



BUSINESS RECOGNITION

A Special Supplement to
The Caledonian-Record and
Orleans County Record
highlighting the many successful
businesses of the Northeast Kingdom
and North Country



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225 YEARS

Luxury Transcends Centuries At Rabbit Hill Inn

BY PAUL HAYES
Staff Writer

WATERFORD — It opened in the late 1700s as a stopover on the midpoint of the trade route between Montreal and the ports of Boston and Portland, Maine.

Two-hundred and twenty-five years later The Rabbit Hill Inn continues a tradition of hospitality as one of the finest, highest-rated and most decorated small hotels in the United States.

Like a fine wine, the Inn has gotten better with age.

Last year the Rabbit Hill Inn was named Travel+Leisure Magazine’s #1 Top Resort Hotel in the



PHOTO BY PAUL HAYES

Originally serving tradesmen and loggers making the 18-day round trip between Montreal and American ports (Boston and Portland), the Inn has become a romantic destination for those seeking a mix of New England comfort, fine dining, and superior service.

And it has guests voting it among the best in the world.

By placing high in the Travel+Leisure surveys, Brian said, “a little 19-room mom-and-pop inn in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont is being compared to a four seasons hotel in Shanghai, or one of those big luxury resort properties in Dubai.”

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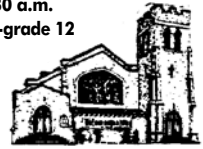
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“There’s no big secret... It’s just hard work,” said Brian Mulcahy. “It’s being here every day for the past 27 years and treating each guest as if it’s their first time here. It comes down to consistency.”

Northeast, #3 Top Resort Hotel in the USA, and #27 of the Top 100 Hotels in the World.

It was the inn’s fifth and highest appearance in Travel+Leisure’s rankings.

The 19-room full-service bed & breakfast inn is owned and operated by Brian and Leslie Mulcahy.

Former guests, they became assistant innkeepers in 1994 and bought the inn when their bosses retired in 1997.

They have relentlessly worked to make the Inn a top destination.

Located on 15 acres of trails and countryside overlooking the Connecticut River, the Rabbit Hill Inn stands out for its luxury accommodations, high-end amenities, a cozy Irish-style pub serving local craft beers, and a AAA Four Diamond-rated restaurant with farm-to-table cuisine, stellar service, and warm hospitality.

It is conveniently located near world-class skiing, biking, hiking and climbing destinations, not to mention a host of top-notch breweries, farmers markets, museums, antique and craft shops, local and summer stock theaters, shopping destinations and some of the prettiest sightseeing in New England.

Guests can book package deals, to include various outdoor activities with their stay (such as guided snowmobile or ATV tours), and the Inn provides personal concierge services, to help guests plan.

The Inn also offers couples package deals (including honeymoon, romantic getaway and picnic-for-two packages) and massage services.

For these reasons and more it draws guests from across the country and around the world.

Many of those guests are drawn by word of mouth. “It’s based on reputation,” said Brian. “You create this brand that people want to talk about and your guests become promoters. They might not even know it. But when they talk about the experience they had, or they feel compelled to write a great review, it creates a desire for people to want to come here.”

The Rabbit Hill Inn began as two separate buildings: The Hodby Tavern & General Store (opened in 1795) and the Jonathan Cummings shop and home (completed in 1825).

They have been joined since 1834 when Fred Cross & O.G. Hale purchased the two houses and opened Fred Cross’s Churn, a travelers’ and traders’ inn.



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Financial Firm AM Peisch Celebrates Century Mark

Partner Anne Smith Taps NVU-Lyndon For Accounting Talent

BY ROBIN SMITH
Staff Writer

ST. JOHNSBURY — A 100-year-old company continues its long tradition of tax preparation and financial services in St. Johnsbury.

AM Peisch first opened in Hanover, N.H. but expanded into Vermont.

Anne Smith, a partner in AM Peisch, says the company first began in St. Johnsbury in 1984, first in the Passumpsic building and then moved to its current location on Route 5 in 1987.

Smith joined the firm in 1987 when her company



Serving clients from A.M. Peisch & Company are from left, in front, Diane Holmes, Denis Querrard, Robin Goven. In back, from left, Lawuo Cummings, Kayla Merchant, Olivia Thomas, Anne Smith. (Courtesy Photo)

merged with AM Peisch. She is the company partner in St. Johnsbury and works with partners in offices across the region, with four other offices in Colchester, St. Albans, Rutland and in West Lebanon, N.H.

There are over 50 employees with the company across the region.

"I like the oft-used quote: 'Life - is what happens while you are making other plans,'" Smith says on the company's online pages.

"Tax and financial planning are vitally important to keep you on the right track when life throws you curves."

Smith has more than 35 years of varying public accounting experience and currently is responsible for engagements in all areas of taxation, financial statement preparation, and business and individual planning, the company states.

Smith provides a wide variety of tax and accounting services to an array of industries including retail, service, manufacturing, construction, government, and not for profits.

Smith also has a large individual practice specializing in tax compliance, planning, estate, gift and trusts. In addition, she has successfully navigated hurdles associated with communicating and dealing with the various taxing authorities. Write up and payroll services are also an offering.

She earned a Bachelor of Science from Plymouth State College. She is a member of the American Society of Certified Public Accounts, as well as the Vermont Society of Certified Public Accountants.

Smith is community oriented and has served on the board of directors and as treasurer of several organizations and has presented a number of useful professional seminars in the region served. She is married with three children.

Tax Time

It's a busy time of year for a financial company, Smith says.

They have eight people working there now at tax time.

Providing a full range of financial services means the company provides services throughout the year, so there is always a deadline to meet, she said.

One of the things that has changed over the years is the increasing complexity of the tax codes.

And Smith said that they work closely with clients to make sure they correctly report foreign accounts.

There are huge penalties for not reporting overseas bank accounts or Swiss annuities, for example.

The staff at AM Peisch do at least 40 hours a year of continuous professional training to keep abreast of changes.

The St. Johnsbury office also taps into a local resource for staff each year, Smith says. They try to use a college intern annually from Northern Vermont University - Lyndon.

"We have an excellent accounting student who graduates in May," Smith said.

They like to introduce students to public accounting.

Smith herself has been in the business for 43

years. She was schooled the old-fashioned way at a Catholic school, immersed in the 3 Rs - reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic.

She asked an advisor what career she could pursue with that kind of background, and he suggested she try accounting in college, "and I liked it," Smith said.

She also happens to like working hard in the winter, when it's end of year and tax prep time, and having less of a work load in the summer.

Smith likes AM Peisch. "The culture is great. The partners all get along" she said.

They also come to the table with ideas about what they can do for the firm and for the people who work there, she said.

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85 YEARS

Walker Motors Picking Up Speed After 85 Years

BY PAUL HAYES
Staff Writer

WOODSVILLE — Still rolling. Eighty-five years later, Walker Motors remains a small business success story.

Drive through this corner of the Upper Valley and you'll find countless vehicles that rolled off the lot of this third-generation auto dealership.

That's because the locals trust Walker Motors. Located at 4675 Dartmouth College Highway, Walker Motors offers American-made Chrysler, Dodge, Ram and Jeep vehicles.

The business takes a personal approach to selling and servicing vehicles, relying on repeat sales to a small, rural community.

Walker Motors has built customer loyalty by taking a low key approach. That means no shifty salespeople, high pressure tactics, or aggressive up-sells.

"Here we rely on repeat customers, word of mouth," said third-generation owner James 'Jamie' Walker III. "So we take a laid back approach.

He and longtime salesperson, Terry Impey, treat potential buyers like family.

"If somebody buys a car from Terry, you come in three months later and he knows you by name," Walker said.

The business was started by Jamie III's grandfather, James Sr., as a Chrysler dealership in 1935.

Walker Motors became a fixture and survived several hardships, including a fire that burned the business down on April 7, 1969.

His son, James Jr. began working in the parts department shortly after graduating from Woodsville High School in 1957 and eventually took over when his father retired in 1983.

During his reign, James Jr. acquired multiple Red Sox season tickets, which he re-sold locally. As the team improved, so did sales. Today people know: Looking for a seat by the Pesky Pole? Call Walker Motors.

The business's family tradition continues today.



PHOTOS BY PAUL HAYES

Salesman Terry Impey makes a call.

Jamie (general manager) and his brother Robert (who heads the service department) took over the business in 2013.

Now in its third generation, Walker Motors remains committed to offering personal service to a tight-knit community.

"Most of our customers, we run into them at the store," Walker said.

The saying goes: If it's not broke, don't fix it. So it goes with Walker Motors. Eight-and-a-half decades later, the dealership isn't going to make changes. It will remain what it's always been.

Said Walker proudly, "We're still a small town, locally owned business."

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75 YEARS

Sayles Funeral Home Cares For Generations Of Families

BY DANA GRAY
Staff Writer

ST. JOHNSBURY — A more mobile and less religious society is impacting the funeral home business, but Steve and Helen Robertson, owners of the 75-year-old Sayles Funeral Home, say they are committed to their work and extending the business's impressive longevity.

The Robertsons have owned the funeral business since July 2016. They are the third owners of the funeral business on Summer Street and the first ones not named "Sayles."

Sayles History

The business began as Desrochers & Sayles. It



PHOTOS BY DANA GRAY

Helen and Steve Robertson are the owners of Sayles Funeral Home in St. Johnsbury, which is celebrating the 75th year of business in 2020.

ings if the family was not well-connected to the area or a local church.

Five years beyond that, said Steve, the two funeral homes might be combined at that site.

"There's a lot of usable acres," he said. "It's on the town line. It's a nice middle ground."

Helen said the concept of funeral homes expanding into events hosting is not new, having been implemented elsewhere.

"We can go along and not expand, but if cremations continue to rise and services continue to decline, then we've got to do something," she said. And this is something that would benefit their business and an area lacking a large, non-affiliated gathering space for events.

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*"We rely a lot on our faith," said Helen.
"Caring for the dead is a work of mercy...
We are blessed to be able to do that as our living."*

was established in 1945 by Willard "Bill" Sayles, a World War II veteran, and Louie Desrochers. Willard's son, Rodney Sayles, purchased the business in 1978.

In an interview with Rodney Sayles five years ago, he said despite being a tough business to start in 1945, the funeral home benefited at the time because its name led with a French name. The French Catholic population responded well to that, he said.

Rodney Sayles joined the business in 1976 and purchased it from his father in 1978. Rodney Sayles bought Guibord Funeral Home in Lyndonville in 1996 and recruited well-known St. Johnsbury resident Tom Barrett for the business.

The same month the Robertsons acquired the business (July 2016) was the same month Barrett died and his funeral was held. The size of the event to celebrate Barrett's life was immense both Helen and Steve remarked. It was attended by hundreds of people including firefighters with their fire trucks as Barrett had served as a firefighter.

"St. John's [Catholic Church] was packed because everyone knew Tom. Everyone liked Tom. He helped a lot of people," said Steve.

The Robertsons are owners and operators of Guibord & Sayles funeral homes in St. Johnsbury and Lyndonville. They also acquired the Pearsons Funeral Home name and files. All together the businesses are incorporated under the corporate name Caledonia Life Services.

Steve said keeping the Sayles name for the business was important for the quality it represents and the name's familiarity after 75 years.

"This is where my grandma was. This is where my grandpa was. This is where mom is. This is where I'm going to do Dad," said Helen, who is involved full-time with the business and is currently pursuing her funeral director's license.

"It's generational," said Steve. "The family used it. It's the family funeral home. It's one of the reasons we kept the name."

Helen is a native of Colebrook, N.H. and Steve comes from Tennessee. They met at Boston University at a time when Steve was working in a motorcycle shop. At the time serving at a funeral home was not his plan.

Steve recalled the day at a Newport, N.H. funeral home that launched his career.

"I just came in to do some spring cleaning and wash cars. I started at 8 o'clock in the morning. By 10 o'clock I was on my first [body] removal. By 1 o'clock I was back to the hospital on my second and there were five more deaths that week at a funeral home that usually doesn't do that many," he said. Six months later it turned into a full-time job.

The couple have eight children, their youngest two at Good Shepherd School and one attending St. Johnsbury Academy. One of their daughters, a Vermont Technical College student, holds a license for body removal. Another daughter, Liz Merritt, manages Guest Memorials, which is a gravesite monument business the Robertsons acquired last summer.

Steve said the funeral business may not have been where he saw himself as a youth, but it has become a

calling that suits him.

"Some have said 'you are in the right position in your life,'" he said. "Well, God put me there. It wasn't something I chose."

The Robertsons, who identify as Christian Catholic, said family and faith are what keeps them centered despite a career surrounded by the heart-breaking loss of life.

"We rely a lot on our faith," said Helen. "Caring for the dead is a work of mercy. We are blessed to be able to do that as our living."

Between the two funeral home locations, the Robertsons' businesses serve a large geographic area. There are about 26,000 people living in the region Guibord and Sayles funeral homes directly serve. The businesses employ 11 full and part-time employees.

As transplants to town, Steve and Helen say they rely heavily on their employees, who in most cases have lived in area towns all their lives. Their workers have connections to Peacham, Danville, Lyndonville, Sutton, Sheffield, Waterford, Concord and St. Johnsbury.

"Between all our staff we really cover the area," said Steve. "There's not too many people that we serve that somebody doesn't know something about."

He said it is comforting to families to see a familiar face when they are experiencing the loss of a loved one.

"If they know someone who's working here and they show up at the time of the death, that's comfort right there," he said.

Impacting Business

The Robertsons said funeral home business in general is being impacted by an increased number of cremations. Helen said sometimes it's a cost issue as cremations tend to be a little less expensive, but many cremations are based on an increasing lack of religious identity and the general increased mobility of people.

"People as a society are less involved in religion and faith so church services aren't happening," she said. "So if you're not going to have a church service you don't need a body."

Said Steve, "It's a much more mobile society. There's not that connection. [People think] 'We haven't lived there in 40 years, so what's the point in bringing the body all the way back there when we can just have them cremated here.'"

Planning For The Future

The industry changes have the Robertsons not less committed to their calling but forward-thinking in terms of continuing the business into the future.

On Dec. 30, they closed on a piece of land on Memorial Drive in St. Johnsbury, near the townline with Lyndon where they are planning to build an events center. Steve said this 10-year vision is reflected in their corporate name of Caledonia Life Services. The event center will give the area a place for every occasion where a large gathering place is necessary, including corporate events and wedding receptions, said Helen.

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C.H. Dana RV Rolls Right Into 65th Year

BY PAUL HAYES
Staff Writer

MONROE — Homes on wheels. That's what the folks at C.H. Dana RV specialize in.

Combining the skills of real estate agents, car salespeople, handymen and auto mechanics, they have helped scores of North Country and Northeast Kingdom residents find and maintain their mobile getaways.

Celebrating their 65th year, C.H. Dana RV remains a mom-and-pop business run by second-generation owners Steve and Jannette Dana, who continue the company's tradition of superior customer service.



PHOTOS BY PAUL HAYES

Want to find your dream home-away-from-home? They can help. The company maintains a selection of over 30 new and used non-motorized RV, including the KZ RV line with models including the Connect, Sportsmen, Escape and Sportster.

Need something fixed? They can handle it. No matter the issue — broken appliances, worn out brakes and suspensions, busted plumbing and electrical systems, or even leaky roofs

— they can repair it all.

"We're A to Z," said Steve Dana. "We pretty much will fix or replace anything."

The family-owned company was started by Steve's father, Clarence.

An avid fisher, hunter and trapper, Clarence began a sporting goods store (C.H. Dana Jr. Sporting Good) that branched out to several locations and began selling boats and campers from several locations.



PHOTO BY TODD WELLINGTON

45 YEARS

Wheels Keep Turning At Berry Family Business

BY TODD WELLINGTON
Staff Writer

Berry Tire & Auto Service Center has stood as a landmark at the intersection of Red Village Road and Severence Hill Road in Lyndon for 45 years.

The shop was started by the late Everett Berry in 1975 and for decades he built his business with the help of his family and his loyal customers. Today, the shop is still owned and operated by the Berry family. Everett Berry's nephew John Berry and his wife Lisa Berry purchased the business after Everett died in 2013 at the age of 74. Their children, Justin and Abby Berry, also work in the shop housed in a distinctive red barn-style building at 1545 Red Village Road.

"We're still in the same spot," said John Berry, who worked for his uncle for over 35 years before becoming the owner.

John Berry said tires are just one part of the business.

"Oil changes, brakes, struts, shocks, exhaust — underneath the car most of the time," said John Berry. "Anything related to tires and underneath the car."

Everett Berry's commitment to his customers continues under the new ownership.

"Take care of the customers and the customers will take care of you," said John Berry.

Everett Berry started the business after working at the Vermont Tap & Die Co. plant in Lyndonville and Goss Tire Co. in St. Johnsbury.

He was born in Lyndon in 1939, the son of Maurice and Shirley (Lynaugh) Berry. Everett Berry served his country in the United States' Army and later moved back to Lyndon in 1966 with his wife Patricia "Pat" Mayer.

Everett Berry was assisted along the way by John Berry, Dick Berry, Justin Berry, Dave Berry, and other long serving employees. John Berry started working with Everett at the shop in the 1980s.

When John Berry assumed ownership he changed the name from Berry Tire to Berry Tire & Auto Service to promote the message that the shop provided more than just tire service.

According to its website, the shop is committed maintaining it's "strong and consistent reputation of offering reliable and trusted car and truck repair to the residents of the Northeast Kingdom."

He was one of the first locally to enter the RV market, starting C.H. Dana RV in St. Johnsbury in 1955.

Clarence sold the sporting goods store in 1972 and that same year, in order to meet increased demand and escape Vermont taxes (including a St. Johnsbury inventory tax), he moved the RV part of the business to Monroe.

Following in his father's footsteps, Steve began with the business at age 10 and took it over in 1991.

Today he and Jannette (who does the books) continue the tradition that Clarence set forth: Deliver exceptional value and superior service.

"Just be honest. Give the customer an honest deal and give them service after the sale," said Steve. "Say what you'll do, do what you'll say."

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45 YEARS

Approaching Fifth Decade, Catamount Arts Remains Regional Epicenter Of Arts, Culture & Entertainment

BY TODD WELLINGTON
Staff Writer

Catamount Arts started in 1975 with local residents Jay Craven and Reg Ainsworth traveling around the Northeast Kingdom to screen classic films at local schools. The first one was “Citizen Kane.”

45 years later, the non-profit located on Eastern Avenue in St. Johnsbury still shows movies but there is so much more going on.

Catamount, under the direction of Executive Director Jody Fried and a 16 member volunteer board



The Fried Gallery at Catamount Arts

“Catamount’s small team is able to accomplish big things by empowering individuals to use arts, culture and creativity as a vehicle for happiness and prosperity in the way that best represents what’s at the heart and soul of their communities,” said Fried.

of directors, is involved one-way or another with a wide variety of local arts projects including the 48 hour Tap-Into-Film Student Film Slam, Circus Smirkus, The Levitt AMP St. Johnsbury Music Series at Dog Mountain, The St. Johnsbury Bluegrass Festival, First Night North, EPIC Music Program, North Country Youth Chorus, Schooltime Performances at Fuller Hall and an annual juried visual arts exhibition which attracts over 500 submissions each year.

“Catamount Arts integrates arts, culture and creativity into the local communities throughout the region,” said Fried. “We serve as an umbrella organization providing backbone infrastructure for the creative sector and help drive community and economic development in northern Vermont and New Hampshire.”

According to Fried, Catamount has also produced 68 concerts on its new mobile stage over the past three years for an estimated 75,000 music fans and the Catamount Arts Regional Box Office provides ticketing for over 40 local organizations.

“We literally partner with hundreds of organizations across every sector of the economy,” said Fried.

Catamount, with 18 paid full-time and part-time employees, has also become an economic driver of its own.

Catamount Arts established its first movie theatre at the old U.S. Post Office building on Eastern Avenue and has since moved to the Masonic Temple building one door down the hill at 115 Eastern Avenue where it has developed an arts complex with two movie theaters, an art gallery, performance space, meeting space for arts education and performance programming and a regional box office.

The organization in the 1980s under Craven’s direction expanded beyond film. Among the efforts, it initiated a focus on live performance that landed



Jody Fried, executive director of Catamount Arts.

legendary musicians including Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Charlie Daniels and Bobby McFerrin. In 1991, Craven stepped down as executive director. Ainsworth later served as executive director until 2008. Fried became executive director in 2009.

“Catamount’s small team is able to accomplish big things by empowering individuals to use arts, culture and creativity as a vehicle for happiness and prosperity in the way that best represents what’s at the heart and soul of their communities,” said Fried. “We help unleash the power of hundreds of proud volunteers and partnering organizations who are all driven to

improve and celebrate the place they call home.”

Fried said he is especially excited about this year’s Levitt AMP music series at Dog Mountain and says Catamount will continue to advocate for the continued development of a creative economy.

“We have spent over a decade deliberately making the case that arts, culture and creativity are at the core of our local communities’ heart and soul, identity, health, vibrancy and economic well-being and thus deserve infrastructure investment similar to other areas like roads, schools, clinics, etc ...”

More information is available at Catamountarts.org.

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Ashley Van Zandt and Molly Stone, part of the Catamount Arts team, promote First Night North, one of the countless Catamount Arts' projects to bring world-class art, culture and entertainment to the NEK.



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Perras ACE Powers Home Improvement For Decades

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

Need lumber, a place to store your stuff, gifts for parties or events, or tools or supplies for a home emergency or a building or remodeling project?

Look no further than Perras ACE Inc., a family-run business in Northumberland that has them all and more and celebrates 40 years in the North Country.

Originally founded in 1974 by Real and Alice Perras as a wholesale sawmill operation called Perras Lumber, the family decided by 1980 to expand the business to include a retail lumber yard and an ACE Hardware franchise, making it the first ACE Hard-



moving or needing seasonal space, or those needing to de-clutter their home.

It's a group of businesses that keep the sister and their staff busy.

"Every day is different and you learn something new every day," said Collins. "It's always evolving, there's always a new item coming out. Instead of wood, for instances, you now have PVC trim."

Much has changed since the early days of Perras ACE Hardware. Those wanting to apply stain to cabinets or doors, for example, have a plethora of choices before them.

"It used to be easy 30 or 40 years ago when you had four choices doing cabinets or doors," said Collins. "Now, you have 4,000."

"I enjoy seeing the customers every day," Collins said about her love of the job. "The majority of our business is contractor-based and I've been dealing with a lot of them for 43 years."

ware store to open in the Granite State.

Since then, the Perras business has grown into three different enterprises, to include a party and gift shop as well as self-storage business.

By the turn of the 21st century, in 2001, Perras ACE Inc. and Perras Lumber became separate companies.

The following year, in 2002, Real and Alice sold the retail hardware business and building supply store to their daughters, Louise Collins and Suzanne Batchelder, who've remained at the helm ever since.

They come from a family of nine children, six boys and three girls, and their oldest brother was sold the lumber mill, which was a wholesale division and ran for another decade before closing in 2013.

Collins has been there almost since the beginning, from the late 1970s when she was still in high school. "Even as a junior in high school, before the hardware store, I was doing the book work for Perras Lumber," she said.

Today, Perras ACE, open seven days a week at 31 Perras Road, focuses on retail lumber, hardware, building materials, doors, windows, plumbing, insulation, electrical supplies, kitchen cabinets, a wide range of Mikita tools, Cabot exterior stains, and more.

Customers come in from the North Country and across the river in Vermont. The average is 120 to

140 customers in the winter months to 260 or greater in the summer months.

"I enjoy seeing the customers every day," Collins said about her love of the job. "The majority of our business is contractor-based and I've been dealing with a lot of them for 43 years."

For the three businesses, Collins and Batchelder employ about 24 full-time residents and add another two or three for the busier summer months.

The retail business also has a box van, flatbed trucks, and a boom truck to deliver products and building supplies across New Hampshire and surrounding areas.

"We go as far north as the Pittsburg and Errol area and we deliver as far south to Concord if we have to," said Collins.

In 2004, Collins and Batchelder opened Perras Treasures, a party and gift supply store across from the hardware store and offering items for birthday parties, wedding and anniversary receptions, and baby and bridal showers, and featuring a full kitchen for food preparation and a dance floor and a projector screen.

Perras Treasures also provides space for school meetings, conferences, and business meetings.

Another component of the business, Perras Self Storage, located in Groveton with another location in Gorham, offers storage units for those who are



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40 YEARS

Everyone Knows Your Name At The Coffee Pot

BY ROBERT BLECHL
Staff Writer

LITTLETON — The world has changed dramatically in the last 40 years.

But if there's one place to go to stay grounded and relax, to catch up on old times and share a laugh, to bring your family or meet up with friends, and enjoy a freshly brewed cup of coffee and homemade breakfast, it's The Coffee Pot Restaurant, home of the "bottomless cup," which this year celebrates four decades on Littleton's Main Street.

Co-owners Jim and Jean McKenna acknowledge that in 1980 they never thought The Coffee Pot Restaurant would reach the big 4-0.



Jean McKenna, right, serves longtime friends Kathy Ross, left, and Janice Nute Severance, at The Coffee Pot Restaurant, which McKenna owns with her husband, Jim, and which celebrates 40 years in Littleton.

PHOTO BY ROBERT BLECHL

"I would have said more like 10," said Jean. Statistically, restaurants have a life expectancy of 10 to 15 years, said Jim.

He remembers friends Denny Fekay, who owns Topic of the Town restaurant across the street, and Rocky Porfido coming in during the early days.

"They never came out and said it, but I think they gave me six months and I'd be gone," said Jim.

At about the 10-year mark, Jean said she remembers another local business owner, Bruce Hadlock, coming in and saying it's probably time to sell.

But they kept on.

"I just enjoyed it," said Jean.

"It's all in greeting people," said Jim.

Tucked into a cozy space at 30 Main St. in the heart of downtown, The Coffee Pot offers made-to-order breakfast all day as well as sandwiches and soups.

In 1980, Jim McKenna was an auto body technician at car dealerships in Massachusetts when, in March of that year, he swung a 180, went north to Littleton, where he lived as a kid, and bought the existing Coffee Pot, then a small coffee and doughnut shop with 12 stools and a counter.

Soon, with the help of his wife, Jean, a Littleton native whom he met a month later and married that fall, The Coffee Pot Restaurant was expanded to a cafe and all-day breakfast restaurant.

"We have the bottomless cup," said Jim, referring to unlimited free refills of coffee after a customer pays for the first cup. "It worked. Somebody once said, 'Jesus, you're going to go out of business.' They laughed, but now everyone is doing it."

The McKennas redesigned the restaurant's layout, expanding it to its current 29 seats.

Jim recalls the high counter and high stools that they took out for the redesign and that had wrapped around much of the space.

"Little old ladies would ask me to help them up on the stools, and when they were done, would ask me to help them back down," he said.

From the outset, the McKennas had a division of labor.

Jim, the McKenna out back, has done the purchasing, and before semi-retiring in 1998, he did the cooking, which he picked up along the way without formal training.

Jean, the McKenna out front, greets the customers.

In the mid-1980s, they opened a second Coffee Pot in Holderness and ran it for two years before deciding to put their sole focus on the Littleton Coffee Pot.

Along the way, they had a son, Spenser, who went on to graduate from the Culinary Institute of America in New York after helping his parents out at The Coffee Pot Restaurant and learning the trade. He is now general manager of the Heritage Brewery in Washington, D.C.

In the 2018-2019 Caledonian-Record and Littleton Record Reader's Choice, The Coffee Pot Restaurant was selected by customers as the best coffee shop in northern New Hampshire and second in best breakfast and waitstaff.

During the years, the menu has expanded to include all the breakfast dishes you can think of, sandwiches ranging from corned beef to egg salad, turkey or tuna to vegetarian, and hot homemade soups, along with desserts that include fresh pies, sundaes and milkshakes.

Specialties include half a sandwich and half a soup as well as baked beans and franks.

There are 10-percent weekday discounts, too, from 2 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday on the entire menu.

Gift certificates are also available.

Hours are 6:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday, 6:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday, and Sunday breakfast from 6:30 a.m. to noon.

The Coffee Pot Restaurant employs a staff of eight who Jean and Jim said make the restaurant work and hum along.

Jean herself is up at 2:30 each morning to get there at about 3:45.

It's a labor of love.

"I love it because of the interaction with people," she said. "I love greeting people and hearing how they're doing."

Jean and Jim have seen generations of customers come in, some decades ago with baby bumps who now have children in college or are now grandparents.

"Now, their children are bringing their children, and it's delightful," said Jean.

Along with the people, Jim enjoyed the cooking.

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"Food is an expression," he said. "Everybody does it differently."

The restaurant counter has become a popular gathering place in Littleton.

"It's therapy in the morning," said Jim. "One person around the counter says something and that gets everyone laughing and gets them ready for the day. There's always someone laughing."

Longtime customers Kathy Ross, of Littleton, and Janice Nute Severance, who grew up in Littleton, were chatting with Jean on March 3.

"We've been coming here forever," said Ross.

Jim and Jean reflected on the decades of service.

"I just never thought it would go by that fast," said Jim. "I just hope the next 40 years will be as good as the last."

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Jean and Jim McKenna now (above) and then (below).



40 YEARS

Deep Roots Keep Houghton's Growing Strong

BY DANA GRAY
Staff Writer

LYNDON — Bruce Houghton's business on the Red Village Road has been growing for 40 years. The proof is in the planting.

Houghton, 66, owns and operates Houghton's Greenhouses, offering annual flowers, geraniums, perennials, hanging baskets and vegetable plants. It's a business that's gone from an 8'x16' addition to his home to roughly 30,000 square feet of growing space.

Located at 2937 Red Village Road Houghton's is a destination for customers for just over two months



PHOTOS BY DANA GRAY

Bruce Houghton, owner of Houghtons Greenhouses, passes through one of the greenhouses between tables of plants on Thursday, March 5, 2020. Though still winter, workers are busy at the business preparing for the seasonal sales period.

each year from the end of April to early in July. Getting there requires a drive of just over three miles from Route 5 in Lyndonville. Parking is on both sides of Red Village Road and spaces are crowded with cars on certain holiday weekends. In particular, the blooming business is booming for Mother's Day and Memorial Day.

"We sell more hanging baskets [on Mother's Day] than at any other time," said Houghton.

The business also helps to beautify local towns as Houghton's flowering plants can be found in towns like St. Johnsbury and Littleton.

Houghton said Littleton's big box stores selling plants serve as competition for his business but he said even people closer to those stores make the further drive to Houghton's.

"At any given time if you have more than one or two cars in the driveway it's likely you'll have a New Hampshire car there," he said. "We draw a pretty significant clientele even with driving across the river and paying sales tax from New Hampshire."

Houghton offered a reason why customers would make an extra effort to get to his greenhouses.

"We give attention and detail to quality," he said. "We're fairly particular on how we do the stuff. Not everything always comes out perfect but that's our goal."

Preparations for the selling season are underway as workers are seeding, potting and positioning plants for good growth in time for opening day, April 25. Snow covers the ground outside while the greenhouses are warm with the tropical temperatures inside where the business's literal growth takes place. At full strength, Houghton's employs about 20 people full and part-time.

"We have several [employees] come back from year to year and they make it happen," he said. "It's pretty impressive some of the things they do over time."

Seeds Sown For The Budding Business

Houghton grew up on a dairy farm in Kirby where he got his first chance to grow things for sale. More than 40 years ago, he was working at Northeast Tool and built his home on Red Village Road.

"When I built my house I built a very small greenhouse to start my vegetable plants," he said.

About that time, a coworker suggested he try to sell some produce to workers at Northeast Tool. The man's father had been doing that for several years and had decided to stop that particular year.

"So I said that will give me a chance to make a

little extra money," said Houghton.

That opportunity unfortunately closed to Houghton before it began.

"The man's father did it anyway so I didn't have a market," he said. "So I put an ad in the newspaper and put a jar outside the door and surprisingly people bought plants."

That response was the root of what would become Houghton's business.

"The following year I did some makeshift greenhouses over by my house and we added pansies, marigolds and petunias and people came and bought 'em," he said. "I really didn't have a lot of idea of what I was doing and we learned a lot the first year, and it went well enough so we did it again and over the course of the years we've added greenhouses."

There's now 14 greenhouses on Houghton's land. He still lives in the home he built with his wife, Judith. They have seven children who have all been involved with the business.

Early on as Houghton learned the skills needed to operate a commercial greenhouse business, the importance of safeguarding the health of the plant became paramount.

"We started off kind of blind that first couple of years even with the big greenhouse and even with fertilizing and so on, and I got pointed in the direction of some trades meetings," he said. "The first slide of the presentation was a water hose lying on the ground and a dead plant beside it."

The presentation focused on the pathogens that can damage plants.

"I took that very seriously," he said. "It's not that some sort of contamination happens and the plant screams and wilts up and dies; it just may never quite perform the way it should."

After 40 years, Houghton said the business still requires vigilance and improvements.

"Over the years it's a constant learning process as far as how to produce the plants, to make a good hearty, healthy plant and how to deal with diseases as they crop up," he said. "It's just kind of an on-going process."

The most recent significant upgrade at Houghton's was a recent lighting change for better efficiency and good growth.

"This past year we phased out the last of the fluorescent grow lights and grow racks and we now have very efficient LED lights which have more suitable spectrum," he said.

Houghton said he doesn't expect any major chang-

es to the operation in the future.

"We kind of got to a size where it would be too much to manage much more," he said. "It's pretty overwhelming to do what we have now."

He currently has no plan for the future beyond his ownership.

"I'm 66 and can't do it forever," he said.

For now, what he and his crew are doing seems to be working.

Wrote one customer in a social media post, "I wouldn't go anywhere else! I've purchased all of my flowers and plants here for several years now. Beautiful flowers. Huge selection and the best customer service. Two green thumbs up!"

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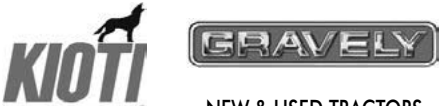
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PHOTOS BY DANA GRAY

Above: Jay Morgan, left, and Brandon Kittredge-Deth move a cart carrying pots of planting soil to a greenhouse at Houghtons Greenhouses in Lyndon on Thursday, March 5, 2020. Below: Houghton's Greenhouse workers Kate Abrams, left, and Jean Paulsen, plant seeds on Feb. 19, 2020 to get things growing for this year's 40th season of the Lyndon business.



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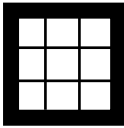
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40 YEARS

East Burke Market Serves In Heart Of Community

BY ROSIE SMITH
Staff Writer

East Burke Market will be celebrating 40 years of operation in 2020, and co-owner Kellie Greer has been there through 22 years of the market's success.

On May 28, 2019, Kellie and Burton Hinton, her boyfriend and business partner, became the new owners of East Burke Market, which services a busy community, providing for skiers enjoying the slopes of Burke Mountain, snowmobilers, and mountain bikers who traverse the network of trails offered through Kingdom Trails.

The community-oriented market has a history of local owners, starting with Stanley Switzer, who



Burton Hinton and Kellie Greer, since May 2019, are the newest owners of East Burke Market.

“Winter sports have always been really big business in the village, and when Kingdom Trails started up, things really took off,” said Kellie. “The summer months are crazy with bikers.”

built the market in its current spot, where a local bar stood before being destroyed by fire in 1978.

The ownership line continued with Ralph Temple; then his son and daughter-in-law, Dave and Joanne Temple.

Jim and Julie Hinman followed in 1998, and during their ownership, Kellie was brought on board as an employee.

The Hinman's sold the business to Jodi Fried and Billy Turner. It changed hands again in 2008, purchased by Bill and Carolyn Quirk, before being acquired last year by Kellie and Burton.

Kellie observed that she's lasted longer than the owners, adding “people paid good money for me, and got the store for free!”

The Hinmans and the Quirks were responsible for a lot of changes in the store, to improve traffic for customers.

“Winter sports have always been really big business in the village, and when Kingdom Trails started up, things really took off,” said Kellie. “The summer months are crazy with bikers.” Although KT is going through growing pains — Kellie said they are right in the middle of the drama — the Winter Bike Fest held recently went really well — according to Kellie, the problem of biker traffic was more organized.

During the winter, skiers and snowmobilers create a steady stream at the gas pumps. Kellie works with her supplier, Alliance Global Fuel Company to make sure there's never a shortage of gas for clientele.

Kellie became interested in purchasing the business about six years ago, when Bill Quirk started talking about selling.

Burton, who owns a farm in Westmore, decided he wanted to do something different than farming. As Kellie puts it, “I had the know-how, he had the cash.” Kellie said she has been around long enough to watch it all, since she was in charge for many years.

Burton works a 40-hour week with the Town of Westmore, plowing, sanding, etc., then comes to the store on Fridays to help stock shelves and get ready for the weekends.

The biggest challenge in running the store is finding help. Kellie said, “Help is hard to find — good help is even harder.” She also pointed out — referring to a recent vote in Montpelier — that if the minimum wage keeps going up, being raised to \$15, she won't be able to hire as many people.

Currently, the store has 13 employees. Kellie has at least two people working during each shift.

Burton still hays in the summer, and really enjoys working for the Town of Westmore, where he has good benefits. But if he and Kellie can't get the help they need for the store, he will have to give that up, which he really doesn't want to do.

Kellie and Burton are members of the Vermont Retail & Grocers Association, that recently met with legislators at the statehouse in Montpelier. A lot of concerns were put forth to legislators, one of them being that it would not just be a raise to \$15 per hour, but the other expenses tied to it — including more taxes — that is going to really hurt small businesses. Kellie said that VRGA does a good job of keeping her posted on political activity in Montpelier that would affect Vermont businesses.

Associated Grocers of New England, a retailer-owned, wholesale grocery distribution center, makes food deliveries to East Burke Market on Thursdays. Specialty products are delivered different times throughout the week. The market sells a lot of local products, including fresh baked items from Hollyberry's, maple syrup (three vendors are suppliers) and fresh produce. The market also offers a variety of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream products. Lunch specials are available Monday through Friday, and a variety of meats are offered in the deli.



Kellie Greer, at left, co-owner of East Burke Market, is shown with long-time employee, Pam Anketell. Pam has been working at the store for nine years. (Photo By Rosie Smith)

East Burke Market also features an expanded collection of craft beers, including Heady Topper, Focal Banger and Sip of Sunshine. There is also a huge selection of wine, some made locally, which Kellie and Burton are looking to expand.

For future improvements, Kellie and Burton hope to purchase bigger walk-in coolers, which will help them to expand their offerings of craft beers, seltzers and hard cider. “We're trying to do the little things while not breaking the bank,” said Kellie.

East Burke Market has a long reputation of providing reliable service to its community members and tourism clientele. Kellie wants to keep that reputation going — “We want to keep [the market] clean and friendly,” she concluded.

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35 YEARS

Big Wheels Keep Turning At Quest Transportation

BY TODD WELLINGTON
Staff Writer

35 years ago St. Johnsbury resident Jeff Moore turned some bad luck into a golden opportunity. The result has been Quest Transportation – a leader in the freight logistics business – which now operates globally from its Route 5 headquarters.

“I had been working for a trucking company based out of New Jersey at the Wells River terminal,” said Moore. “It was during a time when there was a major transition in the trucking industry and many companies were going out of business. I found myself out of a job when this company closed its doors and decided I would try becoming an independent repre-



“This will sound like a cliché but quite honestly our success is from having great employees who are loyal, dedicated and committed to our company’s success,” said company founder Jeff Moore.

sentative selling freight for long-haul trucking companies out of the Midwest. From there I transitioned into applying to the federal government for my own operating authority as a freight broker and in 1987 I started moving freight under my own operating authority. Pretty much the rest is history.”

Quest Transportation now serves customers in 48 states (not Hawaii or Alaska), Canada and Mexico. They don’t own the trucks but are instead a pure logistics company that works with shippers and manufacturers.

“In other words, when a company needs to ship their product they would call us and we would source it with a trucking company that best fits our customer’s requirements,” said Moore. “The goal is to provide shipping solutions for our customers at competitive price while exceeding their service expectations.”

The company, which has nine employees, is operated by Moore and his husband Michael Robey

along with manager Tony Higgs. Higgs joined the company a decade ago.

“He and Michael pretty much manage the daily operations of the company, however, we all frequently talk about strategies for growth and expansion,” said Moore.

While Quest has stood the test of time Moore said the freight logistics business has changed dramatically over the years.

“When I started Quest back in 1985 there were less than 2,000 freight brokers nationwide,” said Moore. “Today there are probably closer to 50,000. Fortunately, we have stayed on top of the technology curve in this business which is giving us a competitive edge...I was reflecting the other day how quiet it was in our office as I was sitting there, realizing that the old days of picking up the phone and talking to people don’t exist anymore. We all communicate via text message, emails or other non-verbal means.”

Moore also owns Wells River Chevrolet in Wells

River and co-owns Pellets Now with Robey. Moore has used his success to support several local organizations and serves on several non-profit boards. He has also served for several years as a St. Johnsbury Select Board member.

“I have a personal philosophy of giving back to the community that has supported me,” said Moore, who was born and raised in St. Johnsbury.

Moore said the secret to Quest’s success is no secret at all.

“This will sound like a cliché but quite honestly our success is from having great employees who are loyal, dedicated and committed to our company’s success,” said Moore.

Further information is available at www.quest-trans.com.

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Pick and Shovel pet shop manager Cindy Merrill holds up a tortoise. (Photo by Robin Smith)

Pick & Shovel Shop Sustains Generations Of Family Pets

BY ROBIN SMITH
Staff Writer

NEWPORT CITY — Three decades ago, Tim Hamblett of Pick and Shovel in Newport City approached Doreen Cleveland who had operated a pet store in Orleans.

He bought her inventory, and moved her shop right into Pick and Shovel, says Greg Hamblett.

Cleveland agreed to run the pet shop as well, beginning what turned out to be 30 years of pet shop service at the Hamblett family’s iconic department store on Coventry Street.

The pet shop on the second floor of Pick and Shovel, easily accessible via the new elevator or the broad stairs, features all manner of pets.

Cleveland retired. Now pet shop manager Cindy Merrill is celebrating her own milestone, 10 years of operating the pet shop.

A dairy farmer, Merrill brings her love and interest in large animals into the small animal pet shop.

In one corner, a white and blond guinea pig agreed to be held, showing off the cute face that has made guinea pigs a classic pet for youngsters.

In a glass enclosure across the large room, Merrill holds up a young tortoise about eight inches long. The tortoise tolerated being held but wasn’t thrilled with the flash of a camera.

This species of tortoise can live 40 years and grow to 12 inches, Merrill said.

This handsome specimen, a vegetarian, is picky about his food. He likes his summer squash first, and then eats his greens. Merrill said he will come back later for the diced carrots.

He disdained to eat for the camera, instead stalking off toward his mock open log to sulk.

Nearby are an array of Japanese fighting fish, their feathered crests and tails ready to fluff up at the waving fingers of an onlooker.

The bird room features many species of birds, which were Cleveland’s specialty.

Interestingly, where birds were popular pets in the past, tortoises, snakes and reptiles are more common pets today, Merrill said.

In a separate room, several snakes lay curled in corners or on rocks in their enclosures.

Two baby bearded dragons, about six inches long each, perched on a log, appearing to kiss. They will grow to 18 inches, said Merrill.

In a nearby glass enclosure, a leopard gecko peeked out of his hide-hole for the camera. He appeared to be full grown, at six to eight inches long.

During the tour, a customer stopped by to pick up food for a pet snake – live mice, Merrill said. Some pets are not for the squeamish.

They stock everything that a pet owner might need for their pets, from a wide range of cat and dog toys, dishes and supplies, to aquarium decorations, cages, enclosures and other items and can order what customers need.

The pet shop is one of the many departments in Pick and Shovel, which has evolved into a classic department store that is a destination for shoppers and visitors to Newport City – especially known for its customer service.

Pick and Shovel features full service hardware, lumber and appliance shops, a maple sugaring and patio furniture barn, and a footwear and apparel store featuring popular brands like Keen and Carhartt. They make keys and have a laundromat.

And Tim and Doug’s Ice Cream Shoppe will open, where hardy locals stand in line for creamies and sundaes regardless of the spring weather.

30 YEARS

Marty's 1st Stop Can't Stop Constant Growth

BY ANDREW MCGREGOR
Staff Writer

Last month Marty's 1st Stop celebrated its 30th anniversary and at a time when one might think owner Marty Beattie might be thinking about slowing down.

He's actually planning a major expansion.

Marty's first opened in 1990, in the former Danville Garage, a service station that Beattie bought, built two modest additions on the front and back of the building and converted to a convenience store.

Since then Marty's has expanded several more times and now boasts over 8,000 square feet of retail



"I'm upper management, middle management ... but when you have 50 employees and as many customers you are answering to a lot of people."

space featuring groceries and sundries, as well as an extensive deli, meat cutting department and offerings of prepared foods like pizzas, sandwiches, soups and more, along with gas sales.

But later this spring, the store on Route 2 in Danville will add another 1,500 square feet of space when it takes over the space currently occupied by a Union Bank branch that is slated to close just before Memorial Day.

Beattie said he plans to dramatically increase his cooler space and expand his produce and frozen offerings. The expansion will take a little coordinating with the tradesmen and vendors but he anticipates the store remaining open straight through the renovation.

The remarkable growth at the store has taken a lot of hard work

"It's been a roller coaster, we've grown pretty

much constantly," said Beattie.

Over the year's Marty's staff has grown to match the store's expansion. He now employs over 50 people during his busy summer season, including some, like office manager Dawn Sullivan, who have been with him for over 20 years. What's more, Beattie estimates he has employed about 1,000 high schoolers and young adults who often work for him as their first job.

"There are times I don't even know all their names but I work at it," he said. Beattie, who is 66, has contemplated slowing down the last few years and said he has reduced his time a bit, but he's still at the store, which opens at 5:30 a.m. seven days a week, nearly every day.

"There's been growth in every direction around here," added Beattie, who has expanded his gas pumps and bought neighboring property beside and

behind his original lot over the years.

Beattie hopes to keep the focus of his business on the personal touch and the local products and produce that his customers want, including some grown on the family farm by his nephew.

"Any business has its challenges, when you are in retail it's keeping the customer happy and supplying what they want," said Beattie. "And labor always seems to be a challenge when you are open nights and weekends."

Beattie is thankful for the success he's enjoyed. "It's rare," he said of his 30 years in retail and to stay an independent store. "I'm upper management, middle management ... but when you have 50 employees and as many customers you are answering to a lot of people."

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30 YEARS

Tri-State Boring & Drilling Drills Down On Success

Three Generations In the Boring And Drilling Business

BY ROBIN SMITH
Staff Writer

WEST BURKE — Three generations of know-how make Tri-State Drilling & Boring, now celebrating 30 years in operation, a true family company. The Faulkner family's involving in water wells and drilling began long before 1990 when Neal Faulkner started Tri-State Drilling & Boring, located on Route 5 in West Burke.



Neal Faulkner, owner of Tri-State Drilling & Boring, and his dad Charles and brothers Theron and Michael, worked together for years in the industry. (Courtesy Photo)

Neal's father Charles "Charlie" Faulkner got his own start in the industry when he worked for North-East Well Drilling in the Lyndonville area, says Charlie's granddaughter Heather. Heather Faulkner, daughter of Neal, is a member of the third generation in the industry. Charlie Faulkner left Northeast Well Drilling to create his own company, Falcon Well Drilling, in 1985. Neal Faulkner and his brothers Michael and Theron worked with their father. Then Neal Faulkner bought the drill rig from his father Charlie and started his own company, Tri-State Boring & Drilling in 1990. Neal works today with daughter Heather, who runs the office and works on site as needed, and youngest son Joshua, who works with the company occasionally. Another relative Greg Chamberlain also joins the small crew as needed. Tri-State has been a true family affair, Heather says.

"I have worked her ever since I was in high school," she said. Joshua "grew up in the rig," she said. Heather took bookkeeping courses to learn to manage the books and stepped right into the operations in 2004, learning on the job. The company does projects involving water wells for residential, municipal water systems and business projects and environmental services. They also do borings to look for water and for soil testing. A full-service company, they come in once the owner has permits in place. They bore, dig trenches, lay pipe and finish the job, Heather says. They provide service for their work. They worked last fall on the water system for Newport Town. They just finished a water supply project for Owl's Nest Resort in Thornton, N.H. They worked on the power plant in Springfield, Vt.



Above: Greg Chamberlain operates equipment for Tri State Drilling and Boring at a well operation for Newport Town last fall. Below: The big red truck and drill is prominently featured on Tri State Boring & Drilling's Facebook page. (Courtesy Photo)



The company has unique equipment they made to do specialty drilling in swampy areas, drilling side-ways. "Our drilling techniques allow us to thread the needle, so to speak, in a aquifer," they say on their Facebook pages, where they have many photographs of the equipment and their crew on the job. Local folks will also know Neal Faulkner in a different capacity. He is very active in local truck pulls at fairs, Heather says. And he runs a second business, Evergreen Forest Products, a custom lumber sawmill in Sutton. Heather calls her father a "man of every trade," a knack she is following herself.

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After 25 years of working together, company co-owners Nicquelle Timson and dad, Ray Desilets, have all of the region's tennis court needs covered. (Courtesy photo)

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BY ROSIE SMITH
Staff Writer

Nicquelle Timson is no stranger to the tennis court business. When she was only a year old, she was traveling to trade shows with her father, Ray Desilets, and by the time she was a teenager in 2000, she was answering the phone for his business — Advantage Tennis, Inc. — getting her feet wet and learning the ropes.

Now she and husband Shawn are gradually taking over the business — next year 50/50, working with her dad — and the following year, the sole owners of Advantage Tennis, which is celebrating 25 years in 2020.

Ray Desilets has worked in the tennis court business since he was 18 years old, first as an employee of Vermont Tennis, before going out on his own in 1995 with friend and partner, Jeff Bitcon. Advantage Tennis, Inc. was formed — designing, painting and maintaining tennis courts and various forms of court specialties throughout Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, and even into Canada.

When Nicquelle started working for Ray, he made her learn the business from the ground up. That means she was working (and living with) her boss. She had to learn the fine line of “when you can’t tattle on employees ... when to talk, and when not to.”

Because the season is so short for the business, sometimes it’s hard to find workers, Nicquelle said. “The hours can be crazy — you don’t know when you’re going to get home at night.”

Nicquelle took over hiring employees, and began looking for help from area high school coaches, because the coaches knew who team players were among their athletes — hard-to-find young workers, who are easier to train for this specialty field, and had good work ethics.

Normally, there are 8-10 employees during the summer, with 2-3 people going to each job. Jobs are done Mondays through Fridays, not on weekends, to avoid burn-out of the employees. The truck drivers have to be over 21 and have a medical card.

The seasonal aspect of the job “makes it hard to find anyone that lasts,” said Nicquelle. “It’s great for college kids in the summer.” The down side is that Nicquelle and Shawn train employees to “do the job exactly the way you want it done, then you lose them” when the season is over.

“We care for our workers,” Nicquelle said. Water and snacks are provided at all the jobs, and close attention is paid to employees, making sure they aren’t overdoing it or getting dehydrated. It’s important for everyone to “know how to take care of each other ... and make sure they’re okay,” she added.

State of the Art Equipment

Advantage Tennis owns three tanker trucks — two hydraulic, double-tanker trucks that carry two 300-gallon tanks; each tank can be filled with its own paint color. Advantage also owns a single-tanker truck.

Two giant bulk tanks that hold paint, are at the base of operation in St. Johnsbury. The trucks are backed up to the bulk tanks, the paint is loaded, and then the necessary colors are added to the tanks on the trucks for the projected job site.

With this much capacity on the double tankers, Nicquelle said up to six courts can be done with each truck. Also beneficial is that the paint being

used will all come from the same batch, and the process to coat a court can go quicker. “We come in (to a job site) ... are in and out quickly. Everything is ready,” she said.

Nicquelle has been around long enough to know what’s going on with her trucks. When the season is done, the trucks are winterized. At the beginning of the season, the trucks are inspected by the DOT (Vermont’s Department of Transportation) and always get a high rating. This is an advantage at weigh stations. “They pass us on ... our trucks look nice ... and are professional,” said Nicquelle.

Shawn Timson is responsible for sales and scheduling. “He sells the job,” Nicquelle said. “He has an idea in his head” and promotes it to clients. The scheduling for projects “has to be done just right, knowing which truck goes where.”

Maintenance And Design

Besides maintaining existing courts, Advantage Tennis also designs new tennis courts, which would include drainage, logos, etc. Advantage does not do the site work — that is subcontracted out to businesses located near the building site. Then Advantage does all the painting and maintenance of the new court. A booming economy means more courts are being built, which includes summer camps, schools and private homes. Advantage Tennis deals primarily with hard-surface courts.

Advantage Tennis also creates other court designs — for examples, shuffleboard and pickle ball — either doing the designs separately or incorporating them into existing tennis courts. Nicquelle said, “as tennis has been becoming less popular, [clients] are making multi-sport facilities ... to keep young and old alike happy and using their facilities ... Especially pickle ball.” she said.

On The Surface

It’s crucial to do the work on a job site when it’s not going to rain. Today’s technology has helped with the process, as information is readily available, such as weather patterns and temperatures.

“Once you start painting, you can’t stop,” Nicquelle said. “You’re out there for three hours or more ... you can’t stop ... each tennis court is about four miles of walking.” Plus you have to do two coats of paint.

The process of refurbishing a court begins with measuring out lines with chalk. After the chalk lines are drawn, a machine is used to lay down tape as a guide for the filling in the lines. Then acrylic paint, mixed with sand, is applied to the court; blue and green being the most popular colors. The paint is applied using giant squeegees. The outside lines are painted by hand. Leather sneakers are worn to paint the courts; otherwise the paint will go right through the shoe.

“Coating is my happy place,” said Nicquelle. “My office is in nature — it’s different every day.”

The weather is key. In warm (or sometimes hot) weather, the paint dries right away. Then a second coat can be applied. “If the paint is still wet, and it rains, you lose it all,” said Nicquelle. “When it is warm enough, it dries right behind you ... you can see the steam coming off the paint when it’s really hot,” she said.

Another “Advantage”

“This business is about shaping young adults, teaching them business ethics, and to be good workers,” Nicquelle said. “We pray with the employees before beginning the day ... Our clients like to do business with a Christian company.”



Nicquelle uses a giant squeegee to paint the surface of one of her tennis court projects.

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25 YEARS

AquaRealm Provides Generations Of Loving Pet Care

BY STEPHEN GARFIELD
Staff Writer

ST. JOHNSBURY — When it comes to changing trends and adapting to industry trends, the pet supply business is no different from any other.

That's what AquaRealm Aquarium and Pets owner DJ Nelson has found 25 years after he started AquaRealm. It's always been located in St. Johnsbury, and for the past decade-plus in its present spot at the Railroad Street/Route 5 intersection, tucked between Kingdom Crust and Twin State Ford at 1216 Railroad St.

It started as Hodge Podge, opening for business in 1995 on Main Street. It moved to DJ's parent's home for a spell and then came the name change and move to downtown Railroad Street. It has been at its current location further north on Railroad Street for nearly three years.

The last word in the name of the business is as pertinent as the first. "We get a lot of aquarium-oriented people, but we cater to all pets," DJ said. "We do a lot with exotics as well, [such as], fish, reptiles, birds, and other small animals."

"Our dog and cat business is expanding, and work is being done on Sunday [Feb. 23] to expand that section to do more with kennels, beds, grooming supplies, dog food. We're also working on our small-animal section ... it's a constant thing. We're



Above: A ferret buddies up with AquaRealm Aquarium and Pets owner DJ Nelson. Below: Nelson shows off other animals for sale at the store.



always expanding, doing more, doing better.

"As a small business we can adjust quicker to what the trends are or what people are needing," he said.

Education is a key part of how AquaRealm rolls, he said. "It's a big part of what we do. We're not about the sale; we're about the education. Working with the animals is important both to me and my staff. We don't want to just make the sale; 'is this

"Once we're open, customers are really important and hold a high priority, but between the animal and the customer, it's the animal for me..."

pet the right one for this customer, or is there another that might work better for them.' Sending them home with an animal they're happy with, that'll fit their home, their lifestyle – that's what we want.

"Once we're open, customers are really important and hold a high priority, but between the animal and the customer, it's the animal for me. Over the years every customer has been appreciative, been thankful for that. We've had people come from out-of-state to do business with us, because they've heard about our reputation of animals being important."

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