

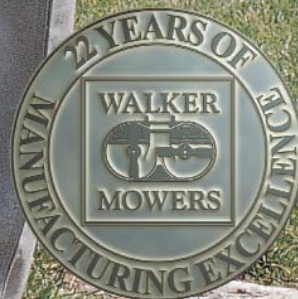
WALKER TALK

10TH ANNIVERSARY

SERVING MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS FOR YEARS COME

Branson's
Majestic
Hotel

TEAMING UP IN DELAWARE
VERMONT PIONEERS HOLD TRUE TO THEIR ROOTS
MOWING ON CAPE COD
WHEN DOWNSIZING MAKES SENSE



VOL. 20

WALKER TALK

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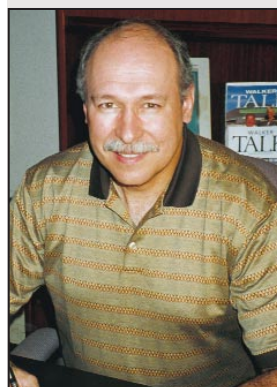
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THE BIG QUESTION AND THE ANSWER

I'll admit a bent toward studying philosophy and an inclination to use the Bible (Holy Scripture) as the source of wisdom. However, for me there must be a practical application that helps us live and be alive (not walking dead). I don't want to be like the person of whom it was said, "They are so heavenly minded, they are of no earthly good." In a practical sense, it helps us live each day, especially the rough, hard days if we have satisfying answers to the big questions like "Why am I here?", "Why am I doing this?", and for the entrepreneur, "Why am I in business?"

The answers to the "whys" will vary for each person;

we each have our mission. For the 8-to-5 worker, a satisfactory answer for their job may be "putting food on the table and a roof over my head." For the capitalist who invests money and resources into a business, a satisfactory answer may be "multiplying money." But I would suggest neither of these answers is satisfactory for the entrepreneur who takes the risk and



puts up with the headaches of birthing and operating their business day to day.

Why is Walker Mfg. in business? We think the best answer is "creating opportunities" for ourselves and others. Sure, we are wanting to provide livelihood and make profit (multiplying money as a means to an end), but the most satisfying answer is found in looking at the opportunities being created by one little company in Colorado USA. To us, it's exciting to be in the manufacturing business, and to look at the "ripple" effect of creating livelihood and opportunities for many other people besides the immediate Walker family ownership — our suppliers, factory employees, distributors, dealers and end-customers all have an opportunity and benefit that would not exist if Walker Mfg. was not in business. Multiplying opportunities is a satisfying answer.

For many of our readers who are entrepreneurs and have your own business, you may also find satisfaction to the "why" when you look beyond yourself and see all of the opportunities you are creating by being in business. It thrills us to hear from our customers that the Walker Mower is helping them create opportunities for themselves and others.

Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President

Mowing lawns is golden ...

For Cape Cod entrepreneur

If someone tells you there's gold in Cape Cod, one of the first things you may think of is a beautiful New England home with a colorful garden. Or maybe you will picture the surf cresting over a sandy beach. For other people, Cape Cod gold can be found in all the fresh fish and chowder they can eat.

When Carl Johnson mentions the word gold, however, he is talking about something entirely different. He is referring to a machine that allows each of his two crews to mow between 25 and 30 lawns a day. He's referring to a machine that allows him to compete in a very competitive market, and that has helped him grow from a one-person operation 13 years ago into one of the best-known landscape contractors in the Falmouth area.

The owner of Johnson & Sons in

Waquoit, Massachusetts, has been a loyal Walker user since he purchased his first Walker Mower in 1994. Today, his two 16-foot trailers carry four 20-hp GHS Walkers, two equipped with 48-inch decks and two with 42-inch decks.

"We stopped using a horse and cart at the turn of the last century, and I'm not about to go back."

"If I can get the Walker on a property, I use it," says Carl, a former Sears small-engine technician. "In fact, it's to the point now that if I can't use the Walker on a property I won't even bid the job. I refuse to use a walk mower anymore, and I won't let my employees use one either. We

stopped using a horse and cart at the turn of the last century, and I'm not about to go back."

The irony is, this entrepreneur is not about to go back one day, let alone an entire century. He spends his days building and improving on his customer base, consolidating routes, and finding efficiencies that will add to his productivity and bottom line. His company maintains somewhere between 175 and 200 properties, with crews spending approximately half of their time mowing and the other half pruning trees, mulching beds, installing flower beds, and overall making vacation homes look their very best for property owners.

CAUTIOUS START

Carl, a Cape Cod native, had worked for Sears for 25 years when a disagreement with his supervisor

Johnson & Sons crews operate with four Walkers, and maintain between 175 and 200 Cape properties every week.



caused him to think about going into business for himself. After discussing his work environment with his wife, Karen, Carl mapped out an exit strategy.

He would repair small engines and mow lawns on the side. After a few years, maybe one or the other would seem promising enough that he could leave his “day job.” Mowing started out rather slowly. The first year, he had eight customers. The second year he had 18. By the third year, however, he had grown his mowing business to 35 customers, and a year later he added 30 more.

“Now, I was working 18 hours a day mowing lawns, repairing small engines and working full-time at my other job,” Carl remembers. “Luckily, my former employer helped move my career along by laying off all of its technicians, including me. Then, I had to decide which way to take my new career. Would it be mowing lawns or repairing small engines?” He chose mowing lawns because it held the most opportunity for him, not to mention his four sons.

POT OF GOLD

Four years before striking out on his own, Carl and Karen were in Toronto visiting Karen’s parents. Says Carl, “I was driving along when I saw a man operating a mower back and forth without even stopping. I drove a mile farther down the road and stopped, all the time thinking to myself that I had never seen a mower do that before. So, I turned around and drove back to talk with the operator. He told me he was using a Walker, and that because of it he could operate with one less employee and make more money. Furthermore, when he came home at night he said he was not fatigued.

“When he opened it up for me and I saw how easy it would be to service, I knew it would be a gold mine for me.”

Carl says wife Karen is the driving force behind the business. She not only gives him daily encouragement, but has also maintained the books from the very beginning, provides customer support, and does the scheduling and routing.

It took Carl four years to buy his first Walker from Dan Staples, the owner of Bayside Equipment located in East Dennis, Massachusetts, but only a week to determine he had made the right decision. During that first week of operation, he was mowing in tall grass and, in his words, “The mower just chewed right through it.” But then the customer failed to warn him about a cast-iron pipe in the middle of his property.

“To me, mowing with a Walker is like skating while sitting down.”

Carl continues the story. “I was mowing along and suddenly heard this loud bang. The mower jumped and the dirt flew. I knew immediately what had happened. I said to myself, ‘I’ve had this mower only a week and now I’ve destroyed it.’” He backed the machine off the pipe and after checking it over, discovered that he was still in business. “I looked at the machine and thought, ‘This mower is indestructible,’” Carl recalls. Of course, he adds, a pipe like that would normally raise havoc with any machine. He was fortunate to escape without any damage.

Over the years, however, Carl says he has found other ways to use



and sometimes abuse his mowers. But he purchased them for their mowing ability, and it is mowing where they truly shine.

“For mowing the types of properties we mow, with lots of landscaping and obstacles, and having customers who want their grass clippings picked up, I don’t believe anyone could design a better product,” Carl adds. “We have the 42-inch decks so we can access properties with gates, and use the larger decks on wider areas. Because the grass-handling system is designed as part of the machine, it is not cumbersome at all and allows us to mow places where other operators can’t get. Yet, it’s the handling that still impresses me the most. To me, mowing with a Walker is like skating while sitting down.”

Carl’s properties average around 5,000 square feet of lawn. He operates two three-person crews, with two members of each crew operating a Walker and one doing the trimming and blowing. He uses this same configuration on small and large properties alike. The smaller the property the shorter the stay, Carl notes. “After all, these are vacation homes, and property owners would rather have us make a lot of noise and stay a few minutes rather than



Carl with third-year employee Wendy Edwards. Says Edwards, “We are fast, but speed isn’t Carl’s top priority; quality is.”



Each of Carl’s four sons has worked in the business, including Adam, pictured here mowing a typical Cape property.

making less noise, but staying around for a longer period of time.”

This owner/operator has gained other insight from working on the Cape for so many years. For example, when it comes to bidding on properties, he has learned that the timeliness of getting information to customers is just as important, if not more important, than the bid price. Hence, the first contractor to show

up with a price for customers will more than likely get the job. Carl says he wins nearly 80% of the properties he bids.

In addition, he has learned to spread out his risks by not allowing any one account to be more than 10% of his business. As he explains, “Customers come and go on the Cape. Contractors can easily replace smaller customers. But bigger ones,

ones for which you may actually have to buy new equipment or retain new employees in order to provide service, are more difficult to find and replace.”

NUMBERS GAME

Carl has no regrets about going into business for himself. All four sons have participated in the operation. Two of them, Adam and Brandon, are still with him today. Since launching his new career, Carl says the Cape has gone through several changes, not the least of which are rising property values and an increase in the number of people who want to provide service to property owners.

The changes have required Carl to increase the number of properties he mows, and to become more efficient in the process. Outlying properties lost by attrition are replaced by closer-in customers and, as he mentioned before, if a Walker can’t be used on the property he turns it down. He estimates that each mower makes him somewhere in the vicinity of \$35 to \$40 per hour, a figure that goes up substantially when properties are both small and in close proximity.

Is more growth imminent? “Not really,” says Carl. “We have eight employees plus my wife and me. I’m at my management capacity. I know that, and I don’t want to ruin a good thing. We will look to increase revenue by becoming more efficient, not by retaining more employees. That’s where the Walkers will continue to play an important role.

“I go to the lawn and garden show in Boston every year and always keep my eye out for something, for some mower that may be more efficient than my Walkers. I haven’t seen anything that comes close, yet. That doesn’t surprise me, however. I wouldn’t be in business without these machines.” **WT**

Mark Wright (sitting) with grounds crew members Jordan Munday (left) and Tim Warnack. Together, they operate the Walker eight to 10 hours a week from February through November or December.



Chateau on the Lake

Majestic hotel gives Branson a new dimension.

What first comes to your mind when you think of Branson, Missouri? If you say Bobby Vinton and several dozen other entertainers, you wouldn't be alone. Neither would you be if you mentioned the Ozarks, and the fishing and hiking that goes with the territory. But castles? What do these symbols of Medieval Europe have to do with Branson? Just ask anyone who has visited Chateau on the Lake.

This 300-room, four-diamond hotel rises majestically above Table Rock Lake just a few miles from downtown Branson. This elegant facility, one of 55 properties operated by John Q. Hammons Hotels Inc., features deluxe accommodations, exceptional dining, and a convention center large enough to host 4,000 guests. Included is a 32,000-square-foot "Great Hall" replete with beautiful chandeliers, detailed trim and spectacular hand-painted murals of famed European castles.

BEAUTY ON THE INSIDE, AND OUT

Although the hotel and convention center is designed to conjure up images of an older world's charm, the facility itself and its surroundings are anything but Medieval.

The Walker, a Scag mid-size for steep hills, and a small walk-behind for small garden areas handle all the mowing on the 40-acre property.

Jordan Munday puts the Walker through its paces on a natural obstacle course.

Mark Wright has been the landscaper and grounds manager since Chateau on the Lake opened five years ago, and it is his responsibility to ensure that the property looks as inviting on the outside as it is charming and elegant on the inside.

"As groundskeepers, we have three primary challenges," says Mark, who graduated from the University of Missouri with a degree in horticulture. "The first is to contend with the hot summers and drying winds that work to evaporate moisture. Then there is the solid rock base that lurks beneath only a few inches of topsoil. The rocks facilitate water runoff and retain heat, which accentuates water evaporation."

The weather and soil conditions, however, don't stop Mark and his crew of three grounds people from planting more than 200 flats of annuals in the spring and 5,000 bulbs in the fall. In between, they are changing out shrubs, and enhancing and designing flower beds that impart both a colorful and serene setting for hotel and convention goers.

"I feel fortunate to be able to work here, and consider myself an ambassador for the hotel," Mark explains. "I've always enjoyed the hospitality business, and working here gives me an opportunity to practice my life's vocation, horticulture, in a spectacular hospitality setting."

KING OF THE HILL

The other challenge is the hilly terrain so characteristic of the Ozarks. Mark says, "The terrain not only challenged architects, engineers and contractors who designed and built the hotel, but it was a concern of mine as well. One of the first questions I asked myself was 'How am I going to mow the grass?'"

The answer, he explains, came from his assistant who told about a lawn mower he once operated at another Branson location. The property, owned by a famous novelist, was also very

hilly. But the little "yellow mower," he recalls, handled it without difficulty.

Mark traveled to the property, saw the mower, and then visited the Walker dealer in nearby Springfield. "I took the mower for a demonstration ride behind the shop. The terrain there was very hilly, too. When the mower negotiated the hills with ease, I knew it would be ideal for the hotel property."

The hotel purchased a 20-hp Walker with a 42-inch GHS deck, along with a broom attachment and a dethatcher. The mower is used eight to 10 hours a week. In addition to the mower's cut, Mark says two features truly stand out.

"I'm an old farm boy and appreciate what a low center of gravity means," says Mark. "One of the first things I noticed was how stable the Walker was. Also, the outfront deck design allows us to mow close under our white pine trees, saving a lot of additional trimming time." Collected grass clippings, he adds, are composted on site and later used to enhance the soil.

"I'm an old farm boy and appreciate what a low center of gravity means."

Despite the Walker's versatility, Mark's crew still employs a small walk-behind mower for tight garden spaces, and a mid-size Scag mower for side hills too steep for the Walker. The equipment, in combination with Mark's hands-on approach, works to keep the grounds manicured throughout the growing season.

"I generally leave the mowing to my crew unless we get a little behind," Mark explains. "My first love is caring for the annuals and the other plantings on the property." Indeed, Mark leaves little to chance, designing the flower beds and hand-picking the flowers from nurseries as far away as Kansas.



Mark's crew will mow and maintain the property from late February through November or even December, depending on the weather. Their charge is to keep the grounds looking consistently nice, and to make sure it has that special touch for weekends and special events such as the Miss USA Coronation Ball held at the Chateau on the Lake in 1999 and 2000.

As much as the hotel and convention center resembles some of those famed castles in the murals, it has one major point of difference. It is as far from a still painting as the 21st century is from Medieval times.

The property is alive with activity. And when Mark's crew isn't mowing and maintaining the grounds, it is tidying them up, directing traffic, and even giving tours. In fact, the day *Walker Talk* visited, Mark nonchalantly offered his services to a guest who was taking a photo of his wife.

"Would you like me to take the photo so you can both be in the picture?" he asked. The guest, of course, obliged, and so did Mark, making sure the couple was framed between the majestic structure in the background and his landscaping in the foreground. After all, the two work together to ensure guests receive the full Chateau on the Lake experience. **WT**



Bigger isn't always better

When downsizing makes sense

Can you recognize the signs that indicate you've grown too fast or that you've become too big? If you recognize them early enough, there's plenty of time to take your foot off the business accelerator and regain control of your operation. If you don't, there is the danger that your business, not you, will end up doing the driving.

Walker owner Sid Burcham recognized the signs five years ago. "At the time, I had been in business 10 years and was getting tired of trying to keep up," he recalls. "I was routinely staying up until 2 or 3 a.m. watching the weather channel. Most mornings I would leave before my children got up and by the time I came home, they were already in bed. It was not unusual to go two or three days without seeing them at all."

Looking back, Burcham, who owns Terra Vista Landscapes in Wichita, Kansas, says one of the reasons he kept growing his business was to be able to pay his key employees enough money so they would stay with him. Ironically, five years ago, his

best employee left anyway to start up his own business. Instead of looking for another top employee, however, Burcham decided to downsize, and has never felt better about his operation. In five years, he went from having 14 employees to having just one.

"Since downsizing, we've been more selective about the kind of work we do, and we're able to charge a higher-end price for our services."

He relates, "By downsizing, I was able to focus in tight on my market niche and keep my best customers. I was also able to take better care of my equipment, including my two Walker Mowers."

OTHER SIGNS

Green industry consultant Marty Grunder points to other signs that your business may be out of control.

"One of the first signals that you may be getting too big, too fast is an increase in the number of unhappy customers," says Grunder, who is president of Grunder Landscaping Co. and The Winner's Circle, both located in Miamisburg, Ohio. As he points out, a fall-off in work quality, response time, or following up on customer requests are sure signs that something is amiss.

Char Kellogg, who with husband Kim operate Grasshopper Property Maintenance in Millersburg, Ohio, agrees. "When we were starting our fifth year in business, our only real competitor sold his equipment and accounts. He notified his customers just before the season started that he was going out of business, and they started calling us. We knew the extra work was a bit of a stretch for us, but hey ... we were good!"

In response to the business boom, Grasshopper Property Maintenance purchased another Walker, a new truck and a new trailer. Char says they also hired bodies rather than team members, and took on a landscape job that was far too big for them.

"We couldn't resist the temptation to do so because it was in a highly visible location," she remembers. "Unfortunately, the customer was a late payer, and the cash flow crunch nearly did us in. To make matters worse, it rained, and rained, and rained, and we fell further behind in all areas. The quality of our service declined. It was the only year that we broke commitments to customers. It was a very humiliating and humbling experience."

Failure to make money can be another sign of growing too fast, Grunder notes. Burcham, for example, says that since he downsized, his profit margins have gone up substantially. In his words, "Netting 35% of \$100,000 is better than netting 8% of \$300,000."

Fourteen years ago, Rich McClure & Son Landscape in Bethel, Connecticut, employed 16 people and generated \$1.3 million in annual revenue. "On one Monday, we deposited \$114,000," remembers Rich McClure. "On Wednesday of that same week, our checking account was overdrawn. That was a wake-up call for us, and we decided it was time to downsize."

"We paid \$75,000 in insurance that year, our equipment was constantly broken, we had to do big jobs to make it worthwhile for us, and our cash flow was killing us. For the remainder of that year, we didn't take any new work, and the following year we reorganized. Now, with four employees, we retain 33% of our annual gross. We're more relaxed, all of our bills are paid, and life is so much easier."

LEARNING TO SAY NO

"You can't be everything to everybody," Sid Burcham relates. "Over the past five years, I've found my niche and I stay with it." In other words, he has learned when to say no.

Char Kellogg and her husband learned several hard but valuable

lessons from their experience, as well. Among them, they now measure their workload more carefully, and try to be up front with customers about what they are and are not capable of doing. Char adds, "We even turn down business now, even though it's still always tempting to take on too much."

As for Rich McClure, he says, "Since downsizing, we've been more selective about the kind of work we do, and we're able to charge a higher-end price for our services."

GETTING AND KEEPING CONTROL

Grunder mentions more warning signs. One is an increase in employee turnover rate. Employee turnover in this industry is a given. Yet, keeping it under control and keeping employees relatively satisfied is nearly a full-time job in itself, he points out. When a business grows without the systems in place to train, reward, and promote employees, these same employees will leave.


Grasshopper Property Maintenance, for example, now has a mentoring program in place for new employees, and the owners work hard at developing systems (load sheets, reporting forms, etc.) to streamline the work and increase communication, efficiency and accountability.

"Think systems, systems, systems," says Grunder. "With them, you have a fighting chance to grow successfully. Without them, your risk of failure increases dramatically." He provides a couple of examples. "Too many landscape contractors fail to keep good enough records to know if they're making money in the first place. If they keep records, the challenge, then, is knowing from month to month where they stand in respect to projections rather than waiting until year-end, when making any change is too late."

Many company owners today are afraid to tell customers that

they're in business to make money. "No matter who you are, you can't make money if your pricing isn't right," Grunder emphasizes. "Pricing problems, too, become pronounced as a company grows."

Grunder even has a system to head off customer complaints and measure the level of satisfaction with his company's service. As he points out, "If an increase in customer complaints is one indication of a 'growing' problem, then, communicating with customers and heading off those complaints is part of the solution. We routinely call customers after a job and ask them to participate in a four-minute survey about our service. We log the survey responses into an Excel spreadsheet and track results. If, in any area, we see a trend that indicates our service is anything but 'exceeding expectation,' we know we have a situation that requires some immediate attention."

Growth and becoming a big operator isn't for everyone. At times, however, it may appear there is no alternative. When the phone keeps ringing and customers keep asking for more services, the natural response is to buy more equipment and hire more people. But successful growth can't occur in a vacuum. Some contractors have the management skills and systems in place to handle growth, but others may not. If you're one of the latter, knowing the warning signs that your business is getting out of control, and acting upon them, may spare you grief and possibly help save your business. 

WARNING SIGNS

Think you're growing too fast or getting too big? Keep an eye out for these warning signs:

- Consistently working far too many hours
- Hardly ever spending quality time with your family
- Failure to make money; profit margins are shrinking
- Sudden increase in your employee turnover rate
- Increase in number of customer complaints

Complete lawn care

Providing full service with a team twist



When Steve Quillen says Grass Roots Inc. is a mowing company first, he means it. Each week, mowing crews tackle 470 properties in and around their home base of Wilmington, Delaware. The company, which targets high-end homeowners, gets the job done efficiently and effectively with a fleet of nine vehicles, seven Walker Mowers, and 14 full- and part-time employees.

But mowing is not the entire story, adds Steve, who, with brother Dave and partner Jim Whittaker, started the business 14 years ago. In his words, "Grass Roots will do whatever it takes to keep a customer satisfied." What does that mean? Simply this, he relates. "If customers want their lawns fertilized, we plug them into our lawn care team member. If customers want a new landscape design, we

bring in our design member."

Both Dave and Steve say the team concept has worked beautifully from the very beginning. It allows them to focus on what they do best, providing mowing and maintenance services, while, at the same, giving customers that all important one-stop shopping.

This unique way of generating business and providing services is the brainchild of Larry Iorii, owner of Down to Earth Inc., also of Wilmington. In business 28 years, Larry provides full-service landscaping to a base of 500 customers, 200 of whom he considers to be "regulars."

"Just about the time Grass Roots was getting into business, I realized I couldn't continue to maintain the level of quality I wanted to maintain," says Larry. "I was trying to be everything to everybody. Ironically, it was when Grass Roots assumed one of my mowing accounts that it

dawned on me how a team approach might work."

Larry said that because of his relationship with the Professional Grounds Management Society (PGMS) he already knew companies had their strengths. Some specialized in mowing; others in lawn care; and others in design and installation. If he could form a team comprised of companies with specific strengths, he would have a leg up on competition, and continue to grow his business without sacrificing quality.

TEAMING UP

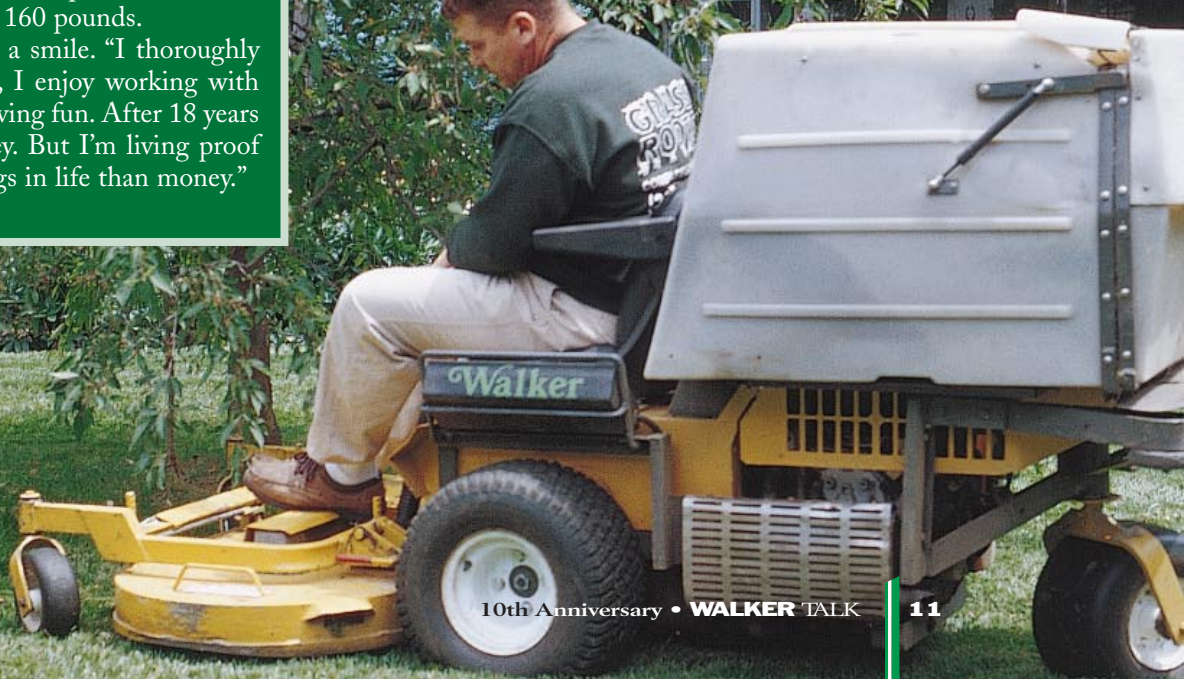
When Larry approached Grass Roots about the idea, the three partners jumped at the opportunity to instantly grow their new business. Larry gave them the opportunity to assume all of his mowing accounts, and the team, as they say, was underway. Today, Grass Roots generates more than \$100,000 of its annual

HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Anyone who sees Steve Quillen for the first time would never believe he weighed 240 pounds and had high blood pressure. That was the Steve of old when he managed a retail store, didn't exercise, and let the pressures of the job build up inside. Today, he's not on blood pressure medication, and his weight is down below 160 pounds.

"What can I say?" he says with a smile. "I thoroughly enjoy what I'm doing. I'm outside, I enjoy working with Dave and Jim, and I'm just plain having fun. After 18 years in retail, I was making good money. But I'm living proof that there are more important things in life than money."

The Walkers' versatility and dependability not only make them valuable team members, but give Grass Roots a leg up on competition. Here, Dave shows how easy it is to trim under trees.





Steve (left) and Dave Quillen operate a mowing company first. Yet, the team concept allows them to be a one-stop shop for customers.

revenue working with the team.

“Grass Roots makes a little less on a team job than working alone,” Larry notes. “But in return, it is guaranteed payment and job security as long as they want to maintain the property.” The same approach applies to lawn care and the other team member, Jason Hoferer, owner of Absolute Lawn Care in nearby Warwick, Maryland. Larry talked with Jason about the team concept while on a ski trip nine years ago. Jason has been a member of the team ever since.

“One of the things that makes us successful is the fact that we communicate with each other on a daily basis,” says Jason, who generates

approximately 15% of his business on team projects. “I know Grass Roots’ mowing schedule, and make sure properties are fertilized at the right time. I also get to store some of my equipment at its shop, and I benefit from referrals.”

In fact, in addition to teaming up on “community” projects, all members benefit from referring each other to jobs. “If I have a customer who is looking for a mowing contractor, I send them to Grass Roots,” says Jason. “It works that way for all of us.”

The other thing that makes the arrangement successful is trust, adds Dave. “We trust each other implicitly. We know we’re not going to try to

steal an account from one another. And we’re also pretty open with our books and financials. If one of us needs a little extra money to get through a slow period, a team member will provide a low-interest loan if he is in a better financial situation.”

Another benefit? Team members not only divvy up the service offering on a property, they share responsibility. Dave tells, “One of us is on a team property almost every day. If we see a developing problem, we alert the team member whose responsibility it is, and the problem is fixed before the customer even knows it existed.”

SILENT MEMBER

There’s a fourth team member, according to Steve. It doesn’t talk and it doesn’t attend meetings. But it is just as important, he emphasizes. That member is the Walker Mower. Grass Roots has been using the mower since 1989 when it purchased a 16-hp GHS model. Today, that machine is joined by six others, all either 20- or 25-hp units with 42- or 48-inch GHS decks. The company also operates two 62-inch side-discharge decks.

“We know there are faster mowers on the market, but pure speed is not high on our priority list,” says Steve. “The mowers are dependable, we can use them on nearly all of our properties, and they’re versatile. Best of all, nothing compares to their cut. Our customers are pretty picky, and we can’t afford to operate a mower that doesn’t deliver a consistently good cut. We’ve tried others, and nothing comes close.”

Dave, who is the resident company technician, agrees, noting that from changing the oil to replacing the starter, the Walker is an easy machine to work on. In fact, he says he “enjoys” maintaining them. Even more enjoyable, he says, is operating them during leaf pickup season.

“One of the reasons we purchased the Walker originally was the way it handles leaves,” Dave recalls. “It does three jobs at once. It cuts the grass, picks it up along with the leaves, and it stripes. When used in combination with our three truck loaders, leaf pickup has been a breeze.”

“We know there are faster mowers on the market, but pure speed is not high on our priority list.”

Grass Roots takes leaves and grass clippings to an area farm and, in the course of a year, literally fills up a five-acre field. The farmer turns the material with a tractor loader and uses it for fertilizing fields. “We like the arrangement,” Steve adds. “We like the fact that we’re recycling our clippings, and it is not as expensive as dumping in our local landfill.”

According to Steve and Dave, the Walker Mower provides a big point of difference for their operation. Customers also appreciate their overall dependability as a company, not to mention their attention to detail.

“It may seem hard to believe, but our customer retention rate has been well above 90% for the last four years,” says Steve. “We won’t lose customers because we won’t give them a reason to leave. The fact that we can offer full service with other team members works to keep competition off their properties, too. It all adds up.”

THREE-WAY SPLIT

When the Grass Roots partners started their company, friends and family both told them it wouldn’t work because they wouldn’t be able to agree on important business decisions. They proved them wrong. All three came from different backgrounds, and each brought a different strength to the table. Jim was a teacher and maintains the books and scheduling. Dave worked for Dupont for 10 years and now handles the repairs and manages the mowing crew. Steve was in retail for 18 years and is in charge of the detail crews that prune, mulch, weed, and install flowers and shrubs.

Both Steve and Jim are active past presidents of the Delaware branch of PGMS, and also are members of the Delaware Association of Nurserymen. Of course, the partners don’t always agree all the time, but they usually find a way to compromise and come to a mutually agreeable decision. Says Steve, “We all have one thing in common, too. We have a passion for our work.”

“We’ve also been very fortunate to have some loyal employees. Four of them are brothers who have

been with us for years. They understand our system and our expectations of them.”

Steve goes on to say that the company pays its employees a good wage, and sees itself about half way up the price pecking order. “We’re not the most expensive company in town, but we’re not the cheapest, either. Our minimum price for mowing any property is \$30. And, as a rule, we strive to get \$35 per employee per hour, depending on the job.”

Half of the company’s customers are on yearly or eight-month contracts; the others pay when service is rendered. Each year, Steve says they push to convert more to contracts. “Contracts are a win-win situation for both the customer and us,” he emphasizes. “It gives them an opportunity to budget for the year, and helps maintain cash flow for us.”

What does the future hold for Grass Roots? For starters, Steve says they’re trying to build on current customers rather than seeking new business. “Again, our focus is really to be able to provide any service within reason that our customers want,” he emphasizes. “We can do that within the confines of the team, or we can

add to our own service offering. For example, we’ve recently installed a couple of irrigation systems and plan to do more. Larry has also suggested that we develop a niche, to become an expert in a particular aspect of lawn maintenance, such as drainage. This, in addition to the work we do as team members, should help ensure our future.”

WT



Steve Quillen (left) with team member Jason Hoferer. Communication is one of the reasons why the team approach works so well, says Jason.

The pioneering spirit lives on in central Vermont



The DLM team (left to right) Kurt, Mike, Dave and Brenda.

Ask Dave Hawkins of East Calais, Vermont, if he's a pioneer, and he'll probably just shrug his shoulders and say, "Not at all." His family roots are planted deep beneath the Green Mountains that highlight the state.

Ask again, and you'll start hearing the story of how he comes from generations of dairy farmers, how he and his wife of 34 years, Brenda, sold their cows in 1983, and how he went through 12 jobs the following year, hunting for something that would satisfy both his work ethic and independent spirit. When nothing came up, he started knocking on doors asking folks if they needed any yard work done.

"Dave was one of the first people in the area to get the lawn maintenance ball rolling," tells Brenda. "There weren't many companies doing lawn maintenance, and there surely weren't many that were going door to door asking for the business." Dave persisted, however, and his first job marked the beginning of Diversified Landscape Maintenance.

Dave muses a bit over the company name. "Before we went out of the dairy business, a county agent told us we needed to diversify. Imagine that, we had more than 60 registered Holstein cows, an equal number of heifers, and a farm to support them — and we had to diversify. So, when we started our lawn maintenance company, it just made sense to call it Diversified Landscape Maintenance." Today, Dave has shortened it to DLM.

FAST FORWARD

Officially, this will be DLM's 14th mowing season. The company is family-owned and -operated. In addition to Dave and Brenda, the two other mainstays are son Kurt and son-in-law Michael Burnor. Among the four of them, they mow upwards of 60 acres of grass weekly.

"Correction," says Brenda, who heads up the admissions department at nearby Goddard College. "I don't mow, but instead enjoy designing and installing flower beds." In

between, she handles all the accounts payables and receivables, along with other bookkeeping responsibilities.

During busy season, the company employs seasonal help. And for big projects, Kurt and Michael recruit a couple of friends to pitch in. Otherwise, it's full steam ahead with the four of them. "Yes, you could say we're a little over-extended," says Dave. "In fact, by the middle of May we were booked solid through July. But that's the nature of this business, and the alternative is less than attractive."

"The Walker Mower has to be one of the best kept secrets in the area."

What is the nature of their business?

DLM offers a full spectrum of landscape services, excluding weed and pest control. Approximately 80% of its work, however, is mowing — mowing commercial properties, including six condominiums, a college and a church — and more than 40 residential properties.

The team mows four days a week, and saves the fifth day and sometimes part of Saturday for landscaping projects. As Dave explains, landscaping is generally more lucrative than mowing, but they're "comfortable" mowing, and it has buttered their bread over the years and will continue to do so. Many of their commercial accounts are on either six- or 12-month contracts (including snow removal), which helps with the cash flow and covers most of their expenses, adds Brenda.

DLM gets the mowing done with the help of four Walker Mowers. The lineup includes two 20-hp units, a 16-hp and a 25-hp. They are equipped with either a GHS or side-discharge deck, and two have more than 3,000 hours each on them.

"We purchased our first Walker in 1991 after seeing one for the first time at a lawn and garden fair," Dave remembers. "I knew immediately it was what I wanted. When we started in business we had a John Deere steering wheel mower

and graduated to a Country Clipper. At the time, we thought the Country Clipper was a Cadillac, and it was a good mower. But then we found the Walker and nothing has compared to it since. The biggest difference, I think, is in the steering. They're so easy to steer and maneuver that by day's end you don't feel nearly as fatigued as you do with other mowers."

Michael and Kurt both agree. "We pride ourselves in the fact that we do good work," says Kurt, who joined the company full time in 1995 after four years in the Army. "The Walker gave us an opportunity to do more work, and even better work, in the same amount of time it used to take with our other mowers." Michael, who joined the family operation in 1998, notes that the mowers are effective even on the hills, and Vermont has plenty of hills, he quickly adds.

The Walker blended in nicely with Dave's pioneering spirit. The mower allowed him to become one of the first contractors in the area to stripe lawns, and DLM is still one of the few companies, if not the only company in central Vermont, to operate a Walker.



Kurt (in foreground) with brother-in-law Mike. Both pride themselves in doing good work. Says Kurt, who joined the company full time in 1995, "The Walker gave us an opportunity to do more work and even better work in the same amount of time it used to take with our other mowers."

"The Walker Mower has to be one of the best kept secrets in the area," Dave explains, noting that other area contractors either haven't discovered the mower or think it is too costly compared to others on the market. He doesn't

mind being unique, however, since the mowers give him a competitive advantage. In his words, "When we were in the dairy business, it always made economic sense to buy the best calves possible because they ultimately became your biggest milk producers. Now that we're in the mowing business, it only makes sense to operate the best mower that money can buy."

LEARNING ON THE JOB

Although there are plenty of similarities between operating a lawn maintenance business and farming, DLM still

had to climb a learning curve to get where it is today. Knowing how to price was a tough lesson to learn.

Dave recalls, “Years ago, we quoted a mowing job to a lady for whom we had done some landscaping. I told her it would cost \$45 to mow her lawn, and added quickly that I knew it was a little pricey. She pointed a finger at me and said, ‘I’ll be the one to determine that.’ I felt so small, but I learned right then and there that you can’t assume to know your customers, and shouldn’t be ashamed to ask the price you need to make a decent profit. Today, we can’t drop a tailgate for less than \$25, no matter how small the lawn is.”



Dave says the Walker has to be one of the best kept secrets in the area.

essentially tapered the trim from the 2.5-inch mowing height to nothing right next to the house foundation. It looked neat and it stayed that way until our next visit.”

Dave was a fast study. He listened to his customers and learned from them. He also imparted his own knowledge of soil management gleaned from his farming days. “We’re not licensed to apply pesticides and herbicides in part because of the stringent laws regarding their use,” he says, adding that, as a general rule, weed and pest controls are overused anyway. Weeds, he notes, can be kept to a minimum by ensuring that the soil pH is right, and that lawns are given an opportunity to become thick and lush.

“We bid a property recently and the owner told me that we weren’t the lowest bid. I looked at him and said, being the cheapest has never excited me.”

DLM charges somewhere between \$25 and \$100 per mowing for most of its residential properties. The cost is dependent on the size of the property, its location from the shop, and the degree of difficulty. “We probably get somewhere around \$30 to \$35 an hour for mowing a lawn,” Dave says. “That’s not as much as some parts of the country, but competition in central Vermont has increased recently because of area layoffs. When people are laid off, they simply purchase a mower. Since their overhead is low, they can charge a lot less than us.” This makes the Walkers even more important, he emphasizes, because they allow his crews to mow fast and still deliver a quality cut.

Dave has learned other lessons, too. Early on in his lawn maintenance career, for example, a customer asked him why he had failed to trim the grass around her house the last time he visited her property. When he said he did, she showed him the correct way to trim.

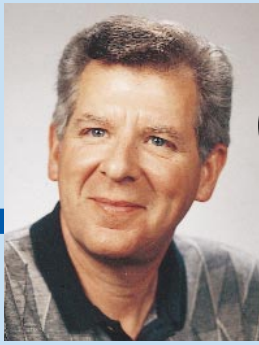
“I was trimming the grass with a weed trimmer to the same height that we had mowed the lawn,” Dave relates. “Because of the heat, the grass around the house grew faster than the rest of the lawn, and by the time I returned, it appeared that I had failed to trim it. She took the trimmer from my hand and said, ‘Trim at an angle like this.’ She



Mike, Dave and Kurt (left to right) mow four days a week, and save Friday and, if necessary, part of Saturday for landscape projects. Although landscaping is more lucrative than mowing, says Dave, mowing has buttered their bread over the last years, and will continue to do so.

A strong work ethic in combination with experience and know-how grew more than healthy landscapes for DLM’s customers. The company’s reputation, grew, as well. Today, Dave, Brenda, Kurt and Michael take exceptional pride in their work, no matter if it’s mowing, designing and installing flower beds, or doing those little extra things customers are not used to having done.

“We bid a property recently and the owner told me that we weren’t the lowest bid,” Dave recalls. “I looked at him and said, being the cheapest has never excited me.” Being the best does, though, and he means it when he says, “The first time I leave a property and know I haven’t done the best job possible will be the last job I do.” Unfortunately, that means retirement for this pioneer will be a long ways away. **WT**



BOB T'S *Tech Talk*

GHS - “The System”

GHS - Grass Handling System. The key word here is system, because that is what it truly is. Webster's Dictionary defines system as: (1) a group of units so combined as to form a whole and to operate in unison, (2) the body as a functioning whole, (3) regular method or order. The components that make up the Walker grass catcher are a system; all working together to form a unique and precise tool. The emphasis here is on “all”. Let's take a close look at each component — their function and how they form a whole:

The deck. What makes a deck? A housing, blades and a drive make up the basics. If only it were that simple. Besides the mechanics of whirling blades cutting the grass, the other major factor is “air flow”. There is a continuous cycle of the blades drawing air into the housing (from around the skirt), lifting and cutting the grass, pulling and pushing the air and grass clippings from the deck to the catcher box and expelling the air. Two blades whose tips are passing each other at 18,000 feet per minute create an enormous amount of turbulence. Controlling and directing the turbulent flow of air and grass clippings is the function of the baffles, vanes and cap strips (edging around the housing). The grass is lifted, cut and directed to the discharge opening. Deck design is a delicate balance between smooth cutting and not clogging. The very components that control the air can also cause the grass clippings to “hang up” resulting in clogging. At this point the blower takes over.

The blower. It has two functions: (1) suck the grass out of the deck discharge and (2) blow it into the catcher box. Within the limited amount of space available the housing and fan must work with peak efficiency. The number, shape and angle of the fan blades will determine the efficiency. In addition, the sound level becomes a critical factor. Blades moving through the air at high speed can be very noisy indeed. What's next?

The catcher box. This is a very complex dumping ground. Distributing the great volume of grass in an orderly manner is first. The shape, size and angle of the

discharge chute determines the flow and placement of the grass (wet or dry). How well the grass is packed into a given space will directly affect the amount of time between dumpings. An oscillating chute is used to get even distribution — not moving too fast and not too slow. Let's consider now the amount of airflow created by the blades and blower that is all being directed into the catcher box. That air is not going to just disappear on its own. There must be a well-calculated means of escape for the air without taking the grass with it. The exhaust screen, discharge opening and exhaust deflector are key to the entire system. Also, an efficient catcher box needs a full signal to let the operator know it's time to empty, and to prevent overfilling and clogging the system.

The components that make up the Walker grass catcher are a system; all working together to form a unique and precise tool.

The chutes. These tie or connect the major components together. Just as a pipeline provides a means of flow from a pump to the storage tank, so the chutes provide the flow from the deck to blower and on to the catcher box.

This isn't rocket science. Or maybe it is! To get the “fast, easy, beautiful” cut desired, this system must work at and be maintained as close to 100% as possible. Maintenance, maintenance, maintenance will directly affect production and profit. It's a fact that any and all of the components can and will become worn or damaged. Damage is usually easy to spot and repair. Wear and its effects happens slowly and subtly. The same goes for debris buildup. The point here is to create an awareness of the whole. It must all work in unison — “the system”. **WT**



“WALKER” TRAILER HITS THE ROAD

Awareness of the Walker brand in the Midwest and Western states will increase as the newly lettered trailer (shown here) takes the road. Primarily used for weekly delivery of component parts to the Walker factory, the trailer will be a moving billboard along these routes.

RECALL BULLETINS

Four recall bulletins, issued or revised in May 2002, are of particular concern to Walker Mower owners. All owners of the affected units are encouraged to have their machines inspected and updated free of charge by contacting their local Walker dealer (contact the factory if there is difficulty finding your dealer). The following units are affected:

Bulletin #1134A: All Mower decks S/N DX-2203 thru DX-69788, replace deck counterweight springs.

Bulletin #1135A: Model MT26 (EFI) S/N 98-37480 thru 00-48156, reposition and clamp fuel filter.

Bulletin #1143A: Model MC S/N 01-49578 thru 01-50804 and Model MD/MT S/N 01-49592 thru 01-51259, possible instrument panel wiring error.

Bulletin #2150: Model MT26 (EFI) S/N 01-54912 thru 02-58437, install fuel pump protector plate.

FACTORY ADDITION NEARLY COMPLETED

Finishing work on the building and installation of the powder coating system are all that remain to complete the 100,000-square-foot Walker factory expansion. Use of the new space will begin in September or October 2002 with the start-up of the powder coating system, and, by year-end, Walker Mowers will have a powder-coat finish, eliminating spray paint.

The \$5 million factory expansion will increase both production efficiency and capacity; a visible commitment by Walker to continue to grow and be a major producer in the commercial mower industry. The new space will allow the company to double in size over the next several years as the Walker product line continues to grow in the market.

WALKER MOWER IS NEW JERSEY PRIZE

A brand new MT20 Walker Mower was the special grand prize given away at the New Jersey Landscape 2002 trade show on February 27, celebrating the show's 25th anniversary. Bob Walker, president of Walker Mfg., drew the name of Mr. Vic Capone as the winner out of the hundreds of registrants. “I’m absolutely shocked! I’ve never won anything” was the jubilant reaction of the owner of Vic’s Landscape Contractors of Milford, New Jersey.



Officials of the New Jersey Landscape Contractors Association and Walker Mfg. gather around the grand-prize Walker Mower: (Left to right) Jim Stewart, Show Chairman; Tony Defeo, Treasurer; Bob Tomasek and Bob Walker, Walker Mfg.; Glenn Bergemann, Exhibitor Coordinator; Skip Powers, Co-Chairman/Exhibit Director; and Mark Graser, Publicity.

THE PERFAERATOR™

Walker Mfg. is pleased to introduce the *PERFAERATOR*™, the first aerator attachment designed for the Walker Mower by Walker. In conjunction with Rock Solid, manufacturer of the *PLUGR*™ Turf Aerator, the *PERFAERATOR*™ design delivers a 41.5-inch path, and uses the same *PLUGR*™ camshaft design for driving tines 2.5 inches deep into soil with no added weight needed. The PTO-driven tines engage and disengage easily to skip over sprinkler heads and side-walks without slowing down. The 12-tine set is also easily raised with

a lever and locked in a secure transport position.

Operators will enjoy ease-of-use along with increased productivity over conventional walk-behind aerators — approximately 70,000 square feet per hour. Like other Walker attachments, the 390-pound *PERFAERATOR*™ mounts quickly and easily with a sliding PTO drive shaft connection, and its own integrated footrests and attachment platform.

“We believe this product is going to open up the benefits of aeration for



many Walker customers with productivity and ease of use not previously available,” explains Bob Walker, president of Walker Mfg. Co.

THE WALKER BY WALKER

Walker Mfg., producer of the Walker Mower, is pleased to introduce the Walker by Walker — a compact, mid-size, walk-behind mower.

The 15-hp Kawasaki engine with full-pressure lubrication delivers the power needed to run all Walker side-discharge and mulching decks up to 56 inches — the same full-floating decks that are run on the Walker Rider also mount on the walk-behind, including the deck tilt-up function.

Like the Walker Rider, a cast-iron tail wheel on the tractor allows the deck to move independently with flexible deck suspension and spring counterweighting, allowing the deck to “float” and follow ground contour for a beautiful cut.

A simple, unique forward speed



control system and easy-to-use steering controls eliminate thumb locks, and allow the Walker to handle much like the Walker Rider. Two HydroGear® integrated, zero-

turn transaxles give the operator the ability to maneuver into tight areas, trim close and finish the job in one pass.

Proven Walker engineering such as a manually tensioned PTO clutch, efficient use of weight, compact overall dimensions, and sturdy construction are all incorporated into the Walker.

Walker President Bob Walker explains the market position for the new Walker: “Industry sales numbers show that there continues to be a place for mid-size walk-behinds on a contractor’s trailer, and if a contractor can use the same proven mowing decks on their walk-behind that they do on their rider, they are ahead of the game in production and quality of cut.”

MODEL S NOW 13-HP

The Walker Model S engine has been increased from an 11-hp to a 13-hp Kawasaki FE400. Engine dis-

placement increases from 351 cc to 401 cc, and the additional horsepower gives residential operators more capability for operating 42-inch

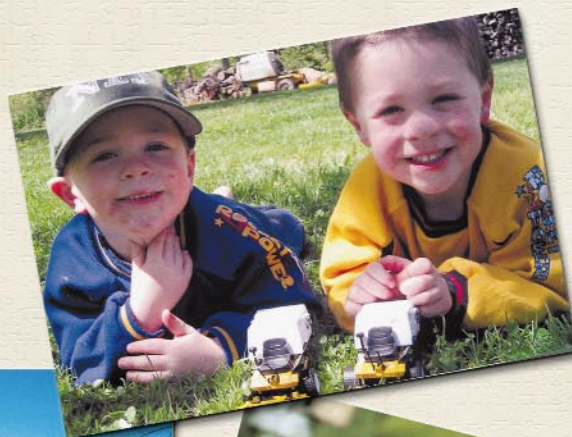
decks, including the 42-inch mulch deck. This engine retrofits into earlier Kawasaki-powered units (S/N 95-20381 thru S/N 02-57906).

WALKER SCRAPBOOK

1
"You're Never too Old to Ride a Walker"
— 80-years-young, Mrs. Evelyn Adams, of Centerville, Georgia, celebrates her first Walker Mower with Walker dealer Bob Seibermorgen, Sunflower Equipment in Warner Robins, Georgia.



2
Little Walker Users — Twins Daniel and Kevin Williamson of Ossining, New York, show off their Walker Mowers. Their father, and proud owner of four Walker Mowers, Tom, describes how excited the boys have been about their mowers, "Daniel brought his mower (with grass clippings in the hopper) for show and share at his nursery school."



3
Building a Future — Walker Mid-America of Harrisonville, Missouri, recently completed a new 12,000-square-foot building used for their Walker distributorship in Missouri, eastern Kansas and Oklahoma. Walker Mfg. salutes Walker Mid-America, and owners Doug and Becky Hartzler, and wishes them continued success.



4
Taking Care of Business — Adriel Stoltzfus mans the phone while his dad, Sam, does the mowing. The Stoltzfus' are long-time Walker operators from Farmington, New Mexico. (Photo Credit: AP/World Wide Photo)



5
12-year Walker owner Otto Hertel of McHenry, Illinois, shows how handy his Walker is during fall cleanup.



6
The Montana State Capitol Complex Grounds Maintenance crew takes a moment to show off its six Walkers and their work in front of the capitol building. Pictured left to right: Steve Davis, Ken Felch, George Dack, Cal Wofford, John George, Shawn Smith.

The photo was submitted by Parks Manager Maynard LaFond.

