

WALKER TALK

SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS FOR YEARS

“You’ve
got to
call Erv!”

- Promoting your business with cable TV
- Mowing with a hospitable attitude
- Teenagers making a living, and a life
- Sons light dad’s entrepreneurial fire



WALKER TALK

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MADE IN AMERICA

After I gave a little talk about the company at a business club meeting in Fort Collins several months ago, a college-aged man came up to me and asked the question, "How long before your manufacturing is moved to China?" It wasn't even an "if" question but the foregone conclusion that all manufacturing is leaving America. That's the popular thinking today; in a few years all American product manufacturing will be done elsewhere. My reply to the young man: "If we have to go to China to compete, we just won't continue in this business".

It is not that we are against the Chinese or other countries in the world having an opportunity in manufacturing. Our view of the people of the world is not colonialism but people finding their best opportunities worldwide. In fact, Walker Manufacturing has benefited from 20-25% of



all our products being marketed outside the USA. It would not be fair thinking on our part for the trade to move only in directions that favor us.

So why is "made in America" so important to Walker Manufacturing? At our heart and soul, we are a family-owned and operated business and we just happen to be an American family. A strong part of our family heritage is being independent. We simply don't want other people doing our manufacturing work for us (as much as possible) and then putting our name on the product. In short, that is why we won't be asking another company to manufacture our mowers for us, either in the USA or outside. Note of clarification: While we manufacture as much of the product as possible at our factory in Fort Collins, we do not manufacture every part; component parts like engines, transmissions, gearboxes, and some of the attachments for the Walker Mower are produced for us by other manufacturing companies.

It is our goal and dream to continue being a family-owned and operated company. While no opportunity can be certain or stable for years in the future (especially in these fast-paced times), we have a vision of going as far as we can with the opportunity we have today and keep our eyes open for new opportunities. I hope some years in the future to look the doomsdayers of American manufacturing in the eye and say, "We are still here". We are still an American family in the manufacturing business.

Bob Walker

Bob Walker
President

“You’ve got to call **Erv!**”

After being in business 41 years, Erv Denig, a registered landscape architect, knows the people of Fort Wayne, Indiana, and they know him. In fact, prospective homeowners are so familiar with his work that many of them call him even before they buy a lot. Why? Because they understand that his company, Lawn & Turf Landscaping, Inc., has a knack of blending landscape design and architecture. Getting this landscape contractor and architect involved early on ensures that the property, the home and the landscape will connect in just the right way.

Denig has a resume to match these high expectations. He has been mentored by some of the most respected names in the landscape industry, and his company has a wealth of experience designing, building and maintaining a wide array of commercial and high-end residential properties. In his words he also has “the best equipment money can buy” and long-time employees who “know what is expected of them.” As if this isn’t reason enough to call Erv, consider this: He has an attitude. He has a strong work ethic and believes that building lasting relationships with customers, dealers and employees are fundamental to success and longevity in this industry. After four decades of

proof, who would argue with him?

Lawn & Turf runs three installation crews, three maintenance crews and two lawn care crews. The company provides a broad range of services, including hardscape and irrigation installation, and caters to commercial and residential customers who are full-service oriented. “Our goal has always been to give customers that ‘one call does it all service,’” Denig says. “Then, we strive to keep them forever.” A little reticent about putting a dollar amount on his business volume, he admits, however, that many of his full-service customers have more than 100,000 square feet of turf to maintain, and overall, his crews mow and maintain several million square feet of turf a week. By service mix, Lawn & Turf generates 50 percent of its revenue from design



Erv Denig is a registered landscape architect.

and installation, 40 percent from maintenance and 10 percent from lawn care. Snow removal alters the mix slightly, depending on the year.

AGRARIAN ROOTS

Raised on a family farm in Fort Wayne, Denig started mowing lawns at the tender age of 12 and continued doing so part-time until launching his business in 1965. He earned a bachelor's and master's degree in business from Ball State and later took

This contractor attributes his work ethic to his father, who was a tool and die maker, and his uncle, who ran the farm and taught him to operate and maintain equipment. "I guess most of us in this business like equipment," he notes with a smile. "Our crews operate several Kubota, Walker and Wright Stander mowers. We have two large wheel loaders and several 16-foot snow blades, and that's not even counting all the

tractor with two Walker Mowers. After watching them operate the mowers and talking with the Walker folks at a trade show, I decided to give the Walker Mowers a try. That was 20 years ago, and we've been using them ever since for our high-end properties where removing grass clippings is a requisite. Until I discovered Walker, I could never find a mower that was both durable and could catch grass."

By the time Lawn & Turf purchased its first Walker Mower, the company had been transformed from a two-person mowing operation into a full-service company.

As Denig relates, it all started when a customer asked if he could replace a couple of bushes. He obliged, and it has been nonstop growth ever since.

"I always wanted to be big rather than small," says Denig. "I started attending conferences and getting involved at the local and national level with associations. If there's one thing more than any other that has contributed to our success, it's been my willingness to network with other successful companies and bring in consultants to help us with growth issues. Being successful in this business is all about developing relationships with virtually anyone associated with your business."

Over the years, Lawn & Turf made a successful foray designing and building athletic fields, and even consulted with the head Yankee groundskeeper on a ball diamond construction project. The company has also worked closely with Jack Nicklaus designing and building a



Walker operator Will Hinen says that with a little out-front planning, he can use the Walker Mower on his smaller properties.

several design courses at Purdue, all the time mowing lawns to earn his way. "I always wanted to be a landscape architect," he recalls. "I even taught drafting at a junior high school while mowing 100 yards a week. I didn't get married until I was 35. Back then, it was all about work."

equipment we have for installation. If I were to put a figure on it, I would say we have at least a half million dollars worth of equipment.

"We were one of the first landscape contractors to introduce Walker Mowers to our area," Denig continues. "I happened to see a con-

golf course. Today, though, the high-end residential and villaminium markets help fuel both the design/build and maintenance divisions.

MINIUM MANIA

When asked to describe a villaminium, Denig points to a row of nice-looking homes adjacent to a high-end subdivision. He explains that developers often add low-maintenance homes to their properties. Appealing to retirees who don't want to maintain their lawns and landscapes, the homes are ideally suited for Lawn & Turf. "We can provide all maintenance services, including mowing, trimming, and delivering lawn and tree care," Denig relates. "While we're in the neighborhood, we also strive to get the maintenance work from other homeowners in the subdivision."

Either way—commercial or residential customers, property managers or homeowners—Lawn & Turf looks to sign up customers to multi-year contracts. "That's the name of the game in maintenance today," says Denig. "Companies need the security long-term contracts offer."

"I think the market is much more competitive and difficult now than it was when I started in business," he goes on to say. "Competition can be fierce, especially in maintenance, and finding employees seems to be getting more difficult every year. Margins are shrinking, too. My advice to anyone just starting out is to build lasting relationships, find a niche, and make sure to buy equipment that matches that niche. For example, we run three different maintenance crews. Our large-property crew operates Kubota zero-turn riders equipped with 61-inch decks. Our 48-inch GHS Walker Mowers maintain high-end mid-size properties, and we use the Wright Standers on smaller, condominium-type areas where we can't get the Walkers and where we can leave the clippings behind."

Having quality equipment is important, he adds. "Look around, we don't have a snazzy new shop or a modern-looking office. We work out of the family farm and use the barn for our shop and the farmhouse for our office. We have dressed both up and have nice areas for our employees, but we put most of our money into equipment. Equipment makes us money, not the buildings. Furthermore, employees appreciate using top-of-the-line, reliable equipment."

The facility is located on 20 acres of land, plenty of space for holding nursery stock and developing a compost site. The owner knows he is fortunate to have a place to dispose of clippings and the means to turn them into a revenue-producing product. On site, Denig's crew handles clippings efficiently, too, employing a large truck vacuum to do the "heavy work."

"The vacuum works like a charm," says Walker operator and foreman Will Hinen. "We just dump the clippings on the side of the road and then pick them up when we've finished maintaining the property. The approach is so much easier than using a pitch fork or handling a tarp." He taps the side of his Walker Mower. "I don't know what I like best about this machine. You cannot beat how it vacuums the clippings, but it's also maneuverable, easy-to-operate, and I can trim from either side of the deck. Being able to hang the deck over the edge of flower beds dramatically reduces our trimming time. With a little out-front planning, I can even use the mower on our smaller properties."

Lawn & Turf currently has three Walker Mowers; two are a couple years old and a third is brand new. The company places most of its mowing equipment on a two-year

replacement cycle, and soon, as much of it as possible will be powered by diesel engines.

"The diesels use less fuel, and in today's environment, operators need to save money where they can," Denig emphasizes. "Replacing our maintenance equipment every two years also keeps downtime to a minimum. If you've been in this business, you know that downtime is brutal. A lost day is lost revenue."

Denig credits his local Walker dealer Taylor Rental and Kubota dealer More Farm Store for keeping his downtime to a minimum and providing great service. Again, it all



Lawn & Turf provides a broad range of services, including hardscape and irrigation installation, and caters to commercial and residential customers who are full-service oriented.

comes back to relationships, Denig re-emphasizes. Maybe there was a time when landscape contractors could be cavalier in their approach to doing business, when they could have a cursory relationship with customers and suppliers. Not anymore, says this veteran. When Denig's customers want exemplary landscaping, they call him. Don't think for a moment, though, that Erv doesn't have a call list of his own and people he can turn to when he needs products, services or just some solid advice. **WT**



Promoting

Cable affordable, effective for South Carolina contractor

“Last year, I got the bug,” says Rick Hooper, owner of Upstate Lawn Services in Greenville, South Carolina. “My wife works for an auto glass company that purchased an info-like commercial from our local cable company. After I saw the finished product, I called the cable company to inquire about it.”

Hooper is describing a three- to four-minute segment designed to profile area businesses. It appears on Charter Media’s “Business Profiles,” a show aired on Charter’s local programming channel.

“The finished product got my name, my picture, the type of work I do and how I get it done in front of potential customers.”

After talking with Charter, Hooper signed up for a profile of his own. The company sent a camera crew, interviewed Hooper and photographed his equipment in operation, including his two Walker Mowers. The vignette ran on local cable Channel 10 for three months.

“The entire process was quite easy,” says Hooper, who has been maintaining lawns

for 12 years. “The cable company asked me to pick a couple of my properties, and the camera crew met me at the first one on the morning of the shoot. The crew filmed me going into the subdivision and mowing with my Walkers. I was interviewed, and then the crew shot some additional mowing and trimming footage. We followed the same procedure at one of my commercial properties.”

After the interviewing and filming was completed, Hooper was asked to approve an edited version that was to appear on television. “The

finished product got my name, my picture, the type of work I do and how I get it done in front of potential customers throughout the Greenville area,” he adds. “The segment made a big deal about the quality of my equipment, including my Walker Mowers, Toro Z-Masters, and Isuzu cab-over truck. It actually generated a great deal of new business for me, and it just seemed to get better and better the more our company appeared on the show.”

COST-EFFECTIVE

Hooper’s success story is not unusual, according to

your business

Charter Media salesperson Lori Trotter. "The Business Profiles work because they're back to the basics," says Trotter, who sold radio before joining Charter. "Viewers feel like they know you after they have seen the segment a couple of times."

Trotter continues, "The profiles are cost-effective for most small businesses, especially when compared to the cost of other advertising media. In the Greenville market, for example, a three- to four-minute Business Profile running two times a day for an entire month would be about the same cost as four morning drive-time radio slots."

Trotter explains that the programming targets zip code zones. In other words, viewers from across the state, who would be unlikely customers for Upstate Lawn Services, wouldn't see the profile anyway.

The Business Profiles program in the Greenville market is aired on Charter's local origination channel designed to provide information about the local community. Other Channel 10 programming titles include a third season for "Down the Aisle" (a wedding planning show) and a second season for "Adventure Carolina". A new "Upstate Home & Garden Show" premiered this spring.

"Customers have the opportunity to show and tell viewers what separates them from the competition," adds Trotter. "That comes across as a powerful message. It's not hard sell, it's conveying information. When I was sell-



ing radio advertising, I knew a lady who operated a small rock climbing gym with a climbing wall. She couldn't justify the cost of a radio commercial, but when I moved over to cable advertising, she purchased a Business Profile. It doubled her business in four months. Although I wasn't involved with selling or producing Rick's business profile, it sounds like he is pleased with the results. I usually tell customers to give their profile a couple of months before making an assessment."

CELEBRITY STATUS

Hooper says his television exposure may not land him a role on a network TV show, but it created quite a buzz among family and friends around town. He recounts an evening eating at a local restaurant. "I was sitting there and a young boy at the table next to ours pointed to me and said to his par-

ents, 'Look, that's the lawn mower guy!' If he recognized me, I suspect his parents did, too, as well as many other people around town."

Being recognized is flattering, but being recognized for what he does is more than flattering; it builds business. Hooper would

like to try another Business Profile, if not this year, possibly next. "The price has gone up a little since I did mine, but it still seems reasonable for smaller businesses," he relates. "In the mean-

"The price has gone up a little since I did mine, but it still seems reasonable for smaller businesses."

time, I'm giving Yellow Pages a try for the first time, this year. I think it's costing me around \$80 per month for a small display ad."

What's the old saying, "A picture is worth 1,000 words?" The Business Profile gave Upstate Lawn Services the picture and the words, and it may be just the ticket for other lawn maintenance contractors and Walker Mower users looking to create more than a little buzz around town about the way they do business. **WT**

Charter Communications is a nationwide cable company with a presence in most major markets. For more information about cable TV advertising, visit Charter Media at www.chartermedia.com.

Rocky Mountains, Pikes Peak and Garden of the Gods Park offer Club members a spectacular natural setting.

Mowing with a hospitable attitude

Members of the private Garden of the Gods Club located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, experience one of the most beautiful natural settings in the country. The exclusive resort overlooks the Rocky Mountains, Pikes Peak and Garden of the Gods Park. When not taking in the view, they enjoy deluxe accommodations, a 27-hole championship golf course, a full-service spa and fine dining, among other amenities.

Founded more than 50 years ago, the Club offers those who visit the opportunity to experience the surrounding beauty and exceptional services. Yet, ambiance and splendor tell only part of the story. Behind the scenes, a professional hospitality staff works year round to maintain this beautiful property.

"We are in the hospitality business and that, in large part, determines how we maintain the grounds," explains grounds department manager David Van Vliet. "All the departments work closely together to convey the proper image and provide exemplary service. Everyone here wears a uniform, and grounds crews are especially attentive

to schedules and knowing when and where they can perform their maintenance services without disturbing members and their guests."

That's no small task considering the grounds department's areas of responsibility and range of services it provides.

IT TAKES A COMPANY

The resources needed to maintain the grounds at Garden of the Gods Club and nearby Kissing Camels Golf Course rival that of many full-service landscape management companies. During the busy growing season, the grounds department and the golf course employ upwards of 60 people. The grounds department alone sports five divisions and, in addition to maintaining the Club and parts of the golf course, crews tend to several cottages, six private



Pictured from left are operations supervisor John Swanstrom, grounds department manager David Van Vliet and turf tech Jeremy Van Dolah.



Each of seven Walker Mowers logs 25 hours a week.

homes, and common areas adjacent to the golf course and Club.

A list of services is dizzying. Last year, for example, grounds crews planted nearly 24,000 annuals and made more than 5,000 maintenance stops to service 180 orchids and 1,000 roses in and around the Club facility. They applied more than 35,000 gallons of fertilizer and kept 11 tennis courts in top playing condition. When it snowed, crews cleared a mile of sidewalks, and during the holiday season they strung four miles of lights, equivalent to 64,000 bulbs. Maintaining an extensive irrigation system that supports the large expanse of turf and gardens, maintaining all perimeter fencing and ground lighting, policing the grounds and, of course, mowing are among other tasks.

"I can't even guess how many acres of turf we mow," says Van Vliet, who owned his own landscape contracting business for nine years prior to joining Garden of the Gods Club. Most of the mowing, he explains, is done by seven Walker Mowers, four equipped with 48-inch GHS decks and three with 48-inch side-discharge decks. The Club has been



The Club greenhouse grows more than a half dozen herbs and 60 percent of the 24,000 annuals planted each year. Pictured is grounds department manager David Van Vliet, who owned a landscape contracting business prior to joining the Club.

using Walker Mowers since the early 1990s. Each one logs at least 25 hours a week mowing, in addition to having dethatching duties in the spring and pine needle pick-up for the GHS-equipped mowers in the fall.

Van Vliet goes on to tell that Ponderosa Pines are the primary pine-needle culprits, dropping approximately 300 cubic yards of them each year. "The mowers earn their keep just by cleaning them up," he notes, adding that the mowers are also ideally suited for mowing around flower beds and getting under the low-hanging pines that line the long stretches of medians.

The grounds department strives to replace one of them every two years. He conveys this information while piloting a golf cart around the Kissing Camels Golf Course, a name, he explains, derived from an unusual rock formation in the Garden of the Gods Park. The park was dedicated in 1909 and is free to visitors who want a close-up look at beautiful red sandstone rock formations.

As O'Neil points out, many of the more dramatic formations, along with a spectacular view of Pikes Peak and the Rockies, are visible from many of the 27 holes. The view itself is worth a game of golf, even for less experienced duffers.



The grounds department and Kissing Camels Golf Course employ upwards of 60 people during the growing season.

DETAILS, DETAILS, DETAILS

Details help define excellence, whether the customer happens to be the owner of a high-end residential property or members of a luxury resort. “We like a clean, manicured look for the turf,” says Van Vliet. “Proper irrigating techniques, in combination with timely fertilizing and mowing, result in a nice-looking, lush green lawn.” Crews, he notes, deploy the GHS mowers in high-visibility areas where clipping removal is needed. Their side-discharge counterparts log most of their time maintaining common areas around the Club and at the golf course.

While giving the *Walker Talk* editor a tour of the grounds, he unconsciously replaces a stone that has strayed from a garden bed or pulls an errant weed. “I think the difference between a good-looking property and a great one is in the details,” Van Vliet continues. “The same theory applies to the accommodations and dining areas here. We import orchids every year from Hawaii for our guest rooms and lobby areas, and grow many of our own herbs on site to ensure that the kitchen has fresh herbs daily.”

Growing the herbs and supplying the Club with annuals and other

flowering plants are the responsibilities of greenhouse manager Gary Schwieterman. “We grow more than a half dozen herbs, including oregano, dill, basil, thyme, rosemary, chives and mint,” says Schwieterman. “It’s

“Proper irrigating techniques, in combination with timely fertilizing and mowing, result in a nice-looking, lush green lawn.”

something that members don’t really see, but it makes a difference. The effort is also cost-effective since we heat the greenhouse all winter anyway.” As he points out, the greenhouse also grows 60 percent of the 24,000 annuals planted each year and rotates orchids through several reblooming periods.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Even though the Kissing Camel Golf Course is open year round, Colorado Springs has a relatively short growing season. When asked if and when annuals are changed out, both Van Vliet and field operations supervisor John Swanstrom just laugh. “This is not Florida,” says Swanstrom, who

oversees the Club’s extensive irrigation system. “Our growing season is only four months long, which means we have a rather small window of opportunity to get the grounds looking in top shape. Our crews start mowing at 6:30 a.m. and work until 2:30 p.m. five days a week. They have to keep moving and be aware of areas such as the reflecting pool and terrace adjacent to the dining rooms where they can work for only an hour before lunch time.”

He continues, “We also have to accommodate our irrigating schedule, which right now is five days a week, as well. Training our seasonal employees, many of whom are interns from different countries, can also be a challenge. Most have a great work ethic, but they still have to become acquainted with the grounds and the equipment.”

Van Vliet agrees. “We have maps and legends for just about every inch of the grounds here, including the golf course, cottages and private residences. They come in handy for training and assigning crews.” He points to a wall map that outlines the Club. The green areas, he mentions, are all turf. “Again, I won’t hazard a guess as to how much grass we maintain, but there’s enough to keep our turf techs hopping throughout the summer. We also have a couple thousand trees that need pruning and other arbor care.”

How does maintaining the grounds at Garden of the Gods Club compare with operating his own business? “Actually, it’s not much different, other than reporting to a supervisor,” he muses. “I think most contractors who have been in business awhile understand that they, too, are in the hospitality business. Yes, having quality equipment, keeping it maintained and training employees are fundamental to success, but so, too, is having a good relationship with customers. Our customers here are the members, and keeping them satisfied is our top priority.” **WT**



The brothers strive for 100% efficiency on each of their 80 properties.

“We’re not just making a living, we’re making a life!”

Some individuals start mowing lawns with the intent of one day operating a huge, successful operation. Others are very content to hang a shingle as an owner/operator and stay that size forever. Others still search for a half-way point; not too big and not too small. In Twin Falls, Idaho, young T&M Mowing owners Tyler and Matthew Shropshire have another goal. Mowing is a means to an end, to one day live a life of self-sufficiency, on a multi-generational family farm. In the process, they have honed their operation from a parent-inspired learning experience into an efficient and profitable business.

“It is truly amazing to think how far

Tyler and Matthew have come with their business,” says proud mother Janis Shropshire. “This truly started out as a home school assignment when Matthew was nine and Tyler 11. I wanted to give them a project that would help develop their math and social skills, and make the connection between what I was teaching them at home and real life.”

By any standard, the experiment paid big dividends for the brothers. Now ages 17 and 19, they tool around town with a spiffy truck and



The Shropshire family (left to right): Tyler, Janis, Allen and Matthew. T&M Mowing started out as a home school project.

trailer, maintaining 80 residential properties a week. The experience taught them how to grow a business by being confident and self-assertive, by providing impeccable service, and by being true to their word. Says their father Allen, “Having them develop a successful lawn business wasn’t our



T&M's trailer is designed for ease—easy dumping and easy access to tools.

first priority. We wanted the business so they could develop character, and every year we worked on different skills. Early on, for example, Janis helped them design and produce business cards and flyers for their business, while I taught them how to maintain and repair their equipment.”

A captain in the Twin Falls fire department, Allen worked with Tyler and Matthew on his days off, helping them with mowing and trimming, training them to leave a property in prime shape. “We would go back two, sometimes

three times to make sure a property was maintained correctly,” says Allen. “Now, their skills surpass mine and they return the favor when I help them. I guess what goes around comes around.”

“We were tempted to get a bigger, more powerful unit (Walker Mower), but that didn’t make sense for our situation.”

SMALL STEPS

With their parents’ help and encouragement, Tyler and Matthew mowed five lawns their

first year in business and grew their accounts slowly. Mom and Dad fully funded the project for four years so the young boys’ enthusiasm would remain high. When the boys were

small, Mom and Dad purchased a used John Deere rider for them, to pull a trailer loaded with their hand mower, trimmers and gas. When their business expanded city-wide, Janis drove them to all of their accounts.

“I enjoyed being part of their business and seeing them grow up,” Janis recalls, admitting, however, that she was probably as happy as anyone when Tyler was old enough to get his driver’s license.

After the understudies had mowed lawns for four years, their parents gradually started shifting expenses over to them, teaching them the meaning of profit and loss and the value of operating debt-free. Three years ago, with full responsibility for their company’s financial position, T&M Mowing met all expenses and even turned a tidy profit. It was time for the owners to look for different equipment to help expand their operation. Tyler and Matthew knew what they wanted. After all, they said, “Everyone around town had a Walker, and we were really impressed with the quality job they did.”

Their father, however, was not convinced. “I had stacks of mower brochures but was not sure about the Walker because it was so expensive,” Allen recalls. But his sons won the day, with one stipulation: They had to pay cash for the mower.

“Once we decided to get a Walker, Matthew and I measured all our properties, including the backyard gates, and determined that the smaller, 18-hp model with a 42-inch GHS deck would be ideal for us,” Tyler relates. “We were tempted to get a bigger, more powerful unit, but that didn’t make sense for our situation. The small Walker would suit our purposes, and it was more affordable for us.”

T&M Mowing purchased the Walker mid-year three years ago. By the end of that first mowing season,

it allowed the brothers to grow their business from 36 to 54 accounts. The next year they expanded their customer list to 72, and this year the count stands at 80 and holding. This was done while actually eliminating one of their mowing days.

"We're doing just about all we want to handle," says Tyler. "We could do more and work longer hours, but making more money is not the main concern.

We want to work smarter, not harder, and continue to deliver a beautiful job, with honesty and integrity."

SMART APPROACH

"Yes, the boys work smarter and not harder," says Allen. "I remember one of Bob Walker's columns in *Walker Talk* where he emphasized the smart approach to business. Our sons took that message to heart and have since streamlined the way they do business. Matthew agrees, noting that they have redesigned their trailer several times to accommodate efficiencies. He points to the trailer, saying, "See where the trimmers and blower are located? We installed trimmer racks and a place to store the blower outside the trailer. Now, all we do is walk up to the trailer to grab a tool rather than always having to walk around to the inside. Seems like a small thing, but it makes a difference when you maintain 20 yards a day."

"We've also reconfigured the back of the trailer to accommodate the dump box on the Walker," Tyler adds. "When we get a hopper full of clippings, all we do is back up the trailer ramp and dump the hopper. Previously we would dump the clippings on a tarp and then lift the

tarp into the truck. The process was always difficult and took two of us. Making it a one-person operation saves time."

The brothers have also rethought their on-site operation to make it more efficient. Instead of alternating tasks, they now perform the same tasks on the same property every week. They also strive to make sure neither of them stands around

waiting for the other to finish. "We want to finish at exactly the same time," says Matt. "Most of the time, it works out that way."

Using the Walker has made a difference, too, but not solely from a productivity point of view. "We like the fact that the steering is so precise," says Tyler. "It was a bit difficult to master it at first, but once we did we were able to mow close with more confidence in tight quarters. That cuts back on trimming and leaves a nice, manicured look."



Tyler says they want to "work smarter, not harder, and continue to deliver a beautiful job, with honesty and integrity."

DOWN THE ROAD

At this point, the T&M mowing team is reluctant to accept new work. The brothers work four days a week, starting at 9 a.m. and finishing at 6 or 6:30 p.m., sometimes



T&M's Walker Mower has helped the young owners more than double their business while eliminating one mowing day.

even later. As they say, they have a life outside of work. The company will consider a new request only if it allows the owners to consolidate their mowing routes.

In the meantime, working on becoming more efficient and better operators allows them to free-up time for other endeavors and, in their words, "give the customers a bargain."

Janis and Allen have no regrets about the home school project and where it took their sons. "In school, we always believed it was more about character than curriculum," Allen says. Janis adds, "After what Tyler and Matthew have learned from starting and operating this business, I have no doubt that whatever they decide to do, they will be successful at it."

As the parents both emphasize, the skills their sons developed and lessons learned from the mowing business equip them for more than just making a living; they've prepared them for making a life. **WT**

“Hey dad, *could you give us a hand?”*”

Carl Polite, owner of Polite Lawn Care in Aiken, South Carolina, started his business in a rather unusual way. One summer afternoon, two of his four sons approached him and asked if they could borrow the mower. They came back later that day and asked to be taken to the gas station to fill the gas can. Finally, his sons asked the key question: “Dad, could you give us a hand?”

Polite had been curious about his sons’ afternoon requests, and now the mystery was about to be solved. They

were mowing a neighbor’s lawn to earn some spending money, but the single job spiraled out of their control. One neighbor’s property led to another; they needed more fuel and dad’s help. “They were only charging \$20 to mow the lawns,” Polite recalls. “It wasn’t very much for what they were doing, but they were generating extra cash for themselves.”

Within two months the sons (with their father’s help and encouragement) were mowing eight lawns a week. “All we had was a push mower, and I emphasize the word ‘push,’ says Polite. “We had to find a different mower. I drove to the Sears store and found a self-propelled model on the floor that had a small defect. I bought it for \$100.”

This all transpired 14 years ago while living in Columbia, South Carolina. Five years later, the family moved to Aiken. By then, the

enterprising sons had “backed away from the business,” but dad kept the fire alive.

“I didn’t have a trailer or a large mower when we moved to Aiken, but the small business was profitable,” says Polite. “I figured that if I could find a bigger mower and upgrade to a trailer and other commercial equipment, the business would grow accordingly. I started looking around and saw several Walker Mowers on trailers. When an operator told me that the Walker was the Cadillac of mowers, I drove to nearby Augusta to talk with a dealer. It was a bit pricey, but I wanted the best mower money could buy and one that would do more than mow a property. I wanted one that could manicure it, too.”



Carl Polite says he purchased a Walker because he “wanted the best mower money could buy and one that would do more than mow a property.”

Polite purchased his first Walker Mower, a 20-hp model with a 42-inch GHS deck, nine years ago. He's still using that mower today.

SHARP LEARNING CURVE

Polite laughs when he thinks about the first few days with his new mower. "I was practicing mowing at my home, but was disappointed in the cut. It appeared that only half the deck was mowing and the other half was pushing the grass down. Then a neighbor told me that the Walker Mower deck has right- and left-hand blades. Embarrassed, I spent the rest of the afternoon doing what I should have done in the first place: reading the Owner's Manual."

After that inauspicious beginning, Polite started to seriously grow his business. With his Walker and trailer equipped with Shindaiwa and RedMax handheld equipment, he carved out a niche among high-end residential property owners. Aiken had become a popular destination for northern retirees, and subdivisions were sprouting up to accommodate them.

"My name circulated pretty quickly," Polite relates. "I charged a fair price and always left a property looking neat and clean, thanks in large part to my Walker. But even more importantly, my customers learned to trust me, knowing that my word was good. You know, people are funny. If you break a sprinkler head and tell the customer, chances are the customer will say, 'That's no big deal, I have an extra one in my garage. I'll replace it tomorrow.' If you don't tell the customer and he or she finds out later about the head, you'll be going



At its peak, Polite Lawn Care maintained 50 high-end residential properties. Now, the number is down to 35, a figure that is more manageable for the owner and his crew.

back to fix it yourself. That's human nature. It just pays to be upfront with people, all the time."

NOT A NICKEL MORE

After being in Aiken nine years, Polite has seen his business grow and mature. At one point, his crew was mowing and maintaining 50 accounts year-round. The figure has backed off to 35 now because the owner wants to keep the jobs manageable. He still holds down the same full-time job he had in Columbia, working as a senior asset manager specialist for nearby Washington/Savannah River Site. In fact, Polite has been with the

company for a total of 30 years.

His crew, comprised of four Hispanic brothers, mows Thursday, Friday and Saturday. They also do several odd jobs that might pop up during the week, such as cutting down small trees, installing color or putting down pine straw. Polite says he has learned the value of never saying no to customers. "If a customer wants you to do something and you have the ability, do it," says Polite. "Otherwise you run the risk of another contractor coming in and taking over the entire project. Regarding my employees, they're the best. They know what they're doing,



Carl Polite's philosophy is derived from something his father told him long ago: "Keep your prices reasonable and treat your customers right and you'll always stay busy."

and all four can speak English and communicate with customers."

Polite attributes his ongoing success to his employees and something his dad taught him years ago when he ran a gas station. His dad said, 'Son, a half nickel is better than no nickel at all.' What he meant, Polite explains, is not to get greedy. "Keep your prices reasonable and treat your customers right and you'll always stay busy."

Polite has done all three. He charges a minimum of \$40 a lawn and routinely communicates with all of his customers. For those who only winter-over in Aiken or simply are away for an extended period of time, Polite will e-mail digital photos of their properties, keeping the homeowners up to date on maintenance practices.

His motto is: "The polite way to treat your lawn," but the same can be said for how he treats his customers.

What does the future hold for this contractor? Retirement is still



Carl's father was an entrepreneur and a sage. He encouraged his son to avoid being greedy and realize that "half a nickel is better than no nickel at all."

a few years away. But when Polite hangs it up with his day job, it will be full steam ahead for his lawn maintenance business. "When I retire this business will grow," Polite says adamantly. "Right now,

I'm turning down work. If I were to retire three years from now, I would only be 56 and hopefully still have plenty of energy to work hard. I plan to buy a covered trailer and I already have a second 26-hp Walker that I purchased last year. My plan is to hire a few more people, possibly get more involved in the commercial market, and train someone to be my operations manager. Then, maybe in a few years I can step away a bit and spend more time chasing that little white ball around the course."

Polite smiles and says, "I've been fortunate. I have a wonderful wife, great family and a nice home. The business that started out as a way for my sons to earn some spending money has been very good to them and to me. Even as small as my business is, I am living proof that if you're serious about your work, charge a fair price, do good work and find your niche, this business can be profitable." **WT**

BOB T's TECH talk

Enjoy the ride

I don't understand how anyone can lay out tens of thousands of dollars for great equipment and then not take exceptional care of that equipment. I'll try to paint a picture of what I witnessed on my way home from work a few years ago.

I was following a mowing contractor's rig: a pick-up pulling a trailer full of equipment, including a Walker model MTGHS. We were approaching an intersection with a four-way stop light when the light turned from red to green before either of us had to slow from the 35 mph we were traveling. This particular intersection has drainage dips on both sides in the direction we were traveling. The dips are very visible well before the intersection, and anyone who does not want to do any damage to their vehicle will slow down before navigating the dips. Not the rig in front of me. Giving the driver the benefit of the doubt, he may have been distracted by any number of things, from a bee in the cab to a momentary loss of vision. Maybe not.

The front wheels did a full dive and immediate full extension, as did the rear wheels and then the trailer. The trailer, which most likely had a load capacity of 5,000 pounds, only had about 1,200 pounds on it. The suspension did not absorb the shock. Every object on the trailer's bed became airborne from 6 to 12 inches depending on its weight. That was the first dip, which was then repeated at the second dip.

Obviously, rate of travel was a huge factor. But even if the driver had slowed to the proper safe speed, the contents of the trailer would have shifted because measures had not been taken to properly prepare for the dips or an unplanned emergency.

Expensive equipment deserves an enjoyable ride. In Colorado, as in most states, it's required by law that drivers and passengers wear seat belts for their own protection. Doesn't your means of a livelihood deserve some protection also?

Tying the equipment down will keep it from bouncing around. A solid tie-down may not require the need for chocking. There are manufacturers that

have combined the two into one. Locking load binders and eye-bolts in the floor can make securing equipment fast and easy. For the Walker Mower with the front-mounted "floating deck", it is especially important to secure the deck assembly to stop bouncing on the trailer, which often results in damage to the deck carrier assembly.

An item often overlooked is the **tailgate**. Make sure it is adequate for your equipment, matched to the pitch of the truck or trailer and in good working condition. A tailgate that's too short can make loading and unloading challenging, and could even cause damage to your equipment. It's better to be too long than too short. Lift assists or springs will make raising and lowering the tailgate less stressful. Always use a trailer hitch with an adequate weight rating that's adjusted so your trailer is level when loaded.

There are a number of options available when it comes to **organization of equipment, tools, fuel and spare parts**. Shelves and bins should angle down in the back to keep items in place. Latching hooks and racks will keep handheld tools from flying around. Open trailers and trucks come with concerns of theft and vandalism. Tool boxes, spare parts storage, handheld tool organizers and any ride-on equipment not being used needs to be locked in place.

Loading is not rocket science, but does require planning. When loading a single-axle trailer, you want about 10% more weight to the front. A tandem-axle trailer can be more equally balanced. Once you have the loading figured out, mark the equipment location on the bed. Chocking the wheels will keep the equipment from rolling. If you are using an enclosed truck or trailer, be sure it is well-vented to allow exhaust fumes to escape and air to circulate around hot engines.

Regarding **trailers and trucks**, there are a lot to choose from. Match the need and plan for growth. And remember that the box of the truck or the trailer requires maintenance, just as the equipment that goes into it. **WT**



100,000TH MOWER DECK PRODUCED

The Walker factory celebrated producing the 100,000th mower deck assembly for the Walker Mower on April 5, 2006. Walker employees marked the milestone with a barbecue lunch, Dixieland music by the Queen City Jazz Band and a group photo. Long-time employees in the fabrication, welding, finishing and assembly departments were recognized for their part in producing the decks. It was noted that Gary Kyle, a 19-year Walker veteran and supervisor of deck assembly, has had his hand on all 100,000 decks, except for about 2,000 of the earliest decks produced.

With the deck assembly being interchangeable on the Walker tractor and with 11 different sizes and styles available, a number of Walker owners have purchased extra deck assemblies to the tune of about 20% more decks produced than tractors. For that reason it will be a few more years before the 100,000th Walker Mower rolls off the assembly line; a goal Walker thinks they will reach in the summer of 2008. Planning is already underway to mark that occasion with another "Family Reunion" celebration similar to the August 2000 event celebrating the 50,000th Walker Mower.

CALENDAR CONTEST UNDERWAY

A photo contest is being held for inclusion in the 2007 Walker Beautiful Places calendar. Photos submitted will be judged by Walker employees with \$1,000 going to the winner and \$500 each for 2nd and 3rd place. Walker owners with a beautiful place that is mowed by a Walker Mower are encouraged to enter, both for the cash prize and the bragging rights of being in the calendar. See the back inside flap of the 2006 calendar or go to www.walkermowers.com for entry rules and details. **The deadline for photo submissions has been extended to September 1st.**

WALKER WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

Walker operators from all over the world will gather at EXPO 2006 in Louisville, Kentucky, on October 6 and 7 for a precision obstacle course competition to determine the World Champion Walker Driver.



Qualifying contests are being held in Europe, Australia and New Zealand in the summer which will determine champions from their respective countries; the winners will travel to compete with

Americans and Canadians in Louisville.

If you believe you are among the best Walker operators, you are invited to come and compete. All registration will be on-site on the morning of October 6. Walker will provide awards to the top three competitors including an expense-paid vacation trip to Colorado for the winner. Plan now to attend and see how you stack up against international Walker users. See complete details at www.walkermowers.com.

NEW BROCHURES AVAILABLE

18-page Product Brochure
presenting the complete
Walker Line



20-page Attachments, Options, Accessories Brochure showing all available items to increase the versatility of the Walker Mower



CAN YOU HELP?

For a future volume of *Walker Talk*, we are researching computer software packages that companies are using to operate their businesses. Do you have input you can give us? If so, please call (920) 720-0573 or send an e-mail to rdickens@new.rr.com.

ROBOT WELDING MACHINE



The first robot welding machine was put to work in the Walker factory in December 2005. It is in the process of being fully loaded with work, mainly used to weld highly repetitive small parts and sub-assemblies. Walker says they are bringing technology into the manufacturing process not to “replace men with machines”, but to give their workers the tools to be more productive and efficient while at the same time offering a good payback on the investment in the technology.

QUICK COUPLER INSTALLATION TOOL

A simple tool has been developed to ease installation of the Quick Connect Coupler on the tractor by holding the disconnect ring in the retracted position. Without the tool, the installer has to hold the coupler ring in the retract position and at the same time slide the coupling on the tractor spline shaft, which can be a little tedious due to the location. The tool will be furnished with all tractors starting with 2007 models and may be ordered for earlier units by P/N 7275-9.



42" HIGH-PERFORMANCE MULCH DECK

After an intensive design and development project in the summer of 2005, the new high-performance 42" DML42A mulch deck is being introduced. This is a completely new housing and blade design to increase mulching performance, offering reduced

particle size and even distribution of clippings, along with a smooth cut. Side-by-side comparison tests with the earlier mulch deck and early field reports have both confirmed improved performance in difficult

conditions. Due to the larger housing, the new deck uses a standard Walker 48" carrier frame. It also includes the heavy-duty cast-iron Peerless blade drive as standard equipment.



BIG BLOWER IN MT20

The 10.5" blower introduced in the 2006 high-horsepower models (MT26, MTL25, MTL31, MD) was made standard equipment in the Model MT20 as a running production change (starting with S/N 06-83758). Field reports are confirming a significant performance boost with the big blower, both in clog resistance and grass catcher capacity.

It was decided to upgrade the most popular Walker model with the new blower after testing showed there was enough power with the 20-hp engine to operate the bigger blower while maintaining good power for cutting. A retrofit kit is available for earlier models (P/N 7542-9 for MT and P/N 7542-8 for MD).



MODEL MC MUFFLER SHIELD

The Model MC muffler heat shield has been changed to a bright, polished stainless steel material. It is a direct replacement part for earlier models with the 18-hp engine.

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Beautiful Places

At Walker Manufacturing this is how we think about what we do--we don't make lawn mowers, we make beautiful places. That thought has inspired us for nearly 30 years on our quest to design and build the best possible machine to make a beautiful place. And the Walker is made for landscape contractors who have the same thought--we don't "mow grass", we make beautiful places. Ask to see a Walker demonstration if you are not using Walker and would like a little help in making your own beautiful places.

*If you have a beautiful place that is mowed by
a Walker Mower, you can win \$1,000 in our
2007 Beautiful Places Calendar Contest.
Visit www.walkermowers.com for details*

WALKER MOWERS™

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