

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS FOR YEARS TO COME

Five Generations

**CAMPUS KEEPS CREWS HOPPIN'
FIRING CUSTOMERS
THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY
IMAGE IS EVERYTHING**



VOL. 16

WALKER TALK

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WALKER TALK is published by Cygnus Business Media
1233 Janesville Avenue, Fort Atkinson, WI 53538.
Phone (920) 563-6388. Printed in the U.S., copyright 2000
Canada Post International Publications Mail Product.
Sales Agreement No. 1248022

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 50,000

In a few days, the 50,000th Walker Mower will roll out the door. We will celebrate. It has been 21 years in the making. Some of the big competitors in this industry might say, "What is the big deal? We produce 50,000 mowers in the blink of an eye." To us at Walker Mfg., it is a matter of proportion and knowing who we are. We are not big, but small. We do not apologize for being small. But that sense makes us appreciate the magnificence of this achievement.

There are many people to thank for helping us reach this point. We recognize our suppliers of high-quality component parts and services

that went into delivering a quality product. When there were problems, these suppliers stuck with us, took responsibility and helped us take care of the customers.

There are the dedicated and faithful factory employees. With an average length of service of six years in the company, the employees combined over 800 years of experience in manufacturing Walker Mowers.

Then there are the 1,000 distributors and

dealers who are on the front line with our end-customers — many of these folks took a real risk and staked their reputation on an unknown product and manufacturing company when they introduced the Walker in their market.

We thank our customers; they paid the bills. With an estimated 100 million hours of operating Walker Mowers, we especially appreciate customers who followed instructions and took good care of their Walker Mowers. That made us look good, and helped us build a good reputation for our equipment.

Then we must thank the Lord. He supplied life, health, strength, wisdom, guidance and a wonderful opportunity.



Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President



Akehurst staying power (left to right): William E., Brian, administrative officer Jay Tarleton, John and William K. Three divisions give the three sons freedom to express themselves.

Flexibility gives permanence to Akehurst business name

Akehurst, Akehurst, Akehurst, Akehurst and Akehurst! Five generations later and this fami-

ly-owned business shows no signs of slowing down. Why? The answer is in their genes and the family's ability to adapt to changing times.

Over the years the Akehurst horticulturists have changed their focus according to market demands. They raised carnations, for example, until a



guessed it, an Akehurst. John is in charge of interiorscape; William K., the landscape division; and Brian, grounds maintenance.

"I guess you'd have to say the nursery business is in our blood," tells William E. "That, in combination

Grounds maintenance supervisor Tom Beishl (left) and grounds maintenance manager Brian Akehurst target high-end accounts as one way to keep competition at bay.

weak market forced them to discontinue production in favor of roses. They grew roses until imports eroded the market. A nursery business that included the production of ornamental trees, shrubs and container-grown plants later flourished until it, too, was replaced by landscaping and lawn maintenance.

Today, Akehurst Landscape Service, Inc., Joppa, Maryland, is a full-service landscape company. Company president and fourth generation William E. Akehurst heads up the company and its three divisions, each operated by, you

with our ability to adapt, has allowed us to be competitive over the years."

Competitive they are, in one of the most hotly contested landscaping and lawn maintenance markets in the country. The company does between \$2.5 and \$3 million in business annually with 19 crews and 65 people. Maintenance, with 10 crews, accounts for approximately 55% of this business.

CHALLENGING SCENARIO

Grounds maintenance manager Brian Akehurst quickly identifies his division's biggest challenges as competition, the cost of doing business and labor. The big three keep Brian on his toes, and work to keep the fifth gener-

ation in that ever-adapting mode.

"Companies our size are being squeezed on one side by the big national companies, and on the other by the small operators," he relates. "At the same time, the cost of labor, if you can find employees, is going up. So, too, is the cost of fuel, insurance, equipment and more. The solution for us has been to find a market niche and work to be more productive with the equipment and employees we have."

The niche in maintenance is high-end commercial accounts, including the upscale malls around Baltimore, the high-end residential communities, and the new business parks. The company maintains 100 such properties in all from which it hauls away anywhere from 60 to 100 cubic yards of grass weekly, depending on the season.

These high-end properties can be too demanding for large companies

"Companies our size are being squeezed on one side by the big national companies, and on the other by the small operators."

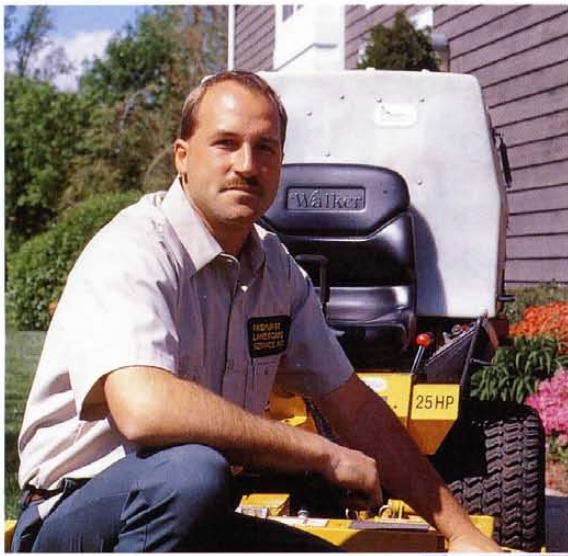
and too big for small companies. It's a perfect fit, Brian adds, as long as the family can keep costs in line and profits in sight. To do that, they've been forced to change the way they do business.

One change was the appearance of the company's first Walker Mower in 1993, nearly 10 years after Brian entered the business to start the lawn maintenance division.

"I saw what the Walker could do in a video and in trade magazines," Brian



Mowing crews pattern cut with both their Walkers and 48-inch Scag walk-behinds. The same deck sizes on both machines serve to enhance the striping effect.



Project manager Tom Wallace says the Walkers have spoiled him. "You're really quickly amazed by what they can do," he relates.

remembers. "We purchased one without even demonstrating it." Another one followed and so did a dozen more.

Today the company operates fifteen 25-hp models. Thirteen of them are equipped with 48-inch GHS decks. One is left behind for backup; the other is being fitted with a spray tank and fertilizer spreader. Crews also have access to a 62-inch deck for wide-area mowing, a leaf blower for fall cleanup, and one sweeper attachment and two snow blades for the winter regimen.

But it's because of their mowing and bagging capability that Akehurst Landscape Service purchased the Walkers. That move has paid off.

"The Walker is ideal for high-end commercial maintenance where customers want the grass on the front and sides of the properties collected," Brian explains. "We use them on all our properties now because they save us time and make us more competitive. Among other things, they save us cleanup time, especially on sidewalks and around swimming pool areas."

Field managers point to other advantages, as well. "Once you get on one you're spoiled," says project

Grounds maintenance supervisor Tom Beishl demonstrates all new mowers for the company. Referring to the Walkers, he says they're the best machines he has seen for the type of mowing his crews do. "They're also light, which means they don't tear up the grass," he adds.



supervisor Tom Wallace. "You're quickly amazed by what they can do."

"They're light, which means they don't tear up the grass," adds grounds maintenance supervisor Tom Beishl, whose job responsibility calls for demonstrating new mowers. "They're also the best machines I've seen for this type of mowing."

Crew members pattern-cut with both their Walkers and 48-inch Scag walk-behinds. The same deck sizes on both mowers serve to enhance their striping effect.

New last year, the company is leasing its Walkers. According to Brian the move was made to further increase productivity by giving the company access to new technology on a regular basis and keeping downtime to a minimum. As planned, one-third of the fleet will be replaced annually.

OTHER COMPETITIVE MOVES

Using and leasing Walkers is only one way Akehurst works to compete in the marketplace. Two years ago, the company added a mulch truck to speed up the mulching operation. It is

also gradually changing its spring fertilization program to reduce the amount of nitrogen and subsequent top growth.

Grass grows enough in the spring, and there's no need to make it grow faster, Brian points out. "A fertilizer program with enough iron keeps the grass green, but doesn't overburden crews with grass collection," adds plant health care specialist Louis Schweigman. The selective use of growth regulators on trees and shrubs helps keep pruning to a minimum during the early growing season, as well.

In addition, Brian looks to grow business in the most economical way possible, with current customers. Hence, he spends a large portion of his day talking with property managers about add-on projects, including the installation of spot color and turf renovation. The three divisions have a natural synergy, as well, with brothers sharing ideas and business leads for landscape designs and new interiorscaping projects, including holiday decorating during the Christmas season.

William E. is optimistic about the future of a company that has roots that extend back to 1876.

"The fact that each of my sons has his own division gives them the freedom to express themselves," he explains. "They were never pressured to join the company, either. Again, I guess they just had the green industry in their blood."

"Oh, there's no question we have plenty of challenges in this industry." But as he points out, the company survived its share of challenges in the past. Some solid planning now for the future and the willingness to adapt should clear the way for the next Akehurst generation. **WT**

Problem customers

Now is the time to do some weeding

Your customers are your business. Without them, all is lost. That's why experts from around the country talk at length about ways to retain them. But as important as they are to your operation, not all customers are worth having. In fact, some can be downright miserable, even unprofitable. For those, a "Dear John" letter may be the best thing for your business.

IDENTIFYING PROBLEM CUSTOMERS

Customers come in all sizes, shapes and personalities. Some are more profitable than others, and some are just easier to do business with than others. They vary in other ways, as well, including property type, proximity to your operation and the level of maintenance they expect. And then there are those who are particularly difficult to accommodate.

One contractor, recently interviewed for a *Walker Talk* story, told about having a two-complaint rule. If a customer complained once, his crews would make the appropriate fix. If the customer complained a second time, his company literally fired the customer.

Sounds a little bold — and it was. But this individual felt so strongly about the level of service his company provided that more than one customer complaint was considered unfounded, and a nuisance. To accommodate that customer

was both frustrating and costly. The solution: send the customer packing.

How can you identify your problem customers? In most cases, you know who they are just by measuring your blood pressure when you're on the phone with them. But there is a more scientific way to make a judgment, says Scott Evans.

A Walker user and a *Walker Talk* subject in Volume 7, Scott with wife Pam operates Scott and Company in Bay City, Texas. He also runs an employee service for contractors, and does some consulting. Evans advises you to grade all your properties (customers) on four criteria: 1) profitability, 2) the hassle factor, 3) their proximity to your facility, and 4) how proud you are of the landscape.

Give each property a grade from 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest grade) on each of the above criterion. Depending on your business situation, you may weigh each of the four categories the same. Or you may decide

Getting rid of unprofitable or problem accounts may be the best thing for your business in the long run, but don't take the move lightly.



that one of the four is more important for your operation. For example, your company isn't making enough profit so you need to give category 1 (profitability) more weight. Either way you do it, grade each property. And when the dust has settled, look at the lowest scores.

When the economy is good, contractors can more likely afford to lose a customer or two.

Instead of outright firing an unprofitable account or one that gives you a lot of hassles, Evans suggest simply raising your price to them. One approach is to raise prices to the 20% of those properties receiving the lowest score. If customers accept the increase, that's not a problem, he adds. The raise will make the problem accounts more profitable, and more tolerable if hassles persist.

TREAD LIGHTLY

Getting rid of unprofitable or problem accounts may be the best thing for your business in the long run, but don't take the move lightly, advises industry consultant Jack Mattingly. Make sure, for starters, that you can live without their revenue.

"Even accounts that don't turn a profit may help pay the overhead," he emphasizes. "Be sure you can do without before actually doing without." Evaluate any possible repercussions, too, he adds. Is this problem customer going to spread rumors about your operation? Or will losing the account create other hard feelings. In other words, there is a right and a wrong way to relieve a customer of your services.

For your own peace of mind and theirs, Mattingly suggests you take problem customers to the point where you've done everything you can for them before firing them. Ideally, that includes showing them photos of their property before and after you took over the account, and documenting in a friendly way all your attempts to fix perceived problems.

If nothing really satisfies the customer, then, in his words, "It's time to throw in the towel; life is too short." He agrees with Evans that selectively raising your price is an effective and diplomatic way to weed out bad customers. Unfortunately, most contractors can only do that once a year, and problems usually occur well after the contract has been signed. When a price increase isn't feasible,

the resignation letter will suffice, along with an explanation documenting your best efforts. Again, you need to explain to customers why you can no longer offer your services.

Once you've identified problem customers and decided to fire them, there is no better time than now to act, says Evans. "A good economy gives lawn maintenance contractors the opportunity to strengthen their business foundation: to upgrade their facilities, equipment and properties. If you don't upgrade now, when the economy is good and when you have money coming in, when will you be able to make improvements?" he asks.

The customer selection or weeding out process is part of this "good economy" upgrade strategy. Why? When the economy is good, contractors can more likely afford to lose a customer or two. If you can't get rid of troublesome or unprofitable customers when you can afford to, when will you? A scary thought!



Document all your attempts to fix a problem. Talk to the customer about it. If nothing satisfies them, it's time to throw in the towel.

So act now, Evans emphasizes. You're in this business to make a profit. It's not fair to your family and your employees to maintain unprofitable accounts or those that otherwise can be too troublesome. But as Mattingly suggests, don't take the move lightly. When you drop customers, you lose a business opportunity. **WT**

Elon College

Busy campus keeps maintenance crews on their toes ... and their Walkers

Graduation is only five days away and Larry Rhodes is moving fast. As manager of landscaping and grounds for Elon College in Elon College, North Carolina, he is largely responsible for how the campus will look on its biggest day of the year.

But this kind of pressure is not new to Rhodes or his staff of 11 full-time and eight seasonal employees. Elon College, the third largest of North Carolina's 36 private colleges and universities, is not only one of the top academic institutions in the South, it also has one of the most picturesque campuses ... and it's growing.

Since 1992 the school has increased its square footage of building space by 40% and expanded its acreage by 100%. Included in this building boom is a new campus center, science center, library and a residence complex. A new stadium is projected to open in the fall of 2001.

"Nearly every activity, including a new building project, impacts our department in one way or another," tells Rhodes, who graduated from the college in 1986. "In addition, managing a landscape department in a college setting is not much different in one way from managing a golf course. There is always a lot of people activity. And how and when you do your work is determined by their movement."

He notes, for example, that the school's nine irrigation systems can only operate between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. This saves students and teachers from taking umbrellas to class on sunny days, he adds. And you won't find mowing crews mowing between 7 and 8:00 a.m. Instead, they will be "policing" the grounds for loose paper and other debris to ensure the campus is looking its very best for students, faculty and visitors.

Life has changed since he graduated, received an advanced degree from NC State in Turfgrass Management, Ornamentals and Landscaping, and came back to the school to work. As he puts it, the

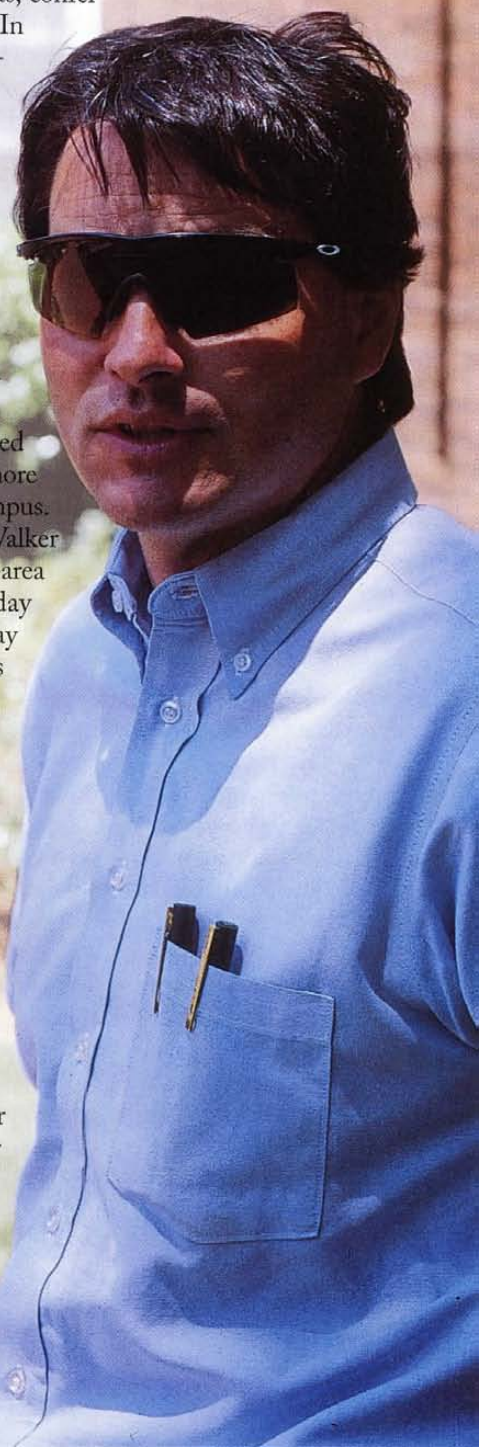
campus seems to be busy all year long, not only with classes but with special events, conferences and other happenings. In other words, being a landscape manager for a school such as Elon College is a full-time as well as challenging proposition.

THE RULE OF EFFICIENCY

Of the 500-plus acres that comprise the Elon College campus, the landscaping and grounds department maintains more than 200.

Four gardeners are assigned to specific areas within the more high-profile areas of the campus. Mowing crews using four Walker Mowers and one Toro wide-area mower work a three-day Tuesday through Thursday mowing schedule. This leaves either Monday or Friday for routine maintenance or making up for a rain day. It also allows would-be mower operators to help gardeners trim and prune, or otherwise keep the campus looking neat.

"Being efficient is really the key to operating a landscape department successfully in this environment," tells Rhodes, who recently returned to the college after working four years as head groundskeeper for the Charlotte Knights AAA baseball team.



"Our mowing crews are assigned the same areas each week to allow them to mow as efficiently as possible and to make them more aware of any unwanted landscape changes, e.g., a broken sprinkler head or disease or insect encroachment." They are even assigned the same mowers, he adds, which gives them the feeling of "ownership" of their machine and familiarity with its operation.

Elon College operates nine 16- to 25-hp Walker Mowers. Two mowers equipped with 42-inch GHS decks, and two with 62-inch side-discharge decks, do most of the campus mowing, along with a Toro equipped with a 16-foot deck. All told, somewhere around 220 acres of grass are mowed weekly. Athletic fields with their Bermuda grass are maintained using a gang reel mower.

The other Walkers are assigned various tasks from blowing debris from sidewalks, shaping beds and removing snow during the winter.

"We use the Walkers for four basic reasons," tells Rhodes. "They are very maneuverable and leave a nice striping effect. Key engine and mower components are also very accessible. And the manufacturer continues to make technological improvements."

The mowers are durable, too, he adds, noting the school still has its first Walker it purchased 12 years ago. More recent purchases, however, are on a rotating replacement schedule.

In addition to the campus, landscape and grounds crews also tend to the college president's house, a nearby community church and a couple of other college properties off campus. "We lock and load one crew everyday," Rhodes explains.

Also keeping the staff busy is fertilizing, and a pesticide and herbicide program that covers the entire 200-plus acres. Some of the non-irrigated areas receive water, too, from water wheels. Special summer projects that include new walkways, new irrigation



Elon College has been using Walker Mowers to maintain its turf for 12 years. The school currently has nine mowers, including its first one.

lines and parking lots will directly or indirectly impact landscape operations, as well.

Currently, the campus is undergoing a tree audit to determine tree health, and point out any potential safety hazards individual trees might pose. "We're still seeing tree damage from hurricanes that came through 10 years ago," says Rhodes, adding that landscapes in any setting are constantly changing. Successful maintenance programs stay up with the changes.

The biggest project currently underway is the new stadium that will bring even more turfgrass and landscape under the grounds department umbrella. With the new stadium will come a new stadium field, soccer field and practice field.

"As a department our focus has always been the campus area per se," Rhodes explains. "The new stadium won't necessarily change our focus. But it will shift part of our attention to a different part of the campus."

In the meantime, the focus at hand for the landscape and grounds team is graduation. Mowing crews are collecting nearly all 80 to 100 acres of mown grass, and gardeners are applying the finishing touches. "I'm proud to say this campus looks great 95%, no almost 100% of the time all year long thanks to a great staff dedicated to

maintaining the school's image," says Rhodes.

Graduation may not be the best time for our staff to relax and reflect on their effort, he adds, but their hard work is in full view for everyone else, including the graduating seniors and their parents. **WT**



Top: With graduation a few days away, mowers and mowing crews double up to bag all areas of the campus. Right: Dawn Hensley is one of four gardeners assigned to a specific area of the campus. Bottom: The campus has changed considerably since Larry Rhodes attended classes. A new stadium scheduled to open in the fall of 2001 is the newest addition.



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 fourth stop in a five-part series that's introducing readers to the "Faces Behind the Walker Name."

Bringing it all together ...

Inventory, spare parts, assembly and shipping

The final union of parts that is known as a completed Walker Mower brings together many areas of the Walker factory. The Assembly Department brings together all manufactured and purchased parts contained in the Walker to make a functioning, well-adjusted product. A supply of components that includes cast-iron gear axles, precisely manufactured transmissions, a finely tuned engine, durable gearboxes, various rotationally molded plastic pieces, and a multitude of other purchased parts are joined with Walker's manufactured parts to make a completed Walker Mower. The Inventory Department receives purchased component parts in the warehouse and supplies them to the Assembly line and Spare Parts Department. Spare Parts responds to distributor parts orders, including everything from an overnight, machine-down emergency to stocking orders weighing well over 10,000 pounds. The final harbinger of Walker quality is seen in the Shipping Department. Shipping personnel bring the mowers off the line, and run a series of quality tests and adjustments as the mowers are brought to the Shipping area. Mowers are prepared for delivery with the proper paperwork, dealer-installed items, and are either crated or left uncrated before being moved to a staging area for truck pickup.

The "Faces Behind the Walker Name" will be completed in the next edition of Walker Talk featuring Administration, Operations, and Engineering.



John W. ...
Tom Wilson
Rich Sewell
Don Owen
Vance Lefort
Ron Harrison
David Sullivan
Clayton Davis
Dan Helzer
Torrey Henson

The only way
A convention
small company

SHIPPING, INVENTORY AND SPARE PARTS DEPARTMENTS

From left to right: Dan Helzer (building maintenance), Rodney Wilson, Dave Saunders (shipping supervisor), Clayton Davis, David Sullivan, Vince Rittenhouse (inventory supervisor), Ron Harrison, Vance Lefort (spare parts supervisor), Rich Sewell, Torrey Henson, Don Owen — Not pictured: Butch Stull

FACT BOX

- ✓ There are nearly 1,000 fasteners on one Model MT GHS tractor with a 48-inch deck. Nearly 300 of these fasteners are in the catcher box and delivery spout system.
- ✓ Approximately 15,000 pounds of purchased component parts are used on the tractor assembly line each day.
- ✓ A Walker tractor is assembled every 20 minutes, and a mower deck is assembled every 16 minutes during a production day.
- ✓ Over 225 truckloads of Walker Mowers and spare parts are shipped annually.
- ✓ Spare parts represent 13% to 15% of the factory total sales.



Steve Minkus
Larry Minkus
Dennis Minkus
Alan Oppie
David Paulk
William H. Ketterlin
Joe Fawcett
Gary Kyle
Robert Wilson
Barry Gueswell
Ed Anderson

James
Danny
Robin
Dave
Aaro
Will
Dav
Lar
Tir
Al
G
E
I



Natalie Schaffer, Sub-Assembly Welding
Schrader, Sub-Assembly Welding



TRACTOR AND DECK ASSEMBLY DEPARTMENTS

- 1- Robin Oxford 2- James Montoya 3- Wayne Gomez 4- Dave Schneider
5- Tom Buxmann 6- Albert Wilson 7- Tim Thorell 8- Stanley Hicks 9- Tony Martinez
10- Rich Erbes 11- Dan Oppie 12- Derek Ketterlin 13- Kyle Fritzler 14- Jerry Helzer (tractor assembly supervisor)
15- Rick Ewan 16- Ed Anderson 17- Dave Paulk 18- Steve Kerbel
19- Larry Taylor 20- Joe Fawcett 21- Gary Kyle (deck assembly supervisor) 22- Aaron Rea
23- Jeremy Caylor 24- Steve Coon 25- Barry Gueswell 26- Rich Slocum 27- Kevin Schmidt
28- Steve Villa 29- Jeff Hoffman 30- Ruben Hinojosa

quality.
red by a
reat.

This story needs to be told

Doing business the “old-fashioned”

way in Kansas



Norman and Leatha were best friends in college, and they're still best friends.

It's a new day. Big is better, borrowed money works better than your own, and when equipment breaks, you throw it away instead of fixing it.

Many companies chart a course built on these fundamentals, and they succeed. But many others find this to be a tough row to hoe, and would be better off doing business the old-fashioned way, the way Norman and Leatha Hein conduct business in Valley Center, Kansas.

The couple started in business 20 years ago. Today, they operate a full-service landscape maintenance company that caters to many of the most beautiful homes in the Wichita area. They maintain 90 high-end residential homes in all with 14 employees during peak season.

“We made two key decisions when we started in business,” relates Norman. “We decided we wanted to be small, or at least not be big. And we made the decision to never borrow money. I know that not everyone would agree with this approach. In some instances borrowing money to get better equipment would make more sense. But we did it our way, and it worked.”

MAKING THE MOST OF THINGS

The Hein approach is to get as much mileage out of their equipment as possible. They still operate their first pickup, a 1977 Ford F-150. And the second Walker they purchased in the early '90s is still mowing lawns, although it is semi-retired in a backup role.

They custom-design and -build their own trailers. And they have made several attachments for their Walker Mowers including an aerator, a sprayer, a fertilizer spreader and a power wheelbarrow two years in the making. They've also tailored an enormous leaf-handling system for their trailers, customized software for the business operation, built their own operating and storage facility, and designed and built a couple of jacks to facilitate servicing their Walkers.

“Necessity has been the mother of invention,” tells Leatha, who admits at

times that it has been tough doing without. She probably can't count the number of times she and Norman have been inconvenienced by not having a dump bed on their pickup.

They've also learned the value of buying quality equipment and keeping it for a long time, tells Norman. "The Walker is a good example. We purchased our first one in 1991. Before then, we just couldn't find a mower that would hold up. When our dealer told us about the Walker, I was intrigued. It had a simple design, was easy to service and looked very dependable. It did a nice job of mowing, too. But that was really secondary at the time. There are a lot of machines that do a quality job of mowing for two weeks."

That first Walker led to another, and another. Today, Hein Lawn Service operates seven Walkers, five with GHS decks and two with side-discharge decks that also double and triple as sprayers, aerators, fertilizer spreaders, leaf pushers and more.

The leaf pusher is a Norman Hein invention, too. The attachment folds up to get between gates, then unfolds into a large leaf corral. The unit pushes leaves into a pile which is then consumed by the trailer-mounted, 30-hp leaf vacuum.

The Walkers are equipped with 42-inch decks. The bulk of the mowing, which includes approximately 20 acres of lawn a week, is done by four GHS units, leaving the other Walkers to handle other tasks.

Three Hein mowing crews start mowing in early February and continue through the month of December. Cleanup then keeps them busy until the end of January, leaving about one month to get the equipment ready for the next season.

"We mow 35 to 40 times a year," says Leatha. "Each Walker puts on somewhere between 800 and 1,000 hours a year."



The side ramp gives equipment direct access to yards.

NOTHING BORROWED, EVERYTHING GAINED

A few clichés are about the only things the Heins have borrowed over the years. The Walkers were purchased outright, as was everything else concerning their business.

"As I look back, we probably would have been better off to have borrowed money and bought a dump truck," tells Norman. "But we were committed to the idea of being debt-free. That's just the way we do business."

The conservative approach carries over into all areas of the Hein operation. Employees, for example, don't wear uniforms. But they are equipped with all the necessary safety gear.

Leatha relates, "Customers tell us they care more about the quality of work we do than the uniforms our employees might wear." Leatha adds that the company has better places to spend money.

"When you make a commitment to hire employees who have a family, you take on more responsibility," she says. "You have to ensure there is enough work coming in to keep them employed, and see to it that they have a good wage and the benefits needed to sustain their families."

The flip side, she notes, is that smaller companies may find it difficult to supply all their employee wants and needs. But one has to keep the business and the industry in perspective. The money that comes in has to be shared by everyone; to buy and maintain good equipment, to provide a good income, and to train and educate employees.

"Even at our size, we find the biggest challenge today is to maintain the quality of work," Norman says. "We have great employees and they work hard. But 90 high-end accounts

is still a lot of work. I operate a crew, so does Leatha, and so does a 14-year veteran employee named Mark. We've always felt that being small has given us an advantage over larger companies that don't have the same high level of quality control. Yet, we've grown to the point where Leatha and I can't be everywhere. There's only so much time in the day."

UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACH

Hein Lawn Service is a bit unconventional in other ways, too. It has never advertised. In fact, you won't even find the company listed in the Yellow Pages. The only reason the name is on the side of their trucks is because the state requires it as part of having a pesticide application license.

And growth, at least in terms of the number of new customers, is not a priority. "We grow with our current customers by finding ways to be more productive with our equipment and through gaining more knowledge."

The question remains, how has such a "low-profile" company that doesn't advertise end up with the nicest accounts in Wichita?

Norman says, "We listen to our customers, develop close relationships with them, and always leave a property looking its absolute best."

Over the years, Norman has charged a fair price for his work. "But we don't take advantage of our customers," he emphasizes. "Our relationship with customers has truly developed into a partnership." **WT**

Successful lawn maintenance contractors come in all shapes and sizes. That's one of the strengths of this industry. You don't have to be a conformist to succeed.

Large contractors, small contractors, those who operate intermediate walk-behinds and those who operate riders can be equally successful. Some choose to operate

new equipment. Others like the idea of squeezing as much as they possibly can out of their "iron."

This doesn't mean, however, that anarchy reigns. How contractors operate depends in large part on the properties they maintain. And there is one fundamental rule, of course — you have to be profitable to succeed.

Over the years, Wayne Mansfield, owner of Nansemond Lawn & Garden, Suffolk, Virginia, has been profitable and successful. He started a lawn maintenance business in his home town in 1983 because he thought there was a market.

Seventeen years later, he has a solid core group of customers, acts as a mentor to up-and-coming lawn maintenance contractors, and operates a business that generates well over \$1 million annually, primarily in lawn and landscape maintenance.

Form and function drive

Virginia contractor

IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

If you've ever driven around the Chesapeake, Norfolk, Newport News or Virginia Beach areas, chances are you've seen a Nansemond Lawn & Garden crew outfitted with a 1-ton dump truck and 20-foot enclosed trailer. The crews alone will paint a pretty clear picture of Wayne's philosophical approach to business.

Crew members are neat and clean, truck and trailer are freshly washed, and the equipment, including the Walker Mowers, looks nearly showroom-clean.

"I'm real big on image," Wayne tells. "With mostly commercial maintenance accounts, the selling point of my business is how I look. To corporate accounts, image is everything, which means that everything we do has to be image-oriented, from the equipment we operate to the dress code employees follow."

Susan and Wayne want to keep their business at the comfortably uncomfortable level.



Sounds shallow? Not really, especially in an upscale corporate environment where first appearances leave lasting impressions.

Everything the company does may be image-oriented but it also has a pragmatic bent. Having 1-ton dump trucks, for example, gives each crew the ability to dispatch its own grass clippings and debris. In addition to keeping equipment clean and painting a good image, the covered trailers act as rolling billboards.

Wayne prefers full-service contract maintenance accounts to “mow and blow” properties. The former allow him to control the look of the property and his company’s reputation. But they also are more profitable.

“You always need to be stretched a little with equipment and employees.”

And despite the size of his operation — 35 employees, four lawn maintenance crews, four landscape maintenance crews and one installation crew — this owner often finds himself operating a string line trimmer or mower. Doing so leaves a lasting impression with employees who appreciate an owner who is not above doing the things he asks them to do. It also gives him an opportunity to check on properties and the performance of his crews.

The company’s Walker Mowers have form and function, as well. Wayne purchased his first one in 1992 because, he says, crews did a lot of manicure-type mowing. Nothing compared to the Walker’s cut and bagging capability.

But since then, he has found the mowers to be “time savers” and



Nansmond Lawn & Garden equipment and crews reflect the image that corporate accounts require.

“inexpensive to operate.” In fact, today crews operate four 20-hp Walker Mowers with 48-inch GHS decks. The mowers are responsible for the lion’s share of the 6 million square feet of grass the company mows each week. Crews also operate Ransomes riders for wide-area mowing. The Walkers took the place of their intermediate walk-behinds.

“When my dealer left that first Walker for me to try out, I just couldn’t get used to not having a steering wheel,” Wayne remembers. “I was raised on our family farm and was comfortable with riding mowers with steering wheels like tractors

had. So I asked the dealer to take it back. But he was persistent and left another. This time I became convinced I needed it for its bagging capability.”

Now steering wheels are nearly a thing of the past for company mowers, except for one garden tractor — a requisite for an employee who just can’t get used to the idea of steering with levers.

Today, this owner still thanks his dealer for being persistent. He also understands that equipment is only as good as the dealer and the manufacturer that stand behind it. “I can’t imagine a better dealer than Scott

Dodson, owner of Turf and Garden in Chesapeake," Wayne emphasizes. "He takes care of me when I need him, no questions asked."

BEING COMFORTABLY UNCOMFORTABLE

Wayne operates Nansemond Lawn & Garden with his wife Susan who spends most of her day taking care of the "business end" of the operation. For more than 18 years, she juggled the business while operating an antique shop, the essence of which still flavors the office and the shop area.

Antique toy tractors and trucks, along with other memorabilia, share her spacious office. Outside, a neatly maintained service shop with its old-fashioned gas pumps conveys a more laid-back '50s atmosphere, one that partially disguises the frenetic pace of a lawn and landscape operation.

Out of the antique business for two years, Susan says she would

"At first, I just couldn't get used to not having a steering wheel."

never have time to run both operations today. The lawn maintenance business has grown that much, even over the last two years.

Susan and Wayne attribute their recent expansion to the area's overall growth, and their reputation. Last year, they received the First Annual Norfolk Arbor Award and won First Place Commercial Keep Virginia Beautiful Award.

The company is also more involved in landscape installations. In fact, last year they retained a full-



For owner Wayne Mansfield, success in this business is a combination of image and pragmatics.

time landscape architect who now spends most of her time generating computer-enhanced designs for high-end residential accounts.

"The computer images are great selling tools," tells Wayne. "Our designer will take a digital photo of a property, and then place it on the computer with the proposed plant material and hardscape in place. It gives a customer a good feel for what a final design will look like upon completion. Even if we don't sell them on the entire project, we recommend they start with a full design and then, if necessary, complete it in stages."

Walker Mowers equipped with 48-inch GHS decks are responsible for most of the 6 million square feet of grass the company mows weekly.

Although landscaping and maintenance complement one another, the Mansfields see their greatest future growth to be in landscaping. Landscape installation and design is profitable and less labor-intensive than maintenance, which is more labor-challenged than ever thanks to today's employee crunch.

In fact, did Wayne mention the other reason he will at times find himself operating equipment in the field? To fill in for an employee no-show. It happens, he says, no matter how long you've been in business or how good your employees are. Still, maintenance is important, Susan adds, because it keeps the cash flowing year-round.

Ideally then, the couple would like to keep their maintenance business at or near its current level, and concentrate a little more on landscaping. Yet, there is a hitch to no growth, particularly when your maintenance accounts are larger commercial properties.

If a property is lost, so goes a large chunk of revenue stream. "The key is to always operate in the uncomfortable range," tells Wayne. "You always need to be stretched a little with equipment and employees. Then, if you lose a big account, your overhead won't be out of proportion."

Sounds like good advice for any size contractor. And it's probably part of the form and function mini-lecture Wayne gives new contractors who come in asking for advice. He will also talk a little bit about image, and about equipment, which is probably one reason why more and more contractor trailers in the area are hauling around Walker Mowers. **WT**



BOB T'S

Tech Talk

Let's clear the air about air pressure

The amount of air in the tires may be just as important as the amount of oil in the engine. Tire air pressure can affect the following areas: (1) operator safety (2) tire wear and durability (3) levelness of cut (4) ease of movement (5) turf damage (6) comfort of ride. Whether you're a commercial cutter or a homeowner, all of these should be of concern.

OPERATOR SAFETY

Never exceed the maximum operating inflation pressure specified on the sidewall of the tire, or the maximum air pressure specified by the tire manufacturer. That can result in rapid air loss with the possibility of personal injury, death, and/or property damage from the rapidly expanding air and/or fragments from the damaged tire. The use of an air pressure regulator is recommended to help ensure that the maximum air pressure is not exceeded.

TIRE WEAR AND DURABILITY

These are directly affected by air pressure. An inflation pressure exceeding the vehicle manufacturer's recommended operating pressure (but not exceeding the maximum inflation pressure rating of the tire) will cause the tread area of the drive tires to crown or bulge in the center, causing the tires to wear prematurely in the center.

Conversely, under inflation can have similar results. Low air pressure will allow the sidewalls to flex too much, causing excess heat build-up and premature deterioration of rubber and cords in the tire sidewall. The rubber material lining the inside of tires designed for tubeless operation will develop cracks, and the tire will not hold air for extended periods of time. The cords will be damaged and weakened to the point of breaking, which could result in a rapid air loss. Low air pressure will cause premature wear of the outside tread of the drive tires.

LEVELNESS OF CUT

A deck that is not cutting level will give a less than appealing stair step look. There are a number of conditions that can cause this, but this article will only deal with tire air pressure. The pressure from side to side in

either the caster wheels or the drive wheels will have a direct affect on the levelness of cut. The pressure balance from front to rear tires can elevate either the leading or trailing edge of the cutting blades, and affect the quality of the cut. Make sure the pressures on all tires are set to the vehicle manufacturer's recommendations. It is important to have equal inflation pressures from side to side, and balanced inflation pressures from front to rear.

EASE OF MOVEMENT

Under-inflated tires take more power to roll. They will scuff more when turning also. Over-inflated tires will roll easier. But as mentioned before, there are adverse effects. They will slide sideways easier and give less traction on wet grass. Tires set at the recommended pressure will give optimum traction and the least amount of scuffing.

TURF DAMAGE

Over-inflated tires will not give good traction, especially on hills or berms. Because over inflation causes the tires to crown, the tread is not fully utilized. Reduced traction means more spinning and sliding that damages the turf. The crowning affect also means more weight per square inch on the turf, resulting in more marks or grooves in the turf. Under-inflated tires tend to dig in and leave divots when making turns.

COMFORT OF RIDE

When you spend six to 10 hours per day, five to six days a week on your lawn mower, comfort is a serious matter. Here, air pressure is a major factor, too. The higher the air pressure the more firm the ride. Lowering the pressure will soften the ride. But as discussed earlier, going too low has serious drawbacks.

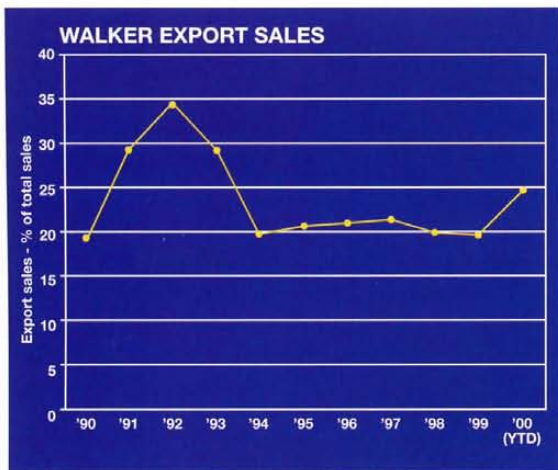
After looking at the pros and cons of high and low air pressure, it's obvious that just like in NASCAR racing, 1/2 to 1 psi can have dramatic results. Following the recommended settings is encouraged, but keep in mind that dropping the pressure slightly when working hillsides or in wet conditions may be beneficial. **WT**

WALKER MOWERS FAMILY REUNION FINAL DETAILS

The stage is set for the Walker Mowers Family Reunion. Registered attendees will receive their final registration packets in late July — this will include complete information about the event and the area around Fort Collins. Registration is still possible by requesting a registration form at 1-877-WALKER50.

WALKER WARE ON THE WEB

The Walker Ware catalog of Walker clothing and collectibles was recently added to the Walker Mower web site (www.walkermowers.com). Available items may be viewed and orders placed on-line with all the convenience of the Web.



EXPORT SALES UP 47%

Walker export sales have increased substantially in the 2000 season and account for 25% of total sales in comparison to 20% for several previous years. What makes this trend even more surprising is the current market situation with the strong U.S. Dollar against foreign currencies which makes USA equipment more expensive in the foreign market. Major export markets for Walker are Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

MOWER MANUFACTURERS PUSHING MID-MOUNT RIDERS

Manufacturers' shipping statistics and industry estimates by OPEI (Outdoor Power Equipment Institute) for 1999 show shipments of commercial riding mowers grew a robust 35% and totaled almost 88,000 units. A big part of the reported increase was due to the expanded offering of the mid-mount zero-turn style machine with shipments of the mid-mounts doubling in 1999. Most industry manufacturers have "jumped on the bandwagon" to offer this type of machine.

In contrast, Walker Mfg. has not followed the industry trend and is not offering a mid-mount. Bob Walker, President of Walker, states, "While we recognize the suitability of the mid-mount design for some mowing applications, we believe the compact, front-cut machine like the Walker

offers a wider range of capability and offers distinct performance advantages for many applications. Consequently, Walker has chosen not to enter the mid-mount market at this time. Rather, we will concentrate and specialize on the Walker front-cut product line."

To help the prospective buyer of a commercial riding mower compare the mid-mount versus the front-cut style machine, Walker is preparing a buyers guide (available Fall 2000). Some of the comparison points include: working on hills, grass collection capability, precision steering and handling, quality mowing, trimming capability, job time and operator comfort.

All this information shows there is much to consider when shopping for a commercial riding mower.

NEW VIDEO SHOWS POSSIBILITIES

Walker has produced a new video program highlighting "Attachments, Options, and Accessories" for Walker Mowers. Current Walker owners and prospective owners will find this presentation a quick and convenient way to become acquainted with all the ways to make a Walker do more, work better and fit the individual owner. Walker owners often say the versatility of the Walker is one of the features they like best.

NEW WALKER DISTRIBUTORS

In late 1999 and early 2000, three new Walker Mower distributors were appointed. Walker Mfg. welcomes AMA s.p.a., San Martino in Rio (RE), Italy; Pro Distributors, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; and Walker Mowers Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, to our distributorship family.



WALKER FACTORY PAID-OFF

On June 9, 2000, 11 years after moving to the new factory, Walker owners and employees celebrated paying off the mortgage. Max, Dean and Bob Walker (left to right in photo) ceremonially burned the loan papers at the monthly plant meeting to symbolize being "free and clear." The Walker family sees reaching this milestone in financial independence in keeping with their goal to remain as an independent, family-owned manufacturing company.



LOADER BUCKET AN AVAILABLE ATTACHMENT

Walker introduces the Loader Bucket attachment which works with the Quick-Change Implement Hitch System on the Walker Tractor.

A versatile tool for landscaping work, the loader bucket will push, scoop, haul and grade dirt, gravel and mulch. It lifts approximately 180 pounds and 2.25 cubic feet of material with 14-inch ground clearance for transport. The Bucket has a high-strength steel cutting edge and tilting action uses a 500-pound electric ram. The optional tail weight counterweight for the Walker Tractor will be required for operation of the loader bucket.

BED LINER FOR UTILITY BED

New for 2001 side-discharge tractors will be the addition of a "Duraflex" vinyl liner in the bottom of the utility bed. The liner will improve the durability and function of the bed, much like the bed liners offered in pickup trucks. Order P/N 8650-10 to install the liner on earlier models.

IMPROVED SAFETY SWITCH SYSTEM ON 2001 MODELS

Two improvements in the safety switch system are being offered on 2001 models to improve reliability, function and safety.

- To improve reliability of the safety switches (three used per machine), a change is being made to a new waterproof switch (it will operate immersed) with a "Packard Weather-Pack" environmentally sealed wire plug connection. These components are designed to completely withstand the dirt and moisture encountered from using and washing the Walker Mower. This improvement is offered on Models MC, MD and MT.
- The function of the safety switch system on Models MC and MT is being upgraded to the same as the MD. The seat switch will add a time delay function to prevent power interruption when going over bumps. The forward speed control (FSC) safety switch will function with the seat switch to stop the engine if the FSC is out of neutral and the operator leaves the seat (previously the seat switch would only work if the PTO had been engaged).



DIE CAST MODEL REPLICA

For the Walker enthusiast or model collector, a 1/16 scale model of the MTGHS Walker Mower has been produced. The model features authentic detail and many moving parts, including a tilt-up deck and a grass catcher that dumps with an opening door. The models will be sold by Walker Ware (see Walker Ware at www.walkermowers.com or call 1-800-420-4334 for pricing and delivery information).

WALKER TALK

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WALKER TALK is published by Cygnus Business Media
1233 Janesville Avenue, Fort Atkinson, WI 53538.
Phone (920) 563-6388. Printed in the U.S., copyright 2000
Canada Post International Publications Mail Product.
Sales Agreement No. 1248022

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 50,000

In a few days, the 50,000th Walker Mower will roll out the door. We will celebrate. It has been 21 years in the making. Some of the big competitors in this industry might say, "What is the big deal? We produce 50,000 mowers in the blink of an eye." To us at Walker Mfg., it is a matter of proportion and knowing who we are. We are not big, but small. We do not apologize for being small. But that sense makes us appreciate the magnificence of this achievement.

There are many people to thank for helping us reach this point. We recognize our suppliers of high-quality component parts and services

that went into delivering a quality product. When there were problems, these suppliers stuck with us, took responsibility and helped us take care of the customers.

There are the dedicated and faithful factory employees. With an average length of service of six years in the company, the employees combined over 800 years of experience in manufacturing Walker Mowers.

Then there are the 1,000 distributors and

dealers who are on the front line with our end-customers — many of these folks took a real risk and staked their reputation on an unknown product and manufacturing company when they introduced the Walker in their market.

We thank our customers; they paid the bills. With an estimated 100 million hours of operating Walker Mowers, we especially appreciate customers who followed instructions and took good care of their Walker Mowers. That made us look good, and helped us build a good reputation for our equipment.

Then we must thank the Lord. He supplied life, health, strength, wisdom, guidance and a wonderful opportunity.



Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President

Walker around the world...

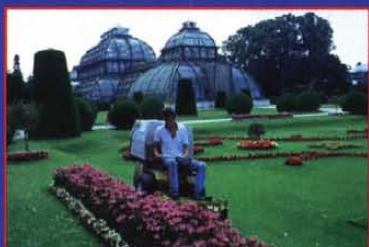
Setting an international standard for
"Fast, Easy, Beautiful Mowing"™



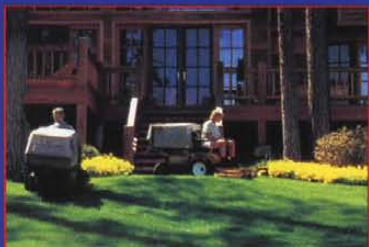
Parliament House • Canberra, Australia



President Mandela's Home • Cape Town, South Africa



Schönbrunn Castle • Vienna, Austria



Residential Property • Kalispell, Montana

■ FAST

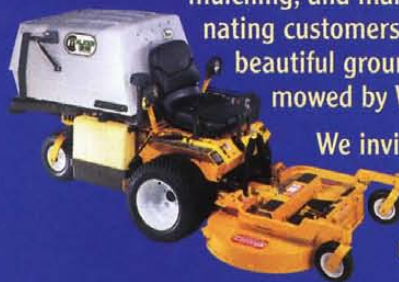
Walker completes the job **fast** using a balance of consistent ground speed, quick maneuvering, and trimming ability. In many applications, Walker wins the job time race, even in comparison to larger mowers with faster ground speed (it is job time that counts).

■ EASY

Walker takes care of the operator with comfortable seating, good visibility, and easy-to-operate, responsive controls providing full productivity and best use of labor.

■ BEAUTIFUL

While "mow and blow" may be an acceptable standard for some mowing jobs, Walker offers beautiful mowing, vacuuming, mulching, and manicuring for discriminating customers. Some of the most beautiful grounds in the world are mowed by Walker.



We invite you to see a demonstration of Walker's "Fast, Easy, Beautiful" mowing on your property.



Schloss Au
Zurich, Switzerland

WALKER MANUFACTURING CO.

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Independent, Family Owned Company Designing and Producing Commercial Riding Mowers since 1980