and employees—and pushing your team to be the best it can, while loving each person and appreciating each one’s qualities.”

Last year, Patriot Fuels USA joined the SIGMA family. “How that happened is interesting,” Walker recalls. “I was in the office one day and needed to make some calls. But I learned that SIGMA was meeting in New Orleans, which isn’t too far from us. Then as I made my calls, everyone I tried to contact was at the SIGMA meeting. So, I reached out to the SIGMA office myself.” Walker felt right at home as he interacted with a SIGMA staff that shared his values of customer service. “Without a doubt, SIGMA is one of the best fuel organizations there is,” he says. “The staff work hard to make sure that each member, no matter how big or small, feels important and appreciated. They go the extra mile—for example, by setting up contacts with vendors or bankers that I wanted to meet but didn’t have their information.” For their part, Walker continues, the association’s elected leadership “is always there to say hello and make sure you’re taken care of. I’d strongly recommend to any marketer or vendor that joining SIGMA is the best money you’ll ever spend. You’ll be where the action is, meet key contacts, build lifetime friendships, and have the help that you need to succeed.”

Walker is bullish on prospects for independent marketers. “I honestly believe the future is very bright for our industry,” he says. “First, we’re not going to move away from fossil fuels for a very long time. We simply don’t have the infrastructure for a total switch to electric vehicles.”

Though industry consolidation is a fact of life, Walker points out that his experience shows how change creates opportunities. “We’ve built a large and growing wholesale business,” he notes, “by supplying a niche of jobbers who were being bypassed by the big suppliers. And by leveraging robotic technology, we’ve launched a franchise concept that puts the opportunity to own a fueling center within reach of underserved markets.”

He recognizes that “a lot of small operators are being consumed by larger organizations.” Yet Walker concludes, “This is America, and we need to always show the younger generation that there is a way into this market and industry. I’m not embarrassed to talk about the American Dream. And in my own way, I’m excited to help make it possible for a new generation to survive and thrive as independent marketers.” ★