

Hotdog honcho on a roll again

Willy Dog franchise moves into China

By Brock Harrison
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WHEN KINGSTON'S WILL HODGSKISS began selling hotdogs, he chose to adorn his carts in red and yellow, thinking they'd attract attention.

Little did he know, a decade and a half later, that those colours would also symbolize expansion to a country where they're the national colours: China.

Willy Dog, the hotdog-cart franchise Hodgskiss started in 1989 with a single stand, has expanded again, this time to the Chinese capital of Beijing, adding yet another continent to his ever-expanding hotdog empire.

"Not bad, huh?" Hodgskiss, 49, says, a grin cracking his face.

The deal was completed about two months ago after the franchisee reached Willy Dog through the Canadian Embassy in Beijing.

When Hodgskiss began franchising in 1992, he figured if anyone wanted to get into the hotdog racket, they'd hit up their local embassies for a business directory.

"So I listed myself all over the world," he says. "It seems so simple, but it works. What can I say?"

Indeed it does. Since Hodgskiss started franchising Willy Dog in 1992, more than 200 red-and-yellow stands have popped up in eight countries across the globe.

Hodgskiss's current success has followed a remarkable riches-to-rags-back-to-riches story that saw him become a millionaire before the age of 30. Then he went bankrupt and ended up selling furniture three years later. And now he sits atop Canada's food-cart industry.

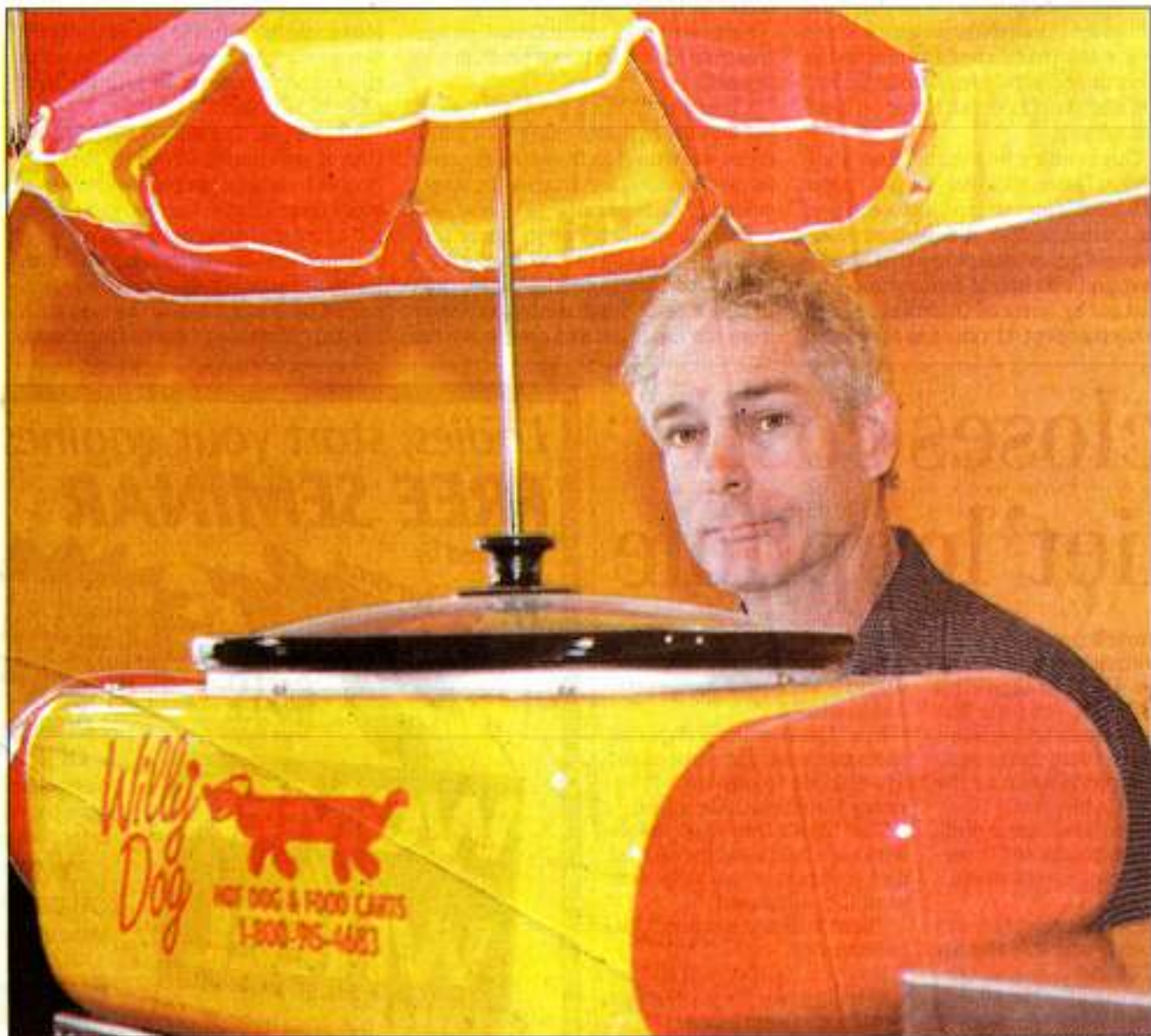
Before graduating from Hamilton's McMaster University in 1985 with a sociology degree, Hodgskiss began acquiring real estate using money obtained from selling shares in a photography business he inherited from his father.

At the height of his real estate success, he owned 28 properties in the Hamilton area.

He drove a Mercedes Benz, lived in a mountainside mansion near Hamilton and "had all the toys a guy could ever want."

Some dubious investments and a sharp downturn in the housing market forced Hodgskiss to start selling his assets to service his growing debt.

"I ended up flat broke," he said. "It was a dark tunnel, a real dark tunnel at the time."



Mark Bergin/The Whig-Standard

Willy Dog owner Will Hodgskiss credits his success to listing his franchise operation with embassies all over the world

Presuming the cheque would bounce, Hodgskiss slapped down his last \$6,800 on a hotdog cart. He set up shop just outside a Canadian Tire in Hamilton and waited for the money to pour in, as it seemed to do for the vendor outside his former workplace.

"I hired a couple pretty girls to run it and thought people would start throwing money at me," Hodgskiss recalls. But he soon learned how hard the business was.

Through it all, he relied on a saying his father had taught him: Do the ordinary things extraordinarily well. He also came up with a mantra of his own: It's not how much you make, but how much you keep.

He learned the nuances of cart locations, the right hours to operate and how many workers were needed to turn good profits.

The hotdogs themselves, 100-per-cent all-beef wieners, were and still are privately made after an extensive consumer testing period.

Shortly into his second year, he hit on an idea that would end up making

him millions.

"We needed hotdog carts shaped like hotdogs," he said. "People think I got the idea from Oscar Meyer or something, but it just came into my head one day."

On a cross-province junket trying to sell his new carts, Hodgskiss made a stop in Espanola. He said it was the turning point of his business. He dropped in on the manager of the town's Canadian Tire, trying to sell him on putting a cart by the front entrance. The manager was reluctant, but finally agreed to see the cart Hodgskiss had been hauling around.

"He took one look at it and said, 'Why the hell didn't you tell me it looked like this? Of course we'll put one out front,'" Hodgskiss recalls. "That's when I knew I had found something that struck a chord with people."

The next year, 1992, he started franchising. A year later, he relocated to Kingston - for a change of pace, he says - and stuck a Willy Dog cart in Confederation Park downtown. It's still there today.

"It was a lifestyle change," he said. "I wanted to slow down. Kingston lets me relax a little."

Now there are red-and-yellow Willy Dog stands in Venezuela, Korea, Mexico, Israel and even a place called Rarotonga, the capital of the Cook Islands in the south Pacific.

He sails his boat and flies his plane when the rigours of Willy Dog aren't too much. His Mercedes is back, too.

"It's easy to forget where you came from but I will always have my past to remind me," says the poised and confident Hodgskiss.

"Half the time when I pick up the phone and it's a guy who wants to buy a hotdog cart, he's on his last buck just like I was. I know what that's like."

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