

Michelin leader back in Upstate where his career started

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Pete Selleck, president and CEO of Michelin North America, is back in Greenville. / GWINN DAVIS / Staff

If you don't think job fairs can help you find, just ask Pete Selleck, chairman and president of Michelin North America.

He gave up a military career for tires — and the move into the [tire](#) industry was the result of a job fair encounter. What the decision has given him is a career spanning 29 years so far — one that brought him to Greenville, moved him to France and then lured him back to Greenville.

Selleck, 56, took over the North American operations of Michelin, based in Greenville, last October. He came to what his family considers home as the region became “probably more important than it’s ever been,” he said. Michelin North America is growing faster than ever, and it’s helping to train employees who will be working in emerging markets around the world.

That’s important to the Upstate, said Ben Haskew, president of the Greenville Chamber of Commerce. Experts figure that about 80 percent of the region’s growth will come from existing companies.

One of the drivers of per capita income, which Greenville is trying to increase, is innovation, an area in which Michelin excels with its Michelin Americas Research and Development Corp., Haskew said.

“This is one of the areas where companies like Michelin, GE and Milliken next door are critical. They invent things and receive patents,” he said.

Michelin also employs an educated, well-trained workforce and pays them well, Haskew said. That’s another element in increasing per capita income.

Selleck, the product of a military upbringing, was the fourth generation in his family to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and his son is the fifth generation to graduate as a West Pointer.

The military gave him his first connection to France. His father was stationed there, and Selleck attended the first and second grade in a French elementary school, “the only American child” in the school.

He learned to read and write in French before he did in English, he said.

With his civil engineering degree as well as Airborne and Ranger training, he served in the U.S. Army as a combat engineer and platoon leader, eventually becoming a company commander.

Gen. Colin Powell was the officer who evaluated him during his career. “I learned most of what I know about leadership from him,” he said.

He and his wife made a “hard decision” in 1982, Selleck said. They decided it was time to leave the military although he remained with the Reserves for about 21 years.

Sounding like many other job seekers, he said, “I went out looking for a job. I had no idea what I wanted to do.” He attended a job fair held for young officers leaving the military and Michelin was there.

“I actually had Michelin tires on my car” since he was familiar with the company, he said. But when a recruiter invited him to interview, “I did not know where Greenville, S.C., was.”

Greenville hadn’t begun its revitalization and resurgence in 1983, but “we took a chance on the community,” Selleck said, adding it wasn’t really taking a chance on Michelin.

“I was excited. Manufacturing is very honest work. You create a product and add value,” he said. And Michelin is a company that constantly innovates, making the job exciting.

“What really hooked me to Michelin was the value system,” he said. During his years with the company, it has gone through some tough times such as after it purchased Uniroyal and Goodrich and was saddled with heavy debt.

“We do the hard things. We also do them and try to manage the impact on the employee and the community,” he said. “This is a company I can hitch my wagon to.”

One example of that care for employees and their community was the creation of Michelin Development in Opelika, Ala., when Michelin closed the 1,000-employee Goodrich plant there in 2009 because of a depressed tire market. Michelin Development was designed to help small businesses grow and add employees through a lending program.

Selleck's choice of Michelin as a career resulted in a 21-year stay in Greenville. He spent 11 years at the Donaldson passenger and light truck tire plant as an industrial engineer, production manager and plant manager as well as earning an MBA from Clemson University.

Selleck's long period at the plant gave him a chance to really know the employees, he said.

"I knew as plant manager that if something went wrong at 3 in the morning, our people would do the right thing. They were very committed to our company. They would shut down the process. They would protect the brand and the customer. They would not let bad product out of the plant," he said.

He then spent three years managing the eight Michelin-brand plants in North America.

After the company was restructured, he became chief operating officer of Michelin Americas Small Tires, managing the company's replacement business in North America. From that position, "I was able to see the beginning-to-the-end process" — from research and development to finished product.

In 2003, Michelin's managing partners told him it was time for a foreign assignment. Selleck initially headed up the replacement business in Europe and then in 2006 took over Michelin's global truck tire business.

"I had to learn the truck tire business," he said. "It's not just tires. It's retreading as well as tires. It's a business-to-business operation."

During that period, he had the opportunity to begin construction of truck tire plants in China and India.

When offered the position as head of North America operations last year, "We didn't need any time. Before the partner's hand was on the door leaving, I said yes," he said. Selleck and his wife felt as though they were coming home.

"This was a gift," he said. But "I accept the responsibility with a significant understanding of how important Michelin is in North America."

Simply looking at its work force shows the company's importance, Haskew said.

"They've got jobs across the board," he said, ranging from headquarters and R&D positions to manufacturing jobs.

North America also is important to Michelin — it's the second-largest market for the company, Selleck said. Last year was the first time North American sales hit \$10 billion.

"Last year was a year when the rebound from the economic crisis continued. We grew. But the second half was a plateau," he said. It was also a tough year when raw material prices shot up, requiring price increases.

This year, Selleck said Michelin is expecting the national economy to grow, but it anticipates unemployment will remain high.

Gas prices could be a problem because that can depress driving, with a negative impact on business. But sales of new passenger vehicles and commercial trucks are expected to remain strong because of pent-up demand.

Growth also is expected among earthmover tires. Michelin produces those large tires at a plant in Lexington and exports about 80 percent of the production. About half of that exporting is done through the Port of Charleston, which makes deepening the harbor of major importance to the company.

"In mining, we are selling everything we can make," he said, primarily because few manufacturers make those large tires and large mines are improving productivity by going to huge 600-ton dump trucks that use gigantic tires. "We intend to expand our earthmover capacity worldwide."

He wouldn't comment on speculation about a new plant in North America, but rumors abound that Anderson is under consideration as a site for a facility. Michelin already has two semi-finished product facilities in the county.

"We are exploring opportunities right now," he said.

"This is a great time to be in Michelin North America," he said, adding he has visited about half of the company's plants in the United States, Canada and Mexico since he took over the operation in October.

The 22,000-employee North American operation is losing about 600 employees annually to retirement, and the company is sending people abroad to help with the building and training for new plants in development companies.

"We're hiring between 1,500 and 2,000 a year," he said. About two-thirds of those new hires are in production.