

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

Staying Small

**SUBSTITUTE EQUIPMENT FOR LABOR
CEMETERY PRESENTS HUGE CHALLENGES
THREE-STEP APPROACH TO SUCCESS
EMPHASIS ON MAINTENANCE**

VOL. 14

WALKER TALK

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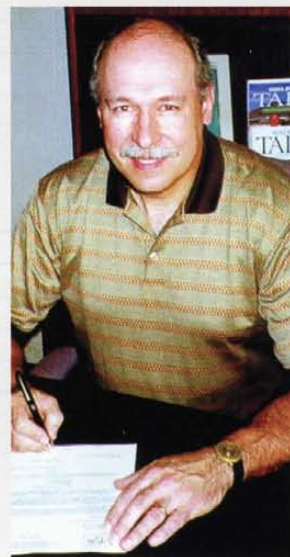


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A CELEBRATING COMPANY

It is part of our company culture to celebrate. We celebrate reaching a milestone, company goal or achievement. In the earlier years the company supplied a special "snack" during Friday afternoon break for everyone when another 100 mowers had been produced — it used to take several weeks. Today, we celebrate hitting our production goals every other week on Friday afternoon.

We have celebrated reaching annual production and sales goals with company lunches "on the grounds." Producing the 5,000th, 10,000th and 25,000th mowers have been marked by a celebration.



We celebrated when our factory mortgage was paid off, and when each employee reached 10- and 20-year anniversaries. There is a plaque in our office that recognizes employees with perfect attendance for a year (seven last year).

Why bother? The fiscal conservative would say, "These parties are costing too much time and money." In our thinking, a celebration is a "party with a purpose" in three ways:

- Celebration is the result of goal setting and goal reaching, and goal setting is a vital company activity (without goals a company will perish).

- Celebration energizes, completes goal setting and striving to reach the goal, and helps start the next cycle (what is our next goal?).

- Celebration reinforces the teamwork aspect of a company where individuals recognize their part in reaching company goals, and realize they were able to accomplish more for themselves by working together in a company than working individually.

You will notice elsewhere in this issue the announcement of our 50,000th mower celebration. We are giving plenty of advance notice, hoping many of you will plan to join us in Colorado in August 2000 to make this a great celebration. It will truly be a celebration of the "Walker Mower Family."

Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President

I need to make a profit, but I don't need to get any bigger." Sound familiar? It should. That's a tune many small and medium-size contractors play over and over again as they work to keep the lid on both growth and the jar that holds the profit.

In this case, Mark Byrne is the composer of the lyrics. And his business, Mark's Pro Services in Dayton, Minnesota (a Minneapolis suburb), is the band. Three of the key instruments just happen to be Walker Mowers.

This contractor's reason for not growing is straightforward. As he puts it, he "doesn't want to have the headaches." So he works with only two employees most of the growing season and adds two more when the cycle gets real busy. With their help, he maintains more than a dozen commercial properties and one large association for a total of 215 customers.

For a small operation, he doesn't do badly, although he prefers not to divulge his actual earnings. The revenue comes primarily from maintenance, including mowing, trimming, pruning (trees 20 feet high or less), and some installation of shrubs and flower beds.

He subcontracts fertilizing, major landscaping, irrigation and snow removal, which means he can promote full service without supporting the overhead. He has

worked with many of the contractors for years; two from day one.

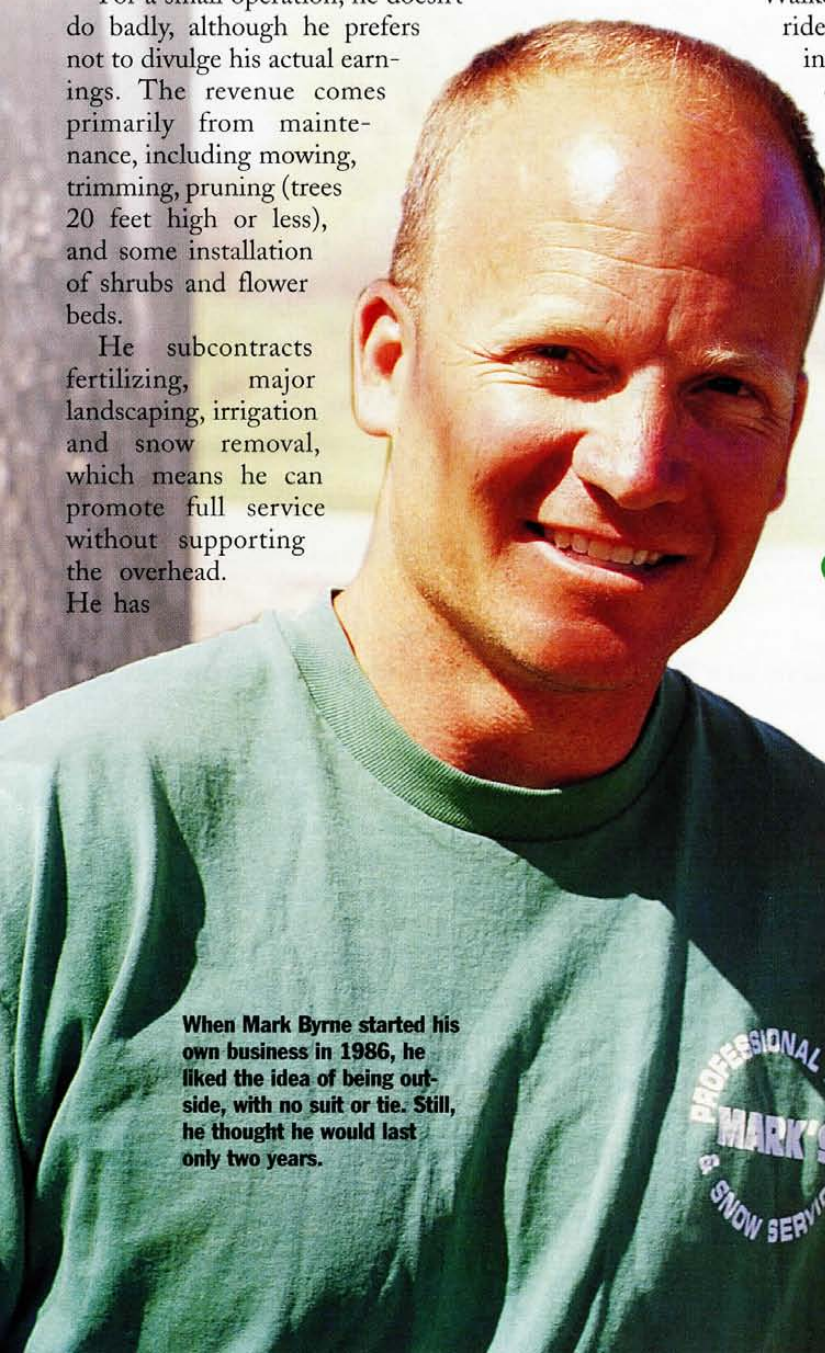
Byrne started his business in 1986 after receiving a two-year associate of arts degree in sales and marketing, and spending two years in the Army. After getting out of the Army, an association asked him to do some mowing. He's been mowing ever since.

"I liked the idea of being outside; no suit, no tie," he remembers. "So I decided to do this full time, thinking I would last probably two years."

That first year, he purchased a lawn and garden tractor and hauled it around with a pickup and trailer. "Nothing fancy," he says. The modest rig helped generate between \$25,000 to \$30,000.

Two years later, he went to a home and garden show and saw his first Walker. At the time, there weren't many Walkers around Minneapolis, he recalls. He took it for a ride, and despite not being used to the responsive steering, thought the mower would help him out. To find out for sure, he used the mower for a half day at one of his sites. That convinced him this was the machine for him.

Today, Mark's Pro Services employs three Walker Mowers, two 20- and one 25-hp models, all with Kohler engines. Each is equipped with a 54-inch side-discharge deck and a 48-inch GHS deck. His lineup also includes two Toro intermediate walk-behinds for hill work, a John Deere



"I have my own little business going"

lawn and garden tractor for larger field areas and a few 21-inch mowers.

"If I didn't have the Walkers, I wouldn't be where I am today," Byrne relates. "For what I do, this machine is the

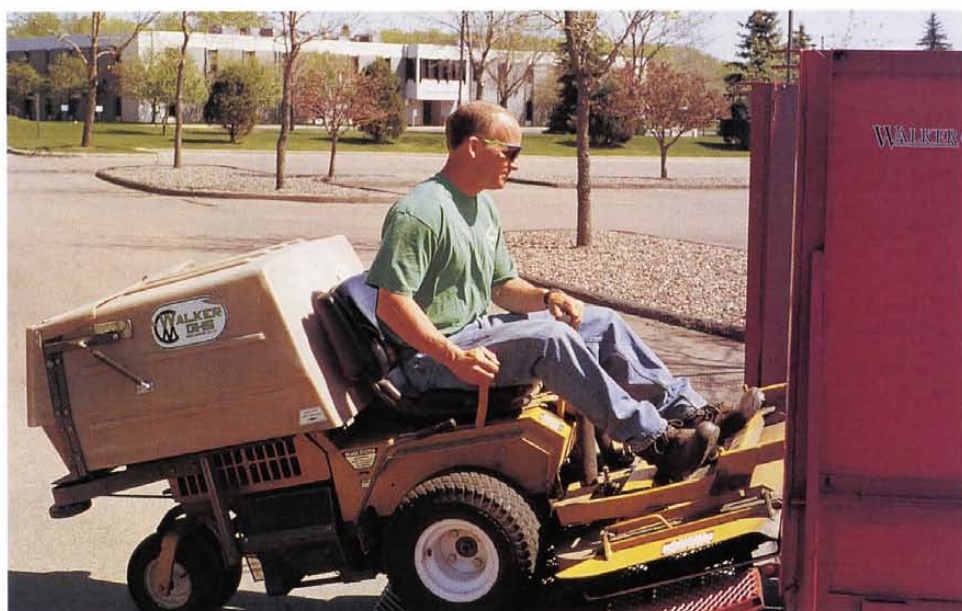
When Mark Byrne started his own business in 1986, he liked the idea of being outside, with no suit or tie. Still, he thought he would last only two years.



Mark Byrne (left) with mower operator Tim McGowan. With two employees and the right equipment, this operator makes quick work of his accounts and keeps headaches to a minimum.

answer. My properties are smaller so maneuverability is a big thing. And you really can't beat the cut you get when using the collection system. And you can back right in the trailer, dump and pull right out." Just the ticket for a small operation that needs to get a lot of work done, he adds.

Byrne says he has looked at a lot of equipment over the years and nothing really matches up to the Walker. He shudders to think about the intermediate equipped with a collection system he tried out. "I would work at Home Depot before I would wrestle with that setup," he says. "I wouldn't have a choice because I wouldn't be able to get anyone to work for me."



"If I didn't have the Walkers, I wouldn't be where I am today."

PRICE VS. VALUE

Owning three Walkers may seem like a lot of expense for a small operator, yet Byrne emphasizes there is a difference between what a machine costs and what its value is to a business.

"Four or five years ago, a friend of mine purchased a mower based on price. I told him at the time, the Walker was the machine he needed. But he was convinced the less expensive machine would get the job done. Well, it didn't. And worse yet, he couldn't sell it. He just bought a 25-hp Walker and couldn't be happier."

Again, it's the value a machine delivers and not the original price, he re-emphasizes. Where does the Walker

Mower's value come in for this operator?

"I like its simplicity, its cut and its comfort," he tells. "Its compact size also means there is no problem getting it on a trailer." Byrne says he likes the warranty. And if a unit happens to go down, his dealer, Midwest Specialty Sales, gives him a demo, not to mention overall good service. The Walkers also cut down on the trimming he does with the 21-inch mowers. That saves on both labor and expense.

There is another factor about operating a Walker, Byrne adds. "It's hard to document, but I truly believe the mowers generate sales. Property managers see the striping

effect left by a Walker and they want their properties to look the same way. For smaller properties, he adds, a Walker Mower is less obtrusive than many of the bigger riding mowers.

For little instruments, Mark's Pro Services' Walkers appear to make a lot of noise. But they're only part of the band and part of the reason for Byrne's success.

BIGGER PICTURE OUTLOOK

There's no question, Byrne is in business to make a profit. Who isn't? But he tempers the temptation to make more money by an overall satisfaction with his current size. He says, for example, that being small allows him to deliver superior service to his customers; he can respond quickly and he usually does within 10 minutes of a message on his digital beeper.

Being a smaller operator also allows him to get closer to employees and their families. In fact, he says he literally grows his employees by getting to know their families, and hiring their brothers and sisters when they get old enough to work. To keep employees happy on the job he does something unusual; he takes turns using the equipment. One day, for example, he'll use a Walker and another day he may operate a walk-behind.

Being small isn't about lacking professionalism, either. Byrne says he takes pride in being very service-oriented. His equipment always looks good; he blows the mowers off at the end of every workday and power washes them every month. And employees are always in uniform.

He also does his civic duty by volunteering his maintenance services. From time to time you'll see his crew

cleaning up a city park, trimming a curb, mowing a boulevard or pruning a hedge. The action makes for good public relations. It also makes a statement that although he's a businessman, he's also a member of the community and takes pride in the way it looks.

So Byrne wonders why a small operator like himself would ever be profiled in *Walker Talk*. The answer is simple. Yes, many small operators don't have the same challenges that big ones do, but all operators need to make a profit, need to operate good equipment and need to operate professionally to be successful. And even big operators were small once upon a time.

Reading about one today may serve to not only bring back memories, but to remind them that big isn't better if the little things that allowed them to grow get swept away with the growth tide. **WT**

Running a profitable business

Mark Byrne has a few tricks up his sleeve to ensure his business turns a profit. Here are a few of them:

1. Stays within his niche. Mark's Pro Services targets 40,000- to 60,000-square-foot properties. That size suits his equipment line and his labor. Small residential properties are too competitively priced and he doesn't have the resources to maintain large industrial/commercial sites.

2. Stays within his geography. Byrne's properties are located within a 46-mile loop. If the property falls outside the loop, he won't offer his services.

3. Stays efficient. When the crew gets to a location, everyone knows what to do, says Byrne. An efficient routine facilitates production and enhances the bottom line. Among other efficiencies, trimmers are spooled and equipment is fueled the night before.

4. Stays with his subcontractors. Subcontractors are an extension of the contractor's business. Finding and staying with reputable ones will go a long way toward building a long-lasting and profitable relationship with customers.

5. Stays in contact. No matter how long a property has been a customer, Byrne makes a point to either call or personally visit the property contact at least once a month.



Property managers who see the Walker's striping effect want their properties to look the same way, tells Byrne. That means the Walker is not only for you — it is selling jobs, too.

Labor shortage puts emphasis on equipment

Ask virtually any lawn maintenance contractor in the country what his or her major challenge is and the answer will be ... labor? With nearly every state having the lowest unemployment rate in decades, and the call for landscaping and maintenance on the rise, contractors large and small are looking for innovative ways to solve their labor dilemma.

Without enough qualified employees, the road to growth is all but blocked. Training is becoming more expensive and time-consuming. And when new employees are found, they often leave before owners can reap the benefits of this training.

What is a contractor to do? The industry is pooling ideas. Among them are:

- Suggestions for revamping immigration laws to allow access to more Hispanic workers
- Increasing the hourly job rate so employees can be paid more
- Exploring other labor resources, i.e. retired workers.

No doubt all will be needed to bring the labor market back to landscaping. But even if it comes back and laborers become plentiful, the challenge will still be there. Labor is the most expensive component of any landscape or maintenance company.

MAKING THE MOST OF IT

By and large, the most successful (and profitable) operators are those who find ways to use labor to their advantage. Employees are trained for specific jobs so they can be as productive as possible. Expensive employee downtime is kept to a minimum. And employee hours are meticulously tracked to ensure 1) workers are making the best use of their time and that 2) customers are being billed for this time.

GROW

Without enough qualified employees, the road to growth is all but blocked.

FIVE WAYS A WALKER BRIGHTENS YOUR EMPLOYEE OUTLOOK

1. Reduces mowing time — reduces labor requirements
2. Eliminates trimming — eliminates need for a trimmer operator
3. Comfortable, easy to operate — broadens the range of prospective operators
4. Rugged construction, less downtime — more employee uptime
5. Easy to maintain — reduces maintenance time



Successful companies are also finding ways to substitute equipment for muscle power. That doesn't necessarily mean they're buying bigger mowers so operators can mow faster, or jumping into the rider market because riding is easier than walking. No, successful companies are making sure the equipment they have matches the application so employees make the best use of their time and jobs get completed well within budget.

In these pages, we've often discussed the advantages of using a Walker Mower, many of which relate directly or indirectly to the labor issue. Walker Mowers are compact and maneuverable (reduced trimming time), they're rugged (less downtime), and they're comfortable and easy to operate (employees like to use them).

But rarely do we put a pencil to the actual number of hours a Walker can save an operator. And time saved is not only money earned; it's also employee hours saved. That means owners with a new Walker can generate the same amount of work as before with fewer employees, or generate more work with the same number. Either way, they're using employees to their best advantage. And that spells success.

PUTTING THE WALKER TO THE TEST

Last year, we asked an Illinois landscape contractor to compare mowing times using five lawn mowers on an identical test plot. He was to mow the 18,195.4-square-foot area on five successive Thursdays.

It took the contractor 52 minutes, 51 seconds to mow the area with a brand name garden tractor equipped with a 48-inch deck and grass collection system. It took him 50 minutes, 22 seconds to mow it with a popular 48-inch zero-turn rider, again equipped with a collection system. And it took him 47 minutes, 43 seconds to complete the job with a 48-inch intermediate walk-behind with a collection system.

A Walker Mower equipped with a 42-inch Grass Handling System mowed the test plot in 43 minutes, 10 seconds. A Walker Mower equipped with a 48-inch GHS system did the same plot in 30 minutes, 50 seconds.

The test time did not account for the additional trimming required by the other three mowers.

Now this may seem like a promotional stunt, but it wasn't. The test plot was configured to reflect a typical mowing scenario, with a fair amount of both open space and landscaping obstacles.

After talking with literally thousands of customers over the years, we know that Walker Mowers save on mowing time. We just didn't realize how dramatic these savings were until we conducted the test.

The point is this: In the right application — when you have a lot of ground to cover and a lot of landscape elements to mow around — Walker Mowers will get the job done faster, up to 20 minutes or more per job faster according to the study. In the bigger picture, the comparison showed the Walker could save the landscaper up to three hours mowing time in an eight-hour work day. Again, this time doesn't reflect trimming time.

That's at least three additional man-hours per day, and probably more to be put to use any way you see fit. At a minimum, that's saving money and labor, with an emphasis on labor.

Today's labor shortage may be putting the spotlight on creative ways to find and retain workers. But it's also bringing to light the importance of matching your equipment to the application.

Contractors who use the most efficient equipment for the job will not only get the job done faster, they will be making the best use of their labor at a time when labor has truly become a driving force behind both profitability and growth. **WT**

WALKER

FACES BEHIND THE WALKER NAME

For years, Walker customers have received a production sheet with each employee's name and signature on it. But over the years customers have asked, "Who are these people?"

This issue of WALKER TALK features the second stop in a five-part series that's introducing readers to the "Faces Behind the Walker Name."

Piecing it together ...

Welding

Quality craftsmanship is a staple of Walker Mfg. As a sample of this quality, one should take a close look at the quality of the welding on the Walker Mower. In this era of robotic and machine welding, Walker Mfg. believes that its product is best welded by the hands of able craftsmen. Each weld on the Walker Mower is hand-placed by one of Walker's 28 skilled welders using wire-feed MIG welding machines.

THE ULTIMATE COMPLIMENT

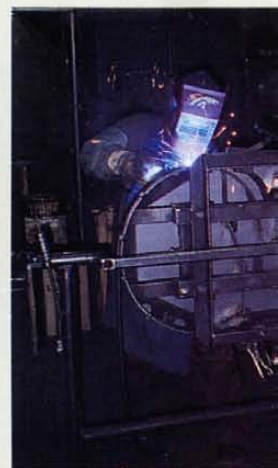
This story came from a Walker dealer in Memphis, Tennessee. At a trade show, a deaf man entered the dealer's booth and began to look the mowers over carefully. After running his hand around various areas of the tractor body and under the mower deck, the man took a notebook out of his pocket and wrote, "Nice welds." With his curiosity piqued, the dealer wrote back, "What do you know about welding?" The man proudly scribed on the pad, "I am a master welder for Boeing Aircraft." What a compliment!

1999 WALKER

Your Walker Man

Paul Lefort
William Young
Steve Gillis
Johnny Clark
Dan Updike
John Grisavage, Jr.
Wesley Baldessare
Joshua

Paul Lefort, Production Manager
 William Young, Fabrication Supervisor
 Steve Gillis, Parts Fabrication
 Johnny Clark, Parts Fabrication
 Dan Updike, Parts Fabrication
 John Grisavage, Jr., Parts Fabrication
 Wesley Baldessare, Parts Fabrication
 Joshua, Parts Fabrication



Rick Quinn
Collin Jones
Al Hardwick
Johnny Heldt
Nathan Campbell
Tom Grady
Tim Case
Bret Hodsdon

(From left to right) Bottom row: Chuck Busch, Allen Maxwell, Rich Park, Sam Nicolls, Rick White
 2nd row: Gene Lawrence, Collin Jones, John Warembourg, Rich Campbell, Bret Hodsdon, Rich Nash (welding supervisor), Tim Case, Johnny Heldt, Pete Davila, Nathan Campbell, Mike Pluma
 3rd row: Tom Grady, Keith Berens, Larry Shaw, Scott Schrader, Jason King, James Galindo, Ron Crowder, Joel Eisenach, Chad Wulff
 Top row: Justin Koetter, Curt Quinn — Not pictured: Bill Buckendorf

The only way for a small company to survive in the marketplace is to have a conventional product with conventional hope to survive in the marketplace.

WELDING FACT BOX

- ✓ It would take one welder an entire day to completely weld a Walker Mower by himself
- ✓ Approximately 40,000 weldments (welded assemblies) are produced each month in the welding department
- ✓ 314 fabricated pieces are welded together to make one model MTGHS tractor
- ✓ On the average 2,520 pounds of welding wire are used per week — this equals 147 miles of wire
- ✓ Monthly consumption of shielding gases for the MIG welding process is 43,000 cubic feet of liquid argon and 3,000 pounds of carbon dioxide



KEK MOWER PRODUCTION

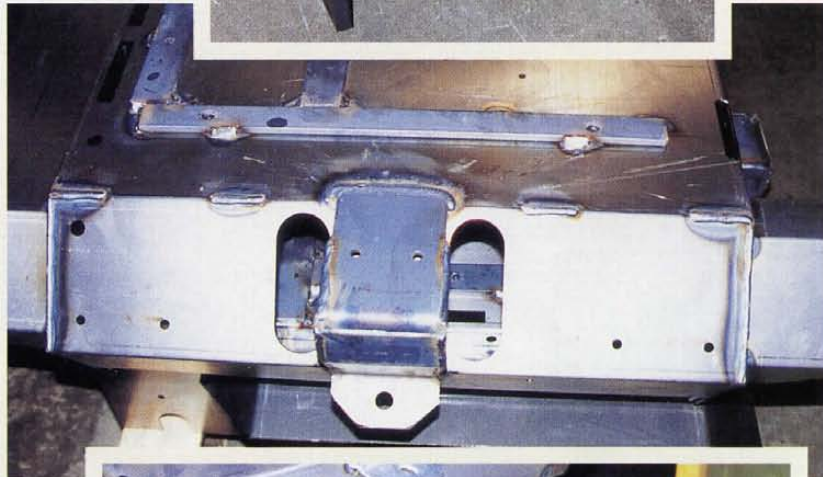
AKER MOWER
 er was built by American Craftsmen with enough pride in

Scott Schrader
Bill Buckenbush
Nicola

Scott Schrader, Sub-Assembly Weldin
Bill Buckendorf, Sub-Assembly Weldi
Sam Nicolls, Sub-Assembly Welding
Chuck Busch, Sub-Assembly Weldin



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Jim Christensen
 Mark Maza
 Brandon Frank
 Paul Maza
 William G. Williams
 Betty Bryant
 1st Nat'l Bank

Jim Christopher, Powder Coating
Mark Meza, Painting
Brian Park, Painting
Frank Martinez, Painting
Allen Murrow, Painting
Roddy Alexander, Paint Preparation
Derek Ketterlin, Paint Preparation
Clayton Davis, Paint Preparation

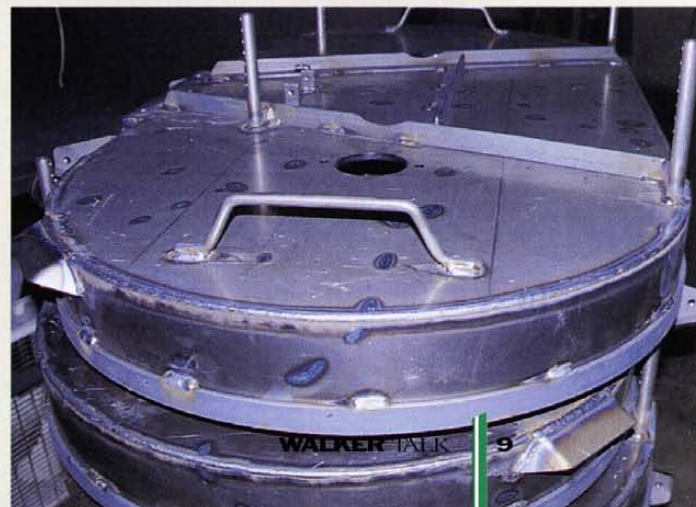


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Belle Fourche, South Dakota

CENTER OF NATION puts emphasis on maintenance

Not every city in the country can lay claim to being plumb in the geographic center of the country. Belle Fourche, South Dakota, can. Not every city can look at its public grounds and know they're being maintained with the same vigor and expertise as a proud homeowner would give his or her lawn. Again, Belle Fourche can.

This city of some 5,000 residents lives up to its name — it means beautiful forks in French — with 80 acres of parks, ball fields and other turf areas groomed just as if every day were Memorial Day or the Fourth of July. The city does it with a maintenance department comprised of three full-time and six

or seven seasonal employees, and four Walker Mowers.

Willie Humann, supervisor for cemetery, parks and recreation, won't take credit for how the city looks, but he's proud of the end product. When *Walker Talk* visited in late spring, the grass was growing like wildfire, and Humann and his crew had all they could do to keep up with it.

"At times like this, we sometimes mow with our 62-inch side-discharge decks just to knock the grass

After the grass and moisture settle down, he adds, and the Memorial Day rush is over, the maintenance team can settle into a routine. That routine means mowing approximately 80 acres a week; aerating, spraying, fertilizing and pruning; maintaining the irrigation system that covers most of the acreage; and just keeping the city looking neat.

The city contracts out its irrigation work, and some of its fertilization and weed control. Aeration and other maintenance chores are kept in-house as is the routine maintenance on its Walker Mowers.

"The city has been real good about getting us the kind of equipment we need to get the job done."

down, and then come through with our 48-inch GHS decks to pick it up," says Humann, who has been working with the city for 10 years.

VERSATILITY AND FLEXIBILITY

The city saw its first Walker Mower at a Rapid City home and garden show in 1994. It purchased its first Walker a year later, and followed up with other purchases every year since.

Today it operates four Model T's with 20-hp Kohler engines. Each has a 48-inch GHS deck and a 62-inch side-discharge deck.

"We needed an industrial mower," relates Humann. "The Walker was also maneuverable around stones and trees, gave us the flexibility of using two decks, and was easy to maintain. The fact that the nearest dealer from here is three to four hours away in Nebraska was a concern at first.

(Left to right) City employees Frank Kulm, Bryan Christie, Willie Humann and Gwen Madison know where they will be most of the summer — somewhere amid 80 acres of Belle Fourche grass.



Before joining the city 10 years ago, supervisor Willie Humann didn't know a thing about horticulture. Attending workshops and seminars, and plenty of on-the-job-training, has since brought him up to speed.





The "Belle" terrain is a contrast between wide-open areas and smaller, more heavily landscaped plots.

But it hasn't proven to be a problem at all."

Belle's mowing terrain varies from the small plots of grass surrounding the library, Chamber of Commerce, recreation building and other coves in and around town to a large cemetery, four parks, a soccer field and several ballparks.

"We used to have gang mowers for the larger areas and thought about getting a wide-area mower before we purchased the Walkers," tells Humann. "But the Walkers with the large-area decks do a good job."

Put on the GHS decks and they make quick work of the cemetery, he adds. In fact, the use of Walker Mowers has completely eliminated using a push mower to trim around the headstones.

Walker dealer Dale Lee sold the city its mowers. He attributes some of their popularity to the GHS deck's ability to vacuum the turf. The cemetery is a good example, he points out. The pine needles readily blanket the area, but the Walkers take care of them. It's not just the mowers' ability to mow that makes



Walker dealer Dale Lee visits Belle Fourche several times a year, including one time each spring when the city trades in one of its older Walkers.

them stand out, he adds, but their ability to clean the turf, too.

Lee says he gets to Belle Fourche a few times a year, or whenever one of his customers gives him a call. In addition to the city's four mowers, there are two other Walkers in town, one owned by the school and the other by a contractor. The city, he notes, rotates its equipment every three years, so every year a new Walker comes to town.

When parks and recreation people aren't mowing, they're maintaining the landscape in other ways. The city spends enough money per capita on trees to be named Tree City U.S.A. So Humann's crews can be found installing new trees, or pruning or limbing older ones.

They also plant flowers, install fences, and ready the city for big special events such as a professional rodeo or smaller ones like a car rally in the main park.

"From Memorial Day to Labor Day, there's always something going on," says Humann who, before joining the city, said he knew absolutely nothing about landscape maintenance.



The GHS deck quickly dispatches cemetery grass. But it's even more valuable for cleaning up pesky pine needles.

CENTER OF THE NATION?

Visitors to Belle Fourche, South Dakota, can hardly believe the town is the geographical center of the country. A quick glance at the map shows the city too far west and north to be in the exact center. But that first reckoning doesn't take into consideration Alaska and Hawaii. What used to be in Kansas is now in Belle Fourche's possession — or almost anyway.

The geographical center of the nation is really 20 miles north of Belle Fourche. But a snake problem years ago at the center point encouraged geographical purists to place the mark in town.



"The city has not only been real good about getting us the kind of equipment we need to get the job done, but they've also encouraged us to get the education we need. Whenever there is a seminar or workshop nearby on landscaping, tree care or lawn care, one of us attends.

"We were also pleasantly surprised when they allowed us to purchase the Walkers. Normally, buying something from out of state is frowned upon, but they knew we really wanted the mowers."

The end result really speaks for itself because grass in Belle Fourche doesn't stop growing when the spring rain ends. The fertilization, in combination with irrigation and hot summer days, keeps mowing crews and their Walkers busy all season long. **WT**

Cemetery presents unusual challenges



An irrigation system helps maintain the grounds' lush appearance, and keeps the Walkers working 40 hours a week during the growing season.

(Left to right) Bill Lawrence with Michael Carleton and Jamie Rutherford. Walkers have been mowing Springcreek Cemetery since 1995.

Cemeteries are not often thought of as a place to test mowing equipment, unless you happen to be a member of the grounds crew that is responsible for its maintenance.

These solemn places present huge challenges for lawn maintenance professionals. Mowing between headstones is difficult, and the uneven turf is bordered by hundreds of small gardens. The proximity of these gardens and flower arrangements to the grass eliminates the use of side-discharge decks, and severely restricts the way chemicals are applied.

Springcreek Cemetery in Clarkson, Ontario, just west of Toronto, faces a few other challenges, as well. Soil

there is sandy, which is good for digging but less than attractive for maintaining moisture levels. The sand is also hard on equipment. And the fact that the cemetery is old — established in 1825 — means that special care needs to be taken when mowing around the older, more fragile stones.

"That was one of the reasons we bought our first Walker," tells Bill Lawrence, superintendent and chairman of the cemetery board. "We wanted a machine that could not only handle the quantity of grass we had to mow, but do so in a gentle way."

The cemetery's two diesel Walkers work long hours mowing, applying fertilizer and spraying material, and picking up leaves and debris.

"When I first started to work here 10 years ago, it took us two weeks to complete a mowing cycle," remembers Michael Carleton, groundskeeper/mechanic. "With the Walkers, we can finish the cycle in one week."

Lawrence nods as Carleton tells his story. "I asked Michael and the others what they thought our best purchase has been. They said the John Deere Gator has been helpful with many chores, but it's second to the Walkers."

The crews use the small mulching deck 98% of the time, even in the higher-profile areas around the office and the front of the cemetery. Mulching eliminates the need to find a place to put grass clippings. It also puts nitrogen back into the soil.

The GHS decks, on the other hand, come in handy for fall cleanup, saving the cemetery the hassle and expense of hiring extra help to remove leaves. Fertilizing and spraying are also accomplished with a Walker.

Springcreek sprays once in the spring to contain crabgrass, using a Rogers Windfoil sprayer that attaches to the Walker. The sprayer keeps drift to a minimum. And its front-mount configuration gives operators the ability to easily and precisely direct the spray material.

Overseeding and fertilizing are also accomplished with attachments that fit the Walker.

MADE FOR THE JOB

"The Walker is the only machine that can do what we need to have done," Lawrence relates. "It's also easy to work on. If one breaks down, I can usually have it up and running in less than an hour," Carleton adds. "Another thing I like about the mower is how the company is constantly striving to upgrade field machines. And the fixes can be applied to newer and older models alike."

The important thing, he emphasizes, is the big picture. It adds to the overall appearance of the cemetery. Appearance is important at any cemetery, and Springcreek happens to be in a fairly affluent area where people have especially high expectations.

The Walkers have become an integral part of this appearance, in large part because of their versatility and quality of cut. Yet, they've also made a difference in a more subtle way. Their ability to handle grass has allowed the cemetery to install a sprinkler system.

Again, Lawrence emphasizes the importance of the mulching decks, which are set at 2.5 inches in the



A wear plate protects the mower deck from constant rubbing against headstones.

spring and 3 inches during the summer. They deliver an excellent cut, and the clippings just disappear.

GREEN CHALLENGE

Four-year Springcreek veteran Jamie Rutherford came to the cemetery with a horticultural degree. His previous landscaping experience didn't really prepare him for his new job.

"Everything we do here is a little different," he relates. "Mowers work all day long, every day. They don't get a break between jobs because there is no between jobs. They start in the morning and finish at night."

The result, he points out, is that each of the Walker Mowers accrues close to 500 hours a season just in mowing, not counting their other spring and fall chores.

"I never liked spraying with the hand sprayers," he continues. "Here, I just jump on the Walker, sit down and away you go. I don't worry about drift, and my arms don't get tired."

"And the mowing is different. Not only is it a challenge to maneuver around the headstones, but the turf is really uneven, which mandates the use of a floating deck."

The headstones are tough in other ways, adds Carleton. "Constantly rubbing the mower deck against the stones wears the side of the mower deck housing. But we solved the problem by welding a piece of steel on the side of the deck."

Then there's the sand, which not only accentuates deck and blade wear but raises havoc with air-cooled engines — Hence the diesel Walkers with Kubota water-cooled engines.

The old section presents its own set of challenges. Headstones are not only fragile, but are scattered throughout the area. Lawrence emphasizes that the Walker is really the only alternative to using a walk-behind in the old section, and the best alternative in the newer section.

"This cemetery is the ultimate test for any mower. The Walkers have passed the test, to the extent that if we didn't have them, I'm afraid these guys wouldn't even be working here."

A cemetery is a landscaper's challenge. In addition to a rigorous mowing and maintenance regimen, the grounds crew at Springcreek prepares for an average of a funeral a day. They go through approximately 30 skids of sod a year. At 75 rolls per skid, that's a lot of grass. And spring time is twice as busy, with crews sodding winter graves. Even with the irrigation, new sod has to be hand-watered up to 10 days before being able to live with a normal automatic sprinkler pattern.

There are 18,000 grave sites and somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 headstones. The cemetery grounds are busy every day with or without funerals, which serves as a constant reminder to Lawrence's crew why they work so diligently at keeping the grounds looking neat and clean.



Three-step approach works for Illinois contractor

Where do you want to take your business?

That's a question Burdette Mills asked himself 15 years ago when he started his landscaping company, Top Notch Services in Granville, Illinois. He wanted a niche. He wanted to provide the very best service possible to select customers.

Of course, that was only a pipe dream for a new contractor looking for work. Finding work wasn't easy when his equipment lineup included a car, snowmobile trailer and push mower, with shovel and rake handles hanging out of the car windows and a tiller tucked away in the trunk.

It was a strange sight, Mills admits, but he was persistent. He wouldn't take no for an answer and he would never say no to any job. Laid off from his position as a purchasing agent for a grain company, he wanted two things from his next job: enjoyment and a degree of security.

Mowing lawns was as close as he could get to his first love, farming. And regarding security, operating his own business gave him the opportunity to fashion his own future. Over the years, a relatively simple philosophy has carried him through. One might call it a three-step approach to success

and happiness in the lawn maintenance business.

- Step one: Don't get greedy, a.k.a., learn to say no.
- Step two: Keep employees busy year-round.
- Step three: Don't take current customers for granted. In other words, do a good job every time you show up on the property.

STEP ONE: FORGET THE GREED

Operating with seven employees and two maintenance crews during the peak season, Top Notch Services caters primarily to high-end residen-

The Top Notch Crew:
"Anyone can mow lawns," says Burdette Mills. "What separates us from the competition is our equipment and the people who operate it."



tial customers and a select handful of commercial properties. In addition to maintenance and landscape installation/renovation, Top Notch will do just about anything for current customers. In the off-season, crews can be found painting homes, building fences, even repairing buildings. The service orientation not only keeps customers happy, it also keeps crew members employed year-round.

“Contractors really have two choices today. They can either get much bigger and hire a lot of people, or remain small.”

As most lawn maintenance professionals have discovered over the years, excellent work is usually rewarded by more work. The issue quickly becomes one of how much work is too much.

“Contractors really have two choices today,” says Mills. “They can either get much bigger and hire a lot of people, or remain small.” Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages, he adds. Big companies constantly struggle with employees and maintaining a high quality of work. Smaller companies have to deal with the challenge of making ends meet with a limited number of customers — when overhead and other costs continue to rise.

Mills chose the latter route. His 65 to 70 accounts, mostly high-end homes, rarely complain about price. But they expect the best service their money can deliver. Like other contractors with a similar philosophy, Top Notch doesn't advertise. In fact, you won't find its name anywhere, even on the sides of company trucks or on the enclosed van. The only form of advertisement is its work, and the satisfied customers who spread the word to neighbors and friends. In most cases,

this approach also results in more desirable new accounts.

“We really don't want any more work so there is no point in putting our name on everything,” Mills says.

This rather unusual approach, in combination with charging for and delivering “top notch” work, helps keep the business manageable. Instead of running around delivering bids and trying to find ways to cover new accounts, Mills has time to operate the business, or, as he says, time to think about where the business is going. Keeping the business small also gives son Jeff enough latitude to do a great job with his two mowing crews.

The day *Walker Talk* visited, Top Notch crews were maintaining one of their high-end properties.

“We use the GHS system and stripe all our properties,” tells Mills, looking out over the huge lawn area. “It's a look other companies without Walkers just can't deliver.”

Top Notch purchased its first Walker, a 16-hp unit with a 42-inch deck, in 1988. Since then, it purchased two more, a 20- and a 25-hp model, both with 48-inch GHS decks. They're all operating. In fact, says Mills, “They all purr like kittens, including that first mower which has more than 2,500 hours on it. It's on its second engine and second set of tires. But it's still there plugging away.

“I'm considered a hard-sell in town, in part because I understand equipment. I was originally attracted to the Walkers because of their ease of maintenance. But they're also so easy to

operate. All you have to do is move the steering controls 1/2 to 1 inch. With other machines, you get fatigued just by moving your arms.”

Mills also claims the Walkers have reduced his mowing times significantly, allowing him to operate with less equipment and with less employees. In fact, on one major cemetery they maintain, the addition of one Walker has reduced mowing time from roughly three days to 12 hours.

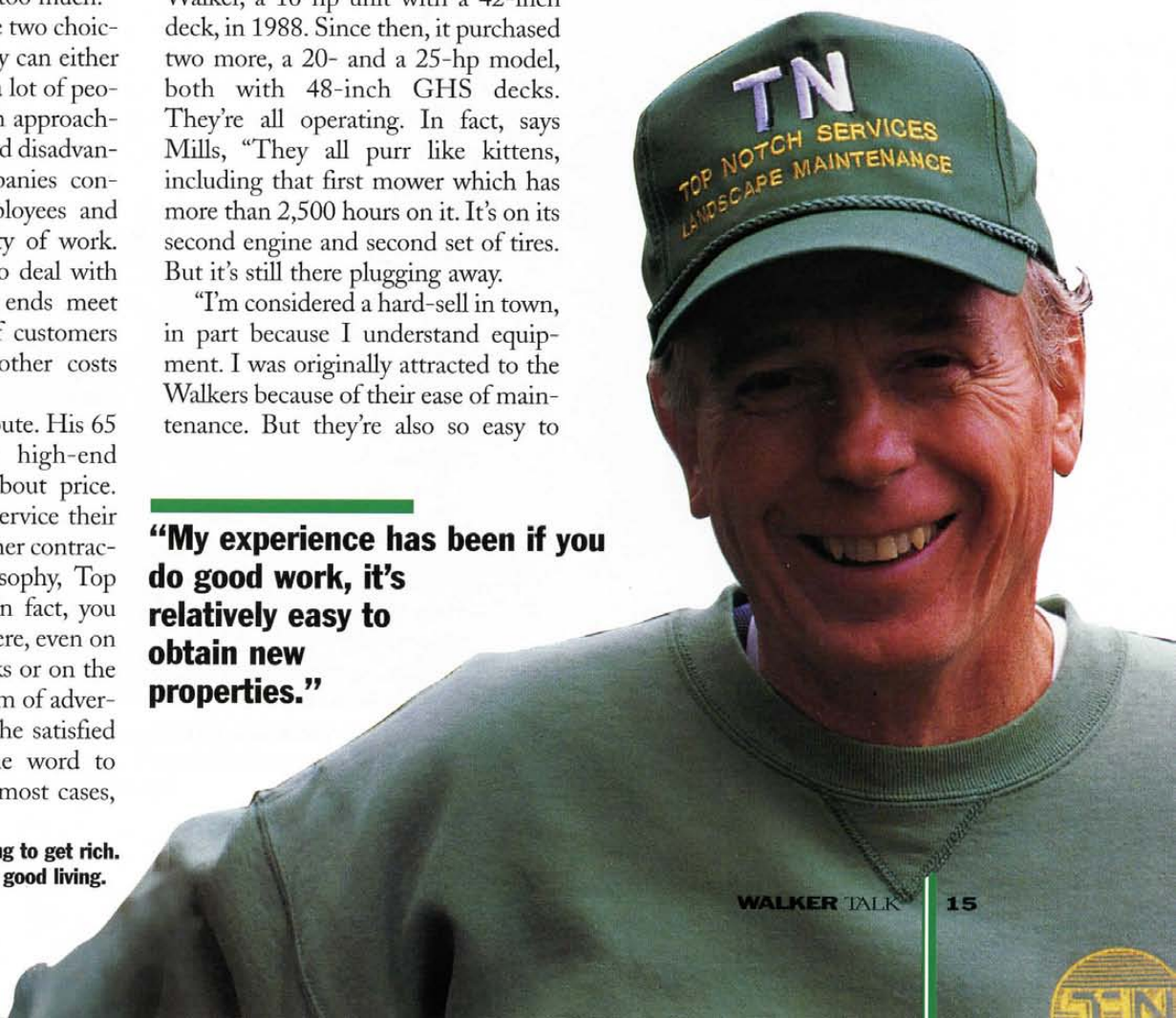
But it's the look of the cut that really pleases Top Notch and its customers. Mills attributes the quality of cut to the GHS system, and to a deck design that makes the fine grass in the area stand up.

“The vacuuming action of the deck really pulls the grass off the ground,” he says. “The result, in combination with using sharp blades, is a neat, clean cut.”

Having good equipment and keeping it maintained is a tough sell for some lawn maintenance companies,

“My experience has been if you do good work, it's relatively easy to obtain new properties.”

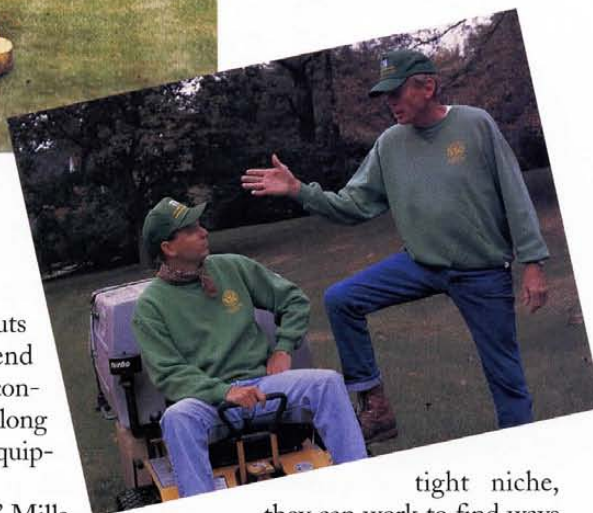
Burdette says he's not trying to get rich. He's just trying to make a good living.





Mowing in tandem delivers an extra-neat appearance. Says owner Mills, it's a bit more time-consuming, but it's something high-end customers appreciate.

Father-son meeting: Burdette says he's not a laggard when it comes to communicating with customers, but his son Jeff has developed an even better rapport with them.



Mills adds. The reason? It cuts into a company's top-end money. As difficult as it is, contractors need to take the long view, and invest in both equipment and employees.

"Anyone can mow lawns," Mills emphasizes. "What separates us from the competition is our equipment and the people who operate it."

STEP TWO: KEEP EMPLOYEES BUSY

One of the downfalls of any lawn maintenance company, large or small, is the inability to employ workers year-round. Top Notch extends its season to 11 months, staying busy with leaf and yard cleanup through the second week of December, and then maintaining equipment, doing odd jobs for customers and plowing snow until the lawn maintenance season begins again the following spring.

But busy is one thing. Keeping them satisfied is another. "We try to avoid laying people off," tells Mills. "In most cases, we also pay them as well if not better than other lawn maintenance companies in the area."

The company also keeps overtime to a minimum and tries to engender a family atmosphere.

All of the above are easier to accomplish when growth is contained, notes Mills, adding that service and customer communication also benefit from keeping the business under control. Smaller companies also have fewer employees to satisfy and, with a

tight niche, they can work to find ways to keep employees busy practically all year long.

Again, he emphasizes, "We're not trying to get rich in this business. We're just trying to make a good living for everyone involved, including my son and our employees."

STEP THREE: KEEP CUSTOMERS SATISFIED

After Top Notch crews finish with their large project, they move up the street a couple of houses. Mills gets out of his truck and looks around.

"I can remember the day when we longed for these properties," he relates. "Now we have most all of them in this neighborhood."

"My experience has been if you do good work, it's relatively easy to obtain new properties. And it's easy to get excited about doing a property like this." He points to a corner property with beautiful English gardens and brick walkways. The challenge, he adds, is sustaining that high level of enthusiasm and quality.

This owner/operator attributes much of his success to consistency, the ability for crews to maintain a high standard each and every time they mow or maintain a property.

"My son Jeff has been in the business since 1987 and he is really more particular than I am," says Mills. "In fact, he complains that I don't keep my lines straight enough when I use the Walkers."

"He's also very good with customers. I thought I had a good rapport with them, but Jeff has developed an even better relationship."

Operating procedures also work to keep properties maintained to their fullest and customers satisfied.

The two mowing crews, for example, start out the morning working together. They follow one another "hop scotching" jobs until they get to a larger property. There, they combine efforts, then veer off again to tackle smaller properties individually. The practice allows them to finish up a little faster on big properties and still pay attention to details. And it's not overkill on smaller properties.

"Our customers also have lush, healthy landscapes," Mills notes. "The grass leaves behind plenty of clippings during the growing season, and in the fall the trees drop plenty of leaves. Two crews working together just dispatch the debris in a more timely fashion."

He glances over at his Walkers. The mowers are operating in tandem with the lead mower picking up the majority of the debris while the other is delivering the finishing touch.

"We sometimes mow this way in the fall," Mills explains. "It's like a value-added service to our customers, giving their properties a neat, clean look. The procedure takes a little more time. But again, our customers appreciate the effort."

No, this way of mowing isn't for everyone. And neither is his way of doing business, Mills admits. In fact, he knows he's about as far from the consolidation trend as a lawn maintenance professional can be. But big isn't his bag — better is. And he frankly thinks he is better off for it. **WT**



BOB T'S

Tech Talk

Belts — they do more than hold things up

Belts are a primary method of transferring power in the Walker Mower. There are two types of belts used: v-belts and v-ribbed belts. Belt drive is a very cost-effective and reliable source of power transmission when compared with other methods such as chains or gear drives. When properly maintained, belts will provide a relatively trouble-free life.

A good preventive maintenance program for drive belts will save you time and money. Down time can be prevented by investing a few minutes each day to inspecting and addressing faulty components before they fail.

An effective belt maintenance program always has three facets: 1) regular inspections, 2) proper installation, 3) troubleshooting.

INSPECTION

These steps should be a part of your daily inspection: a) visually look at all of the belts, pulleys, guards and guides (belts that are worn, frayed or cracked should be replaced), b) listen for any odd or unusual sounds or vibrations, c) find and eliminate the cause of any oil or grease that is getting onto the belts or pulleys, d) make sure all

mounts (such as motor, gearbox, hydro, jackshaft, idler arm and idler pulley) are tight.

INSTALLATION

When a belt is replaced, proper installation is critical. Never pry a belt on or off. Prying can damage the belt and the pulley. A pulley that has nicks or burrs on it can severely damage the belt. Prying on the belt can cause nicks, cuts or broken cords, and the result will be extremely shortened belt life. Always use the adjustment components to remove or install a belt. Proper tension has a direct affect on the operation of the mower and life of the belt.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Troubleshooting of a belt failure needn't be difficult with some patience and knowledge. A careful examination of the belt can reveal a lot, as shown in the accompanying chart on this page.

For more detailed information concerning belt maintenance and troubleshooting, contact your local Gates or Dayco belt supplier and ask for the following booklets: Gates Rubber Co., Belt Preventive Maintenance Manual, #14995; Dayco Products, Inc., Service Manual for Industrial V-Belt Drives, #102163. **WT**

Bob Tomasek is manager of customer service at Walker Mfg.

SYMPTOM	CAUSE
Wear on top of belt	Rubbing against guard or other object; idler malfunction
Wear on belt sidewalls	Belt slip; misalignment of pulleys; worn pulleys; incorrect belt
Wear on bottom of belt	Belt bottoming in pulley (wrong size); worn pulley groove; debris in pulley groove
Cording frayed	Pulley misalignment; belt damaged during installation; object rubbing on belt
Broken belt	Belt rolled or pried onto pulley; object caught between belt and pulley; severe shock load
Underside and/or sidewalls burnt or glazed	Belt slipping (under-tensioned); worn pulley (belt bottoming in groove)
Belt surface hard, stiff	Hot environment
Belt stretched beyond usable length	Broken cords; over-tensioned
Belt squeals or chirps	Belt slips; oil, grease or contamination on belt
Belt flops or jumps	Stretched idler spring (under-tensioned); pulleys misaligned; cog missing; idler pulley not turning freely



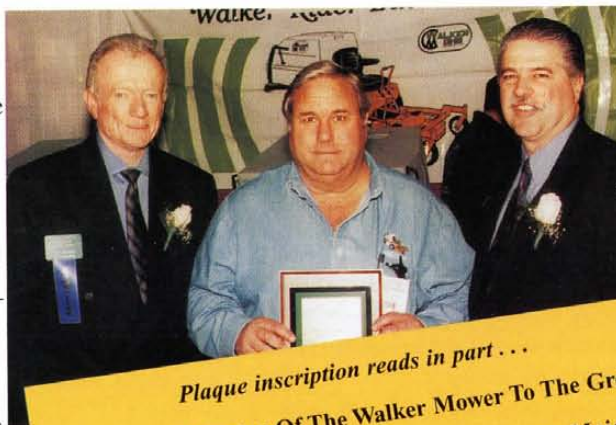
During their visit to Walker Mfg., the English dealers also enjoyed some "Rocky Mountain" hospitality from local Walker dealer Mac Equipment, Inc.

WALKER VISITED BY EUROPEAN DEALERS

Earlier this year, Walker Mfg. enjoyed visits by dealers from England, France, Belgium and The Netherlands. A total of 42 dealers/dealer representatives made the trip to Fort Collins, Colorado. The two-day visits encompassed factory tours, service demonstrations, and visits to two local Walker dealers.

DISTRIBUTOR HONORED FOR INTRODUCING WALKER TO NEW JERSEY

Precision Work, Inc. (Long Island, New York) was honored this year by the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association for their involvement in the annual New Jersey Landscape Show and their years of hard work introducing the Walker Mower to the Northeast. Bob and Annette Oestreich have been distributors for Walker since 1982, and have the distinction of being the oldest Walker distributor.



Plaque inscription reads in part . . .
 "Your Introduction Of The Walker Mower To The Green Industry Here In The North East Has Been A Major Contribution To Turf Maintenance This Century."

Walker distributor Bob Oestreich (center) is presented with an "in appreciation" plaque from Skip Powers (left) and Jim Stewart (right) of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association.

WALKER MOWERS NOW SOLD IN HUNGARY AND LATVIA

European marketing agent Wolfgang Loerli recently established Walker Mower distributors in the eastern European countries of Hungary and Latvia. Walker Mfg. welcomes Mikroprofit KFT of Kecskemet, Hungary, and SIA Gamma Rent of Riga, Latvia, to our distributorship family.



The storefront of SIA Gamma Rent in Latvia is filled with old-world charm.

WALKER TALK VISITS EUROPE

This summer, two *Walker Talk* editors are traveling throughout Europe gathering stories from operators and profiles of Walker's 14 European distributors. The result will be the release of *Walker Talk Europe*, special edition, this fall. The multi-language publication will be written in the native tongue for the profile of each country and with a parallel translation in English throughout. It will show the various applications in which the Walker Mower is used throughout Europe, and will show many successful Walker Mower operators in Europe. In recent years, approximately 8% of the annual Walker Mower production goes to Europe.

ELECTRONIC FUEL INJECTION ENGINE OPTION INTRODUCED

The Walker Mower 2000 Model MT will be available with a Kohler 26-hp electronic fuel injection engine option. Operators will experience the proven Walker tractor design while enjoying more power and a fuel savings of approximately 30% to 40% over the 25-hp model with the carburetored engine. This engine package also offers easy starting over a wide temperature range, less maintenance and improved throttle response. Troubleshooting is made easy with built-in, automotive-type diagnostics.



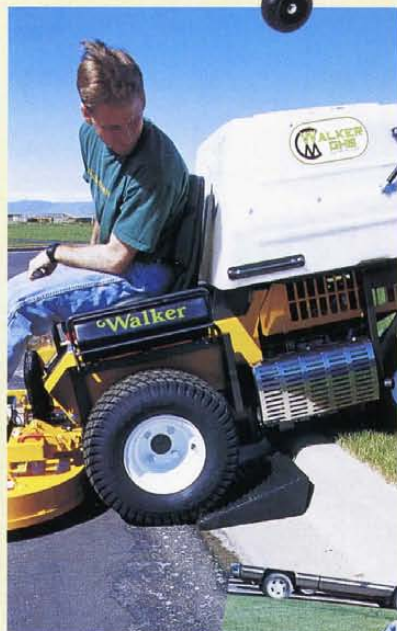
TILT-UP NOW AVAILABLE FOR 52/62 DECKS



Walker 52- and 62-inch decks can now be tilted to 90° for cleaning and blade maintenance; just like all other Walker decks. A hinged deck carrier frame, large handle, roller wheels on the back, and telescoping PTO drive shaft provide quick, easy tilt-up of the deck assembly. One person can tilt the deck up and then lower to the normal operating position in less than 15 seconds. For safety, the PTO drive shaft is automatically locked and cannot be operated in the tilt-up position; the drive shaft stays connected during the entire tilt-up raising and lowering cycle. No upgrade kit is currently available for earlier models.

CURB JUMPER RAMP INTRODUCED

The Walker Curb Jumper Ramp (P/N 5597) is now available. The polypropylene ramp can be used for backing over standard curbs. It stows on the front of the 42- and 48-inch decks as a footrest when not in use.



UPDATED DECALS

Starting in model year 2000 production, owners will notice a fresh, new design on product decals. The new stream-lined elliptical shape replaces the original oval design.



The Walker Mower family is getting together...



Walker Factory Family Photo — Spring 1999

...and we hope you can be there!

Talk about a family reunion — on August 11 and 12, 2000, Walker Manufacturing Company will be producing its 50,000th lawn mower and coincidentally in its 20th year in business.

This calls for a special celebration; and the Walker Manufacturing Family Reunion will be just that. We really want to have our entire family at the celebration which, of course, will not only be an opportunity to get to know each other better, but for family members to meet other family members.

Anyone who has ever owned, operated, sold, maintained, or repaired a Walker is part of "the Walker family" and we want you to make plans now to come to Fort Collins, Colorado, and celebrate with us on August 11th and 12th in the year 2000.

Please send the card — tipped into this issue — to us and let us know your interest in attending this special family gathering. We will notify you by October 1st with additional information and any arrangements you'll need to make for travel, overnight accommodations and all of the events that will be included in the Walker Manufacturing Family Reunion.

What will be happening?

- **Factory Tours**
- **Walker Races (we will provide the mowers)**
- **Two Walker Mowers will be given away!**

- **Walker wearable giveaways**
- **Entertainment**
- **Events for Families**
- **Arts/Crafts Fair**
- **"Ask the Experts" panel**
- **Meet Walker users from around the world**
- **And many, many more events and surprises**

Now about that 50,000th mower — we'd like to give one family member a very special opportunity to drive the mower off the assembly line, win free prizes and a free trip to Fort Collins, Colorado. Your initial registration by returning the enclosed card will be placed in a drawing for this very special Walker ride.

If you have any immediate questions please call 1-800-279-8537. More details to follow after October 1, 1999.

WALKER MOWERS
Family Reunion
August 11 & 12, 2000
Fort Collins, Colorado