

New lifestyle popularizes self-storage

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

Self-storage vaults are cropping up in the Detroit area faster than you can say "pack rat."

The fledgling industry invaded Michigan a few years ago after sweeping through southern states, where it became a fast-growing, low-cost, liquidating space for businesses and unwanted household items and attics, and became oversaturated in some urban markets.

"In the past two to three years it has been going like gang busters here," commented Karen Lee, manager of Secured Storage Systems, Troy.

Added Joan Hige, manager of E-Z Mini Storage, Southfield: "I've heard of giveaways and other things to draw people, probably because they built too many in the south. Texas has a lot more than Michigan. But it certainly seems to be growing."

A trend toward apartment and condominium living, smaller houses, and fewer basements and garages has hastened the development of the self-storage industry nationwide.

The rising cost of office rental in major commercial centers, such as Troy and Southfield, has prompted retail stores, industrial firms and professionals to stow inventory and files in storage units.

Like apartment tenants, self-storage users sign monthly leases. Cubicles range in size from approximately 5-by-10 feet to more than 1,000 square feet and average \$40 to more than \$400 per month.

Some facilities require security deposits. Others charge monthly administration fees. Typically, all require tenants to pay rent monthly and to insure their stored goods.

Most storage sites are fenced, permitting entry to tenants only through a gateway unlocked by individual computer code. Although some managers live on site, access hours average from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

"IN SOME towns like Oklahoma City and San Antonio units are 30-40 percent empty," said Cheryl Hall, general property manager for Troy-based Young Attic Inc.

"People don't rent a unit (in Michigan) if my life depended on it," she said, adding that rentals are scarce here. But initially, demand didn't outpace rental availability.

"We ran into difficulties in Michigan because people didn't know what self-storage was," Hall recalled. "They said, 'Oh yeah, that cute little farmhouse,' but they didn't know what it was."

The "cute little farmhouse," which

serves as the rental office, is a trade mark for the firm, which was founded in 1975, "when self-storage was just taking off," Hall said.

Your Attic's 40-year-old president, George Field Jr., is credited by some as being instrumental in transforming a "small and pop" business into a full-fledged industry.

The firm owns a facility in Ann Arbor and plans to build in seven other suburban locations this year. Its Troy and Southfield facilities were sold to Shurgard Mini Storage, which will name four years.

"Our approach is different," Hall said. "We build from the ground up. Public (located in the south) claim to be in the land brokerage business. Shurgard keeps facilities that other companies build."

"We look at it specifically as a self-storage business. We build from the ground up."

Their former Troy facility, now Shurgard-owned, offers 650 units with concrete floors and steel walls. The few units that become available every month generally are rented within hours after being vacated.

DAVID LAND and Barbara Hopson, husband and wife managing team, estimate about 80 percent of their customers reside or own businesses in Troy.

Commercial firms and professionals account for about half of their customers, apartment dwellers comprise another

other 40 percent, and families, moving to another, house to another, make up the rest.

The company's Southfield site, located in an industrial area along Eight Mile, caters mostly to businesses.

Retailers and home-based businesses slow inventory at the Troy site. Distributors use rental units as mini-warehouses. Homeowners and apartment dwellers store cars and recreational equipment year round.

Families moving from one house to another, or from larger to smaller homes, load furniture into the cubicles. College students, nursing home patients and veterans often use the service for temporary storage.

"A lot more people are living in condos and apartments. Young families just starting out don't have the money for a down payment, yet they still have disposable income, so they have things to store."

Hopson estimated the cost of storage rental at approximately \$5 per square foot compared to \$12-\$15 per square foot for office space in the Troy area.

LEE FIGURES storage space costs about one-third less than office rental. Half of her customers are business firms. About 80 percent of her tenants reside or own businesses in Troy, Birmingham and Royal Oak.

"We're in the Mercedes of self-storage," Lee claimed. Her family opened the facility on Maple near Coolidge in

December. "We're still building. We have occupancy permits for five buildings. We have 350 units now and will have another 300."

She often receives referrals from

Young Attic Inc.

"One factor we were a little nervous about is that we're not right on Maple. But orange and brown are our colors — we have all orange doors — and I think you can see it. The house is very visible."

The Yellow Pages is most used by our customers anyway. We opened in December but we weren't in the Yellow Pages until March. Then we were going great guns."

Hige also began renting units in March at her Southfield facility. She estimates that about 80 percent of the units, which range in cost from \$22 to \$110, have been rented.

"You'd be surprised how many people have to have this service," she said.

Hopson noted, however, that many renters aren't certain how to shop for a storage site. She suggests that tenants consider all-concrete or concrete and steel units.

"Some of the older ones are made out of wood. Mice and water leakage are the biggest problems," she said, adding "Be aware of security and get into some place that at least is fenced."

Child's play for adults

Photographing children can seem more like the child's play if you follow a few helpful tips from experts.

Composition

Look before you shoot. Get close enough to the child to fill the frame. Then, determine whether a horizontal or vertical

format will be best to use

and small enough to take anywhere.

• Keep your camera ready. If children are accustomed to seeing you with a camera, they'll act more naturally. Candid shots are fun. Involve the children in an activity to take lots of pictures.

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FOR 256 HOURS

FOR 272 HOURS

FOR 296 HOURS

FOR 320 HOURS

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