

# WALKER TALK



SERVING LAWN MAINTENANCE PROFESSIONALS

## REFLECTING BACK ON 50

VOL.

50



### 3 Reflecting Back on 50 Issues

Ever wonder what happened to the Filoli Center from *Walker Talk*, Volume 6? What about Mike Hill from Clean Cut, Volume 37? Now you can find out more about their progress and more as *Walker Talk* profiles many of its loyal customers from over the years.

### 16 Unique Vantage Point

We learned that, if we take the time to listen to the stories of how people have come to know us, we are often profoundly impacted to continue to work as hard as we can to help them continue their story, as our company and product may play a role.



### 17 Seeing and Experiencing Is Believing

The vast majority of stories over the last 25 years were about people who make a living mowing and maintaining lawns, and they all have a story to tell.

### 18 News & Products



WALKER TALK is published by AC Business Media, 201 N. Main Street, Fort Atkinson, WI 53538. Phone: (920) 542-1131. Printed in the U.S., copyright 2017. Canada Post PM40612608. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: (WALKER TALK), Station A, P.O. Box 25542, London ON N6C 6B2.

# WALKER TALK

## Volume 50, 25 Years



This issue of *Walker Talk* is a celebration issue. We are celebrating people and relationships spanning the 25 years that we have published *Walker Talk* and the 38 years of producing the Walker Mower. You may notice the magazine layout is different with us taking a look back at some of the people that have been featured in previous issues of the magazine to see how they are doing.

*Walker Talk* is long-lasting as a company-sponsored publication. Several other company-sponsored publications in our industry have come and gone in the last 25 years. People who know the specialty business publishing industry tell us that *Walker Talk* has lasted longer than many other publications of this type.

Why has *Walker Talk* lasted so long? It helps fulfill our mission at Walker Manufacturing to build relationships and create opportunities for people with the common denominator of the little yellow machine. We are not ashamed to admit that we are a family-owned and family-operated business, and we like to operate family-style, which is built on the foundation of working with people and building relationships. By telling the stories of real people working in businesses they have created, working in other organizations or working as a private user, we have kept the interest of our readers across the years. There is nothing better than real-life stories.

This issue of *Walker Talk* is also celebrating long-lasting people. Long-lasting people tend to build long-lasting families and long-lasting businesses. Research on business survival rates shows the average time for a business from start to finish is between five and 10 years. Many of our *Walker Talk* story subjects have lasted well beyond "average."

Of course, lasting does not mean doing the same thing year after year. It means keeping pace with change, adjusting and improving along the way. Sometimes that has meant changing to a different operation or different opportunity that does not include the Walker Mower; in some cases, the Walker Mower has helped create a stepping stone to a better opportunity. As we like to say, "Each person should work to find their best opportunity." Fortunately, in many cases, that best opportunity has included owning and operating a Walker Mower.

Now that we have completed 50 issues, an obvious question is: "Will *Walker Talk* continue to be published?" We cannot promise it always will be, but we have some long-lasting DNA in our blood that includes the third generation in our family. **WT**

*Bob Walker*

Bob Walker, President

# Making the Switch from RESIDENTIAL to



**V**ernon Henderson, owner of V. Henderson Landscaping in Washington, D.C., was featured in *Walker Talk*, Volume 6. At the time, he owned one Walker Mower, sported one crew, had two full-time employees and was primarily mowing residences. Twenty-two years later, he has three Walker Mowers, two crews and four full-time employees.

But Henderson's emphasis switched. Today, 90 percent of his work is in commercial and other large accounts like the

U.S. Chamber of Commerce property he maintains in downtown D.C. Henderson said he still mows, but his focus is doing topiary work, shaping trees and shrubs, and designing flower beds.

"Once you gear up to do larger, commercial accounts, it's difficult maintaining a schedule to work on smaller residential accounts," he explained. This former D.C. police officer is less motivated by making money, and more interested in maintaining control of his equipment and work. Yes, he grew some over the

years to accommodate requests, but did so reluctantly.

Since appearing in *Walker Talk*, Volume 6, Henderson's life changed in other ways, too. Single at the time, he is now married and lives on a three-acre property outside of D.C. The extra space gives him plenty of room for personal use of his Walker Mowers, to keep his equipment out of the rain and also maintain his hobby of collecting sports cars. His most recent addition is a 2017 Dodge Viper GTC.



Vernon Henderson, owner of V. Henderson Landscaping, is less motivated by making money, and more interested in maintaining control of his equipment and work.



The Breeze team (left to right) includes: Dave Radant, and Dennis, Fred, Laura and Rex Breeze.

# Staying BUSY in Calgary

**I**n 1998, Breeze Landscaping in Calgary, a city in Alberta, Canada, maintained 65 commercial properties. The family-run company had been in business since 1984, with Laura and Rex Breeze and son Fred doing most of the work. Nearly 20 years later, the makeup hasn't changed dramatically. Another son, Dennis, is now a partner, as is long-time employee, Dave Radant. Laura and Rex have assumed a part-time role. In Rex's words, "We maintain some of the smaller odd jobs now and do the running around for our sons."

Rex and Laura, and Fred's family have moved to larger properties with big garages to store the equipment. Although their focus remains exclusively in the commercial market, accounts have grown from 65 to more than 100. Instead of two Walker Mowers, they now operate seven. They've added two crews (and sometimes three) to accommodate the extra work, including four cemeteries and seven Catholic schools, one of which has 10 acres of turf to mow.

"The steady growth has been good,"

said Laura. "You don't realize it, but it gradually happens with the addition of more properties, a new trailer or two, and a few more mowers. It's been a blessing to have both sons working with us now. Dennis was working as a carpenter 20 years ago. Dave wasn't with us at the time either. Now, he's been with us 18 years and is like a member of the family."

## STAYING COMPETITIVE

The Breezes have upgraded their two 20-HP Walker Mowers to 25- and 26-HP models, each with 48-inch GHS decks. They've also purchased two 52-inch and two 48-inch side-discharge decks. Explained Rex, "We do a little more side-discharging now. It's more green-friendly, not to mention getting rid of clippings is costly."

Fred mentioned in *Walker Talk*, Volume 12, that getting optimum performance out of Walker Mowers is knowing when to use them and, conversely, knowing when to use other pieces of equipment. That approach hasn't changed. What has changed, however, is the market is more competitive, he added. "Customers still want high quality, but at a lower price.

"One way we compete is to use a

Toro with an 11-foot deck on large properties like that one school. Yes, the Walker Mower does everything, but I don't want to wear out a \$22,000 machine mowing a large property when a wide-area mower can do it faster and allow us to be more competitive on pricing. We also employ a four-wheel-drive Ventrac for mowing side hills."

"Still, we use our Walker Mowers on most every property," added Rex, "and they come in handy for spring and fall cleanup." Those tasks, he emphasized, are even easier now, thanks to an enclosed gooseneck trailer that hydraulically lifts debris over the side.

When asked what he thought the secret was to the family's long success, Fred mentioned that finding a niche and sticking to it is key. "Our niche is in the commercial market and we're set up with our equipment to be very competitive there. No, we can't compete with residential mowing contractors, just as they can't compete with us."

The other part of the success story is something Laura said 20 years ago: There would always be a Breeze and a Walker on every property, well, almost every property.



Laura and Rex Breeze had been in business for 14 years when *Walker Talk* first visited in 1998.

# 'A Wonderful, Enjoyable Journey'

**H**oward Jensen has a long relationship with Walker Mowers. He purchased his first one in 1990 and was a dealer for more than 25 years. "Walker Manufacturing is virtually the same company now that it was when I purchased my mower," he related. "Even the younger generation there holds the same values that have successfully driven it for years."

Some things don't change on the home front either. J & C Lawn Service in Alliance, Nebraska, appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 15. The company has many of the same accounts it had back then, and sons Josh and Chad (J & C) continue to work in the business. J & C Walker Mower Sales is still going strong, as is the J & C RV Park that has 13 hookups for visitors.

Not to say there weren't changes. Jensen turned in his railroad notice four

years ago after spending most of 42 years there as a locomotive engineer. About the same time, his sons got on board the train, and now work for the railroad when not mowing with, selling or repairing Walker Mowers.

"We also made some recent changes to our property, adding two more acres for a total of seven now, giving us plenty of room to demonstrate mowers," said Jensen. "Two years ago, we rebuilt an old salt storage structure to now accommodate a five-garage-door facility to park equipment and vehicles. Last fall, we built a 64- by 64-foot shop."

For the Jensen family—Howard, wife, Susan, and sons, Josh and Chad—the Walker Mower does more than stripe lawns and collect grass. It's a machine that has taken the family, in Howard's words, on "a wonderful, enjoyable journey."



**For the Jensen family—Josh, Howard and Chad Jensen (left to right)—the Walker Mower does more than stripe lawns and collect grass.**

## STEADY as They Go

**I**t's been more than four years since Cutzgras appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 41. The family-owned business has a nice niche in Port Charlotte, Florida, and Pat, Mark and Dennis Jontos have no desire to shake it up. To the contrary, it's steady as they go.

They maintain about 60 high-end residential accounts, operate a customized home watch service and have the same three Walker diesel mowers they had when *Walker Talk* originally visited them. In fact, the company still operates its first Walker Mower purchased in 1994. (It has more than 10,000 hours on it, although the engine was recently rebuilt.) The two other mowers have more than 12,000 hours between them.

The family visited Walker Manufacturing this spring, and spent several hours touring the facility and talking with factory workers. They even had an opportunity to share their Walker Mower experience with workers at an afternoon factory gathering.

"I told them the result of their quality work is the best cutting machine on the market. More importantly, I relayed to them how much of an impact that machine and their efforts make on our lives, and the lives of other Walker Mower users," said Dennis. "I think they appreciated our candor, and knowing the mowers they build and put into shipping crates have such a positive impact in the field."



**Mark, Dennis and Pat Jontos of Cutzgras visited Walker Manufacturing this spring, and spent several hours touring the facility and talking with factory workers.**

# Growing the FAMILY MOWING CIRCLE in ARIZONA

**W**hen featured in *Walker Talk*, Volume 18, Joe and Tracy Martoccia, owners of Top Job Landscaping in Scottsdale, Arizona, had four full-time employees, none of which were family members. More than 15 years later, it's Joe, Tracy, son Johnnathen and daughter Santina who do the work. The company doesn't mow 300-plus yards like it did back then, Joe explained. His business model is fewer customers, but better customers.

"We got away from the commercial market, and now target high-end home-



Pictured from left to right is Johnnathen, Tracy, Hunter (seated), Santina and Joe Martoccia.

**"I tell people my Walker Mower does the work of four people."  
– Joe Martoccia,  
Top Job Landscaping**

owners who look for quality work and excellent response time," said Joe. "We have about 20 customers, and I tell them you can always get a hold of me and they can. Communicating with customers, especially being proactive with text messaging, helps us keep them informed as well.

"In addition to mowing and maintenance, we still install outdoor lighting and irrigation systems, provide design and build services, and do just about

anything a customer asks. I found that we can make just as much money with fewer customers, the kind that don't go with the lowest bidder and, instead, are willing to pay for a more custom service."

He calls the approach, "keeping it in the family, family-run and family-owned. Ten-year-old son Hunter is next in line," said Joe. "He already operates the mower like a veteran, with the blades off, of course. It won't be long, though, and he will be mowing with us." One could say Joe's Walker Mowers are part of his extended family. He still owns the 16-HP model he had in 2001, but looks to a 23-HP unit he purchased in 2008

to do most of the mowing.

"You can't mow in any tougher conditions than here," Joe explained. "The days are incredibly hot and dusty. I have never seen a machine that stands up better in conditions like this. But you have to maintain them, too, by blowing them off after work and routinely greasing them, and changing the oil and air filters."

He continued, "I tell people my Walker Mower does the work of four people." At that rate, it's no wonder Top Job can grow its own employees within the family circle. "What better job to have," said Joe, "than to be able to go to work every day with your family."



# Where Three BROTHERS Compete for TOP NET

Consistency is paying off for three brothers in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Tobin, Dana and Brett George maintained 500 yards with 40 employees and 18 Walker Mowers in 2011. They also provided three service offerings: lawn maintenance headed up by Dana, landscape installation by Tobin and fertilization by Brett, along with snow removal.

Not that much has changed since Tobin D. George Lawn Care appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 39, except one small detail, Dana said proudly. “Every year, we have a friendly competition to see whose division brought in the biggest net percentage for the company. Last year, for the first time since we started the business in 1992, the maintenance division won.”

Not to say the other two divisions are suffering. No, the brothers are doing

well across the board, in large part, added Dana, because they gained experience and became even more efficient.

The maintenance division relies heavily on its Walker Mowers. The numbers grew to 22, including 14 GHS mowers with 48-inch decks, six Model Bs and two Model Hs.

“Our GHS mowers continue to be our bread-and-butter machines,” Dana explained. “They are perfect for our typical residential account that measures between 10,000 and 15,000 square feet. But I’m even more excited about the Bs. We equip them with wide-profile tires and 42-inch decks. They can get through gated areas and work well on hillsides. In fact, because of them, we eliminated all but one of our walk mowers and we hardly ever use it.”

He mentioned that being a little older



**Tobin D. George Lawn Care provides three service offerings: lawn maintenance, landscape installation and fertilization, along with snow removal.**

and wiser allowed him to get rid of less profitable accounts and even helped in recruiting higher-quality employees, all part of being more efficient and winning the friendly competition.

Back in 1992, just staying in business was winning, Dana added. “At the time, I didn’t know if we could make a living by mowing lawns and installing landscapes. We could and the company now supports three families, along with our mother, Mary Jane, who, at 79 years old, does a lot of running around for us.

“The Walker Mowers have been a large part of our success. In fact, if it weren’t for them making the work easy for us, we likely would be doing something else today.”

## Growing in KENNEBUNKPORT

Dana and Melissa Viehmann were featured in *Walker Talk*, Volume 32, when they owned two Walker Mowers; today, they own four. Their company, Dan Viehmann Landscaping and Property Management in Kennebunkport, Maine, also nearly doubled in size, with employee numbers growing to five full-timers and 15 in high season.

Melissa said they retained many of the same clients and added new accounts, some of which came with larger design and build projects that required the work of an excavator and track loader.

The couple also grew their property maintenance (caretaker) service from 16 to 35 homes. In business since 1990, they’re celebrating 27 years this year.

**Dan and Melissa Viehmann of Dan Viehmann Landscaping and Property Management nearly doubled the size of their business.**



# Still Kicking in **ALABAMA**

Harry Stokes, owner of Yard Perfect, sits on a Walker Mower with his wife, Barbara, and his dog.



“There are worse ways to spend retirement.” That’s what Harry Stokes, owner of Yard Perfect in Hampton Cove, Alabama, told the *Walker Talk* editor in 2010. Seven years later, at the spry age of 73, he’s still mowing lawns. In his words, “I’m still kicking despite taking a licking.” The licking he took was losing all his retirement savings in the 2008 recession.

A few things changed since his story appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 35, however. For starters, he’s on his third Walker Mower, a 25-HP electronic fuel injection model with a 42-inch GHS

deck. He’s working alone now, too, subbing out landscaping and most of his pruning requests.

“I just don’t have time to do those jobs,” he related. “I maintain 34 to 37 yards a week, which amounts to 44 hours of mowing, not counting travel time. Even though 80 percent of my customers are within a 2- to 2.5-mile radius of my home and some even closer, there’s no time left in the week to do more when you add in paperwork and taking care of your equipment.”

This former vice president of an electric component manufacturer’s rep

firm has more than half his accounts on an annual contract, which helps with year-round cash flow. In fact, any new customers are asked to do business that way. He joked, “There isn’t much call to remove snow in Alabama during the winter months.”

Stokes didn’t even bring up the subject of retirement. What he did mention was that his wife, Barbara, an elementary school teacher, just received national recognition for her work for the past 30 years. As he said, “We’re both very fortunate to be doing something we enjoy.”



## CONSISTENT Is the WORD

Mel Taylor and his wife Nancy appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 31. At the time, they operated three Walker Mowers, had three crews, and maintained 150 commercial and residential accounts in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Ten years later, Mel’s Lawn & Landscape Maintenance has, in Taylor’s words, “stayed consistent.” The company has the same number of crews and employees, essentially the same number and

type of accounts, and the same number of Walker Mowers.

“I purchased a couple of new Walker Mowers since the story appeared, but continue to operate with three of them,” said Taylor. “It’s difficult to grow by leaps and bounds, and that’s really not something I’m interested in anyway. The company is doing well, I’m very busy, and I continue to enjoy the work I do. Life is good!”



# Getting **BIGGER, SMARTER** in Fargo

**A** year before All-Terrain Grounds Maintenance was featured in *Walker Talk*, Volume 17, owner Ryan Such had just purchased the company from the previous owner. A year later, in 2000, he was maintaining 150 properties with two full-time and four part-time employees, and four Walker Mowers with 48-inch GHS decks.

Seventeen years later, the picture has changed dramatically. All-Terrain now runs 25 Walker mowers, has 55 employees and maintains upwards of 3,000 properties in Fargo, North Dakota. “The customer mix is about the same,” said Such. “We maintain multi-family homes, Grade A commercial properties and upscale residential properties. Our

service offering, comprised of full-service lawn maintenance and snow removal, hasn’t changed that much either.”

The company has branched out to maintain several lake country homes about an hour’s drive from Fargo, and Such emphasized that they’ve not only grown, but have become a bit smarter. “We have two Master Gardeners on board, which has helped us provide an even higher level of service to customers,” he said.

Such mentioned that North Dakota has the lowest unemployment rate of any state in the country, which puts a premium on finding and keeping employees. A few years ago, he retained a consultant to help do just that, and he admits that

managing his labor force takes top priority to this day.

Not to say he doesn’t have other things to do. Shortly after *Walker Talk* first visited his company, Such launched ATG Small Engine and started selling Walker Mowers. That company has since changed its name to Out Front Power Equipment, but Walker Mowers remains its bread-and-butter mower brand. The store also sells Scag and recently added Ventrac to supplement its snow removal offering.



**Shortly after *Walker Talk* first visited All-Terrain Grounds Maintenance, Ryan Such launched Out Front Power Equipment and started selling Walker Mowers.**

## Celebrating **30 YEARS!**

**L**awn Masters owner, Jim Dubberly, was on the cover of *Walker Talk*, Volume 6. He was in business in Sebring, Florida, for eight years and maintained 250 properties with five Walker Mowers. Now, 61 years old, this lawn maintenance veteran is celebrating 30 years in business, and the same formula that worked for him 20-plus years ago is still his ticket to success.

One of his first accounts was a large residential development, and developments are where the bulk of Dubberly’s business is today. He can reach them within a 5-minute drive, towing a 30-foot enclosed trailer. The trailer doubled as a storage facility, transport vehicle, repair shop and break room when *Walker Talk* first visited him and it plays the same role today.

“Homeowners in developments are

not only within proximity to one another, but they also get their lawns mowed at the same height and yards are maintained similarly,” Dubberly noted. “I still use my Walker Mowers, and will always have two or three, even though I don’t have a dealer close anymore. To make sure I have parts on hand, my shop almost looks like a mower shop.”

Probably the biggest challenge for this veteran is something that is echoed throughout the industry—labor. “I don’t know what I would do without my best employee ever, my son, Chris,” said Dubberly. “Since his first ride on a Walker Mower with me as a toddler, he has become an expert in mowing and has worked with me for more than 12 years. He cares as much about my business as I do and is the only employee with a work ethic like mine.”

Although growing his business isn’t



**Although growing Lawn Masters isn’t part of a strategic plan, if it were, labor or lack thereof, would be a difficult obstacle to overcome for this father and son team, Jim (left) and Chris Dubberly (right).**

part of a strategic plan, if it were, labor or lack thereof, would be a difficult obstacle to overcome for this father and son team.

# 'Hey Son, Could You GIVE ME A HAND'



Carl Polite mows twice a month during the growing season and backs off to once during the winter. In addition to mowing, his 12-month package includes an array of other maintenance services, almost everything, he said, except installing fences.

BELOW: The Polite Lawn Care Service team (left to right) includes: Bobby Isaac, Carl Polite and Paul Lewis. Kneeling is long-time employee Anzer Williams.

Carl Polite started mowing lawns to help his sons, just as the title of the story in *Walker Talk*, Volume 28, read, "Hey Dad, Could You Give Us a Hand?" That was 14 years before the *Walker Talk* visit in 2006. By then, however, his sons moved on and Polite Lawn Care Service in Aiken, South Carolina, with a crew of four Hispanic brothers, was mowing 35 accounts three days a week. In between, the owner was also working a full-time job.

Fast-forward 11 years and the roles are reversed. Dad, who no longer holds down another job, could use a hand. With only three full-time employees, he now offers full-service landscape main-

tenance to 80 properties. In addition to mowing, his company provides lawn fertilization and insect control, sprinkler installation and repair, color installation, and mulching, along with several other services all explained in detail on their website.

One could say Polite's career is taking a rather circuitous route. A retired U.S. Airforce veteran, he worked 31 years for the nearby Savannah River Site, a nuclear reservation, before retiring to mow and maintain lawns full time. In 2009, he dissolved his company to work for a government contractor in the Middle East. The heat ultimately

drove him back home after a year and he quickly restarted his company.

"There's no secret to success in this business or any other," Polite remarked. "Surround yourself with good, quality people and deliver quality work. Of course, this is easier said than done. Finding and retaining quality people is a challenge today and, even then, your employees will likely not have the eye for details that you have. So it's important to always keep a hand in your work."

He credits his parents, Emma and Moses, for putting him on the right business track. Said Polite, "They fostered a level of respect for others that is core to my success. Moreover, my father ran a gas station, Polite and Son Mobil in Allendale, South Carolina, when I was a teenager. That was the beginning of my entrepreneurial endeavors. I learned so much from him about how to run a business and never had an idea I would ever use it. Thank God for my parents!"

Today, Polite operates with one Walker Mower, what he proudly calls the Mercedes-Benz of the mowing industry.

His enclosed trailer also hauls a Kubota out-front mower for larger, rougher properties and two push mowers. During the growing season, he usually mows twice a month and backs off to once a month during the winter.

For most customers, a list that includes homeowners, cemeteries, homeowners' associations and a couple of farms, he offers a 12-month package that includes an array of maintenance services, almost everything, he said, except installing fences.

"I try to manage more than I used to," said

Polite, who credits a website for his recent business growth. "Most of my work over the years came from word of mouth, but last year, I created a web page and the business took off. Having a presence on the Internet connects your business with different people who don't know you or your work, but would like to learn more about your business and the services it offers. If you want to grow, having a website is a great way to start."

Business is very good, Polite added. So good, in fact, another Walker Mower, or even two, could be in his future.



**"There's no secret to success in this business or any other."  
– Carl Polite,  
Polite Lawn Care Service**



**Elmer Groom, owner of Groom Gardens, is still proudly doing the Walker Wave.**

## Still Doing the WALKER WAVE

**S**even years ago, readers of *Walker Talk*, Volume 36, saw an image of Elmer Groom, owner of Jacksonville, Florida-based Groom Gardens, doing the Walker Wave. Well, he's still at it on that same property. In addition, the veteran landscape contractor continues to mow and maintain the 20-acre Pilot Pen headquarters facility he's had for 20 years.

"Not much changed over the last several years," said Groom. "The biggest change is going from a three- to a two-man crew. Right now, I guess you can say I have a one-man crew, myself, until I find a new employee to replace the one that left a couple of weeks ago."

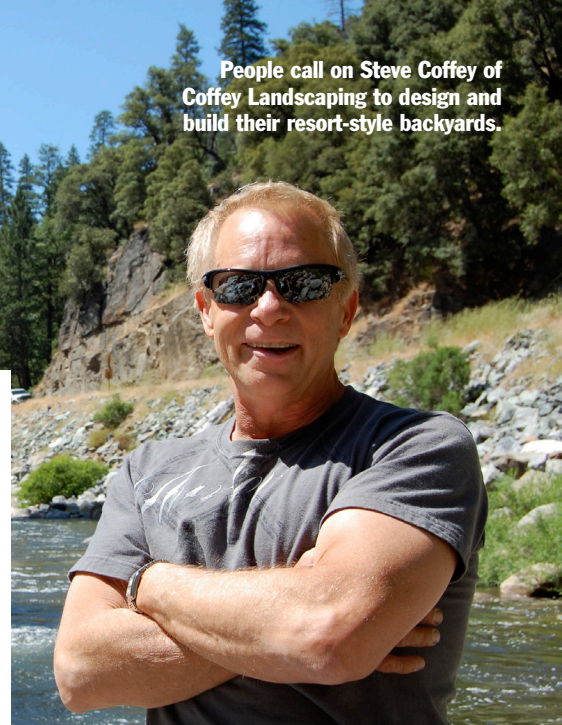
This Walker user emphasized that finding and keeping labor is an ongoing struggle. With the large Pilot Pen property and 38 residential properties, he's putting in more than a few extra hours a week on his 23-HP Walker Mower and its 52-inch side-discharge deck. A 48-inch GHS deck especially comes in handy for fall leaf collection.

How does Groom get so much done by himself in the hot and humid Florida weather? Certainly, the Walker Mower helps, but even then, in his words, "I have to pace myself."

## 'It's in My BLOOD'

**T**he first *Walker Talk* issue 25 years ago featured Atlanta company Scapes. Owner Steve Coffey had been in the industry since the mid-1970s. In 1992, his company owned eight Walker Mowers and generated annual sales of \$5.5 million. Seven years later, in December 1999, he sold Scapes to TruGreen. He purchased a home in Whistler, British Columbia, Canada, and took up snowboarding and enjoying other outdoor activities in a serious way.

"Landscaping was in my blood, so when my non-compete agreement ran out, I began to dabble in landscape design and build," he recalled. "I worked alone and took on small projects, primarily for high-end residential properties."



**People call on Steve Coffey of Coffey Landscaping to design and build their resort-style backyards.**

Today, he still has a place in Whistler, but spends most of his time in Crossville, Tennessee, halfway between Knoxville and Nashville, where people still call on Coffey Landscaping to design and build their resort-style backyards.

## 'I LOVE My Walker Mower'

**M**ike Hill of Clean Cut wasn't mowing lawn when his phone rang with the *Walker Talk* editor on the line. He was driving to the family lake house three hours east of Louisville, Kentucky.

"A few years ago, my wife and I purchased the lake property. At the time, she wasn't all that excited about it, but that changed in a hurry and now she spends nearly all her time there. I usually go down on Thursday and return to Louisville on Sunday," said Hill.

In between, he's mowing lawns just like he was when featured in *Walker Talk*, Volume 37. "I love my Walker Mower," added Hill, who just turned 60. "I mow my residential accounts with the same machine I've had for 20 years, although it has a new mowing deck and the engine has been rebuilt."

Still operating alone, this Walker

Mower user emphasized he's not working as hard as he once did and often knocks off work by noon. A second lake house property that the couple rents out brings in additional income and ensures that, when not cutting lawns, there's something for Hill to do.



**Mike Hill is mowing lawns just like he was when featured in *Walker Talk*, Volume 37.**

# Having Fun in NEWPORT NEWS



**Winston Collins, owner of Collins Landscaping & Lawn Maintenance, offers a customized lawn maintenance service, one that is more aptly described as a property caretaker service.**

**W**inston Collins, owner of Collins Landscaping & Lawn Maintenance, was 67 years old when *Walker Talk* visited him in Newport News, Virginia, nine years ago. Today, he's 76 and, in his words, still having fun.

"I'm not trying to grow; I'm trying to maintain," said this former Army drill instructor. In fact, he has many of the same high-end residential customers he had back then and continues to offer a customized lawn maintenance service, one that is more aptly described as a property caretaker service.

"Whatever the customer needs, no problem," he related. "I have a great

rapport with them, and they trust me to pick up their kids from school, take care of their dogs, pay the bills, sort the mail and so forth. They name it and I will do it because that's the kind of relationship I have with them. I don't think I could ever sell the business because there wouldn't be the level of trust between the new owner and the customers that I built up over time."

Collins still uses Walker Mowers. The number grew from four to seven and includes two Super Bs that he uses on almost all his properties. He's still happily married to his wife, Edwynna, and continues to be a runner, although a foot issue slowed him down, but not for long.

## SPOSATO LANDSCAPE GROWS WITH THE AREA



**I**n 2008, Sposato Landscape employed 150 people and operated 30 Walker Mowers. Since then, the Milton, Delaware, company more than doubled in size, now employing more than 300 people and operating 72 Walker Mowers. When former high school teacher and company president, Tony Sposato, was asked what contributed to the rapid growth, he said simply, "the area."

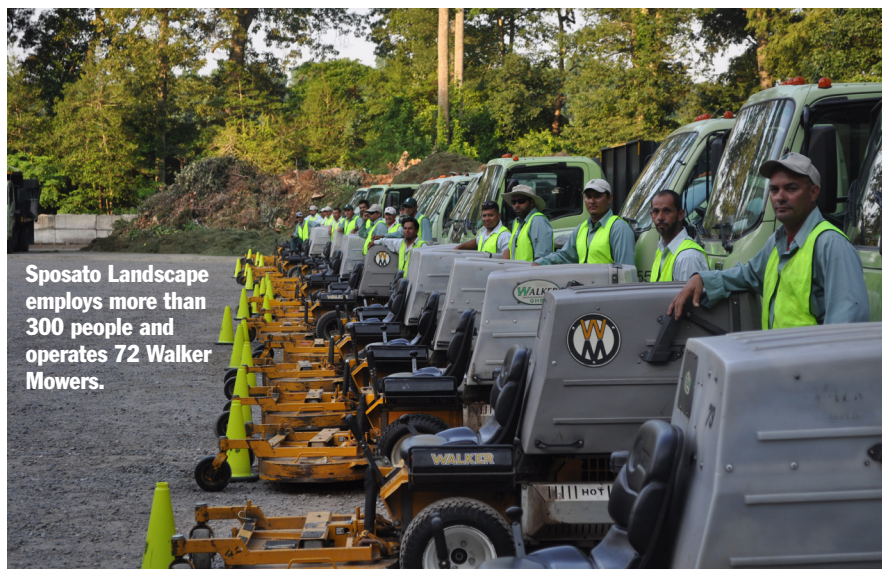
"We're in a state that attracts a lot of people, thanks to nearby resorts and low taxes," said Sposato, whose company was profiled in *Walker Talk*, Volume 31.

"As a full-service landscape company, all of our divisions, including design and build, lawn care, irrigation, and residential and commercial maintenance, can take care of virtually any customer request, and they generate work for each other. There's no question that being full service helped us grow, too."

So do the Walker Mowers that crews use primarily on the resorts, golf course communities and other high-end properties where customers want their entrances looking nice. Most of them can be found working with the 11 residential maintenance crews, at two direct-report resort locations and out of the Ocean View satellite facility.

Like other landscape contractors large and small, Sposato indicated that lack of labor continues to plague the industry, noting that his company could add another crew or two if it had the people. As he pointed out, the irony is the resorts are among his biggest customers; they are also his biggest competition for labor. For the last 14 years or so, he's been relying heavily on the H-2B guest worker program to man his crews during the busy mowing season.

What goes unsaid is companies can't grow at this pace without a loyal base of customers and employees. Sposato has people in both categories, celebrating more than 20 years with him.



**Sposato Landscape employs more than 300 people and operates 72 Walker Mowers.**

# Owners of a SPECIAL NICHE

**B**ob Vickery, owner of the The Planter's Touch in Easley, South Carolina, had just left behind a 21-year career as a banker when he and wife, Cile, appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 27. He was 44 back then. At age 62 now, Vickery has no regrets. The owner/operator, with Cile managing the business end of their company, has plenty of work. With two full-time employees, The Planter's Touch mows 46 accounts a week with two Walker Mowers, provides turf care for nearly 100 properties, and offers landscape design and installation services to another 25 customers.

"Maintaining lawns and installing landscapes, primarily doing renovation, works well for us," said Vickery. "Our maintenance customers often want some landscaping and our landscaping customers usually select us to do their

maintenance. Yes, we could do more work today, but like most everyone else in this industry and others, labor is the biggest challenge to growth."

The couple meets the challenge by hiring mostly younger workers. In fact, Vickery estimated that, over the years, he probably hired 30 or so youngsters, including high school and college students, homeschoolers, and other young adults. Two former employees he's mentored have since started their own landscaping companies, and both operate Walker Mowers.

Vickery mentioned that owner/operators like himself have a special niche, one that is comprised of higher-end homeowners who want a more customized service. He never had to do any



Bob Vickery, owner/operator of The Planter's Touch, with wife Cile, who manages the business, has plenty of work.

advertising; all his new work is acquired by word of mouth.

He laughed, "I received more praise from customers during the first six months mowing lawns than I did as a banker for 21 years. I have no complaints. We've been blessed. We've made a good living doing something we enjoy."



**S**ome companies find a niche and stick with it. That's what the Bash family did in Arlington, Ohio. Owners, Tim and Laura Bash, and son, Ben, provide virtually the same services to many of the same homeowner customers they did six years ago when they appeared in *Walker Talk*, Volume 38.

Bash Lawn & Services mows, fertilizes, applies mulch, prunes, installs seasonal color, shapes beds, aerates and rolls lawns, and the list goes on.

## 'We're Still VERSATILE'

"Nothing of any real significance changed," added Laura. "We purchased two new 23-HP Walker Mowers with 48-inch GHS decks in 2012 and they handle the bulk of the mowing three days a week. Ben does most of it, which consists of 40 properties, although I help when needed. Tim did the rolling and fertilizing this spring, and is ready to start trimming shrubs. It looks like we may need to find a person to help him out this year."

She noted there were a few changes over the years. "Ben left the business for a brief time to try his hand working for an intermodal company nearby. A corporate job with a set schedule was less attractive than mowing, so he came back after six months.

"We probably mow and fertilize a few more lawns now, and our leaf clean-up picked up because of our Walker

Mowers. There are a lot of Walker Mowers around here, but we're one of two or three companies that handle clippings and leaves. The automatic dump box, a truck vac and two dump trucks help make the process efficient."

Laura mentioned they have enough work so they don't advertise anymore and they continue to stay out of the snow removal business, opting instead to recharge their batteries during the winter months.

**"There are a lot of Walker Mowers around here, but we're one of two or three companies that handle clippings and leaves."  
- Laura Bash, Bash Lawn & Services**



**Top Notch Services' new 50- by 90-foot facility is not only a nice place to work on and store equipment, but it also provides high visibility for a company that considers its work and satisfied customers as its only form of advertising.**

**T**op Notch Services in Granville, Illinois, still uses Walker Mowers. At 78 years old, company founder, Burdette Mills, is going strong, although son, Jeff, runs the business now. And the company has many of the same customers it had.

So what changed? "We're now in our 33rd year in business," said Mills. "The

## Some Things Change, Some Stay the Same

type of service we provide is a bit different. Jeff is really good at hardscaping, so we do more of that today. Providing mowing and other maintenance services remains important for our customers, but that business became much more competitive. There seems to be more low-ballers in the area, people who put four wheels on the ground and think they're a business."

Walker Mowers continue to play a key role for Top Notch Services, added Mills. "We've had 10 Walker Mowers

over the years. Our latest purchase was a Super B with a 52-inch deck for larger lawns."

For his part, Mills spends most of his time out of the field and in the company's new 50- by 90-foot facility doing repairs, an addition he calls a "wonderful plus for business." It's not only a nice place to work on and store equipment, but it also provides high visibility for a company that, to this day, considers its work and satisfied customers as its only form of advertising.

## Age Still **NO BARRIER** for Ralph Anderson

**I**n 2009, when *Walker Talk* visited Anderson Lawn Care in Wyand, Illinois, owner, Ralph Anderson, was 76 years old, and his four Walker Mowers and five employees maintained 75 accounts. Anderson turns 85 this year

and slowing down is not part of his DNA. His five employees and four Walker Mowers maintain at least 60 accounts, divid-

ed nearly in half between residential and commercial/institutional accounts.

"I'm working harder than ever," said Anderson, who served on the front line in Korea in 1952. "I'm busy as commander of the local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and right now I'm trying to organize a memorial service. There's

not any time left over to feel bad."

Anderson and wife, Marcella, remark about how much rain the area experienced this spring, but they're used to that, sort of. "It makes work a little more challenging than it should be," said Anderson. His two crews mow from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays and use Saturdays as a makeup day. They are going to be mowing this upcoming Saturday for sure.

"I still have the original Walker Mower I purchased in 1995," he added. "It was banged up after being rolled from a trailer, but I use it for applying lawn seed." In addition to four Walker Mowers, the crews operate a couple of Exmarks to mow some large farm plots, including an area wind farm.

The word retirement doesn't hold much attraction for an individual who,



**Owner of Anderson Lawn Care, Ralph Anderson, pictured with wife, Marcella, turns 85 this year and slowing down is not part of his DNA.**

after farming for 15 years, became an Amway direct distributor, purchased a lumber yard, and turned it into a mini mall with a restaurant, barbershop, video store, and ice cream parlor, and in the early 1990s, started mowing lawns.

"So many of my customers are long-time friends, and I just can't imagine selling my business and no longer being the one to maintain their properties," he emphasized. "It adds up to a rewarding lifestyle and journey in life."

**"I'm working harder than ever."  
– Ralph Anderson,  
Anderson Lawn Care**

# EVOLVING to Preserve and Grow



**Filoli Center garden supervisor, Kate Nowell, poses with the director of property operations, Alex Fernandez.**

**F**iloli Center puts a different twist on the old saying: The only thing constant is change. Since appearing 22 years ago in *Walker Talk*, Volume 6, this historic country estate, located in Woodside, California, has evolved to ensure its preservation. At the same time, it has expanded its role as a place for the public to learn more about and enjoy early 20th century cultural traditions and natural history.

What hasn't changed over the years is the magnificent beauty of the 654-acre property that includes 16 acres of formal gardens and a 43-room mansion, both of which are open to the public for self-guided and guided tours. There's still approximately four acres of turf to mow once a week during the growing season as well, a task that's charged to the estate's Walker Mower and a Honda push mower. Two of 14 horticulturists, Justin Brown and David Shippy, share mowing duties on Mondays when the house and gardens are closed to the public.

## GARDEN ATTRACTIONS

The grounds and gardens highlight the Filoli estate, and both fall under the care of garden supervisor, Kate Nowell. "In addition to our full-time staff, we have hundreds of volunteers who come

daily to help us with a variety of maintenance tasks," said Nowell. "They sign in and usually work for a couple of hours. Even though many have been volunteering for 20 years or more, the program requires a fair amount of coordination."

Among changes, she mentioned the recent drought that put an emphasis on making water management even more efficient and using turf that is more drought-tolerant. Her staff also restored an eight-acre orchard that provided the estate's original owners, the Bourn family, with dessert fruit. Today, the apples, pears, plums, oranges,

figs and nectarines, to name but a few varieties, help support local soup kitchens. The fruit is also made into cider and jam in time for the Harvest Festival, or to be sold in the retail shop and enjoyed by guests at estate events.

Holding corporate events is something relatively new for Filoli. Operating hours were extended, too, and this is the first year for the grounds and mansion to be open year-round.

The additional activity is creating a few challenges for the garden staff. "One of the biggest challenges is also one of the favorite things we do, which is to interact with the public," noted Nowell. "We are constantly being asked to identify flowers or quizzed about what we are doing. At the same time, we need to stay on task to complete our work. It forces us to be even more efficient."

She continued, "One example is time spent mowing. In addition to using our Walker Mower and a Honda rotary, we used to double-cut the turf with small reel mowers and a Locke mower to give it an even more manicured look. The staff doesn't have time to employ the reels today and the difference in cut is barely noticeable."

This is the estate's second Walker Mower. The first one, the one in *Walker*

*Talk*, Volume 6, still runs, but is used primarily for areas in need of turf restoration. "It's a durable machine," added 11-year Filoli veteran, Shippy, something even Brown, who's been at Filoli just over a year, also observed. "We have a lot of equipment, but not much of it is new," he added. "That makes sense, though. Preservation extends beyond the gardens and mansion."

## BIG PICTURE

In 1995, Alex Fernandez was finishing up his first year as Filoli's assistant garden superintendent. Today, he is director of property operations. "Back then, we didn't have the visitor's center and café, nor did we have a formal educational component," Fernandez explained. "Now, Filoli offers many educational classes, ranging from courses in garden design, floral arrangement and summer pruning to drawing plants and the history of botanical art.

"Education is part of a concerted effort to grow awareness and encourage more people to enjoy the gardens, learn from the past, and experience what it was like to live in Filoli in the early 20th century."

He noted that, when the country estate opened in 1975 as a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation,

it was a small nonprofit doing what it could to maintain and preserve the estate. Now, hundreds of thousands of garden enthusiasts from around the world visit annually. The challenge for Fernandez, Nowell, their staff and volunteers is to maintain the fine balance between preserving the estate and sharing it with more of the public.

For more information about Filoli, please visit [Filoli.org](http://Filoli.org). **WT**



**David Shippy (left) and Justin Brown share mowing duties every Monday.**



# UNIQUE Vantage Point

By Tim Cromley,  
Marketing Manager



**“Everyone has a story.”  
– Tim Cromley, Walker Manufacturing**

I began working with the *Walker Talk* project in 1995 and, even though I had a lot more hair back then, what I didn't have was a clue about how unique the opportunity was that I was beginning to experience. See, the way stories are gathered for *Walker Talk* is usually by an interaction Bob Walker or one of our staff had with a customer, whether in the field or by correspondence. Then, as we get to know these people, we realize that their stories would be great to share with others. Typically, this means that we hand off the story to our editor, Rod Dickens, and he contacts the customers, makes a visit, gets to know them by listening to their stories, takes photos and then writes their stories.

What is unique for me in this process is that I have been fortunate to be on both sides of this equation. An integral part of my job as Marketing Manager is to interact with customers—whether at shows, open houses, online or a host of other ways. As I talk with customers, I often say to myself: “What a great story ... I wish everyone could hear it.” And many times, I submit their names to be profiled in *Walker Talk*.

Sometimes, because of

scheduling or other reasons, I have the opportunity to field some of our stories, which means I get to know some customers even better and then get to share their stories through my eyes. It is a unique vantage point because I not only get to know them better, but I am also charged with the task of carefully handling their story and telling it the way they often so passionately told it to me.

Since Volume 50 is a reflection on past customers, let me share a couple of lessons I have learned in my time on this project:

- Everyone has a story. This may sound so simple, but we learned that, if we take the time to listen to the stories of how people have come to know us, we are often profoundly impacted to continue to work as hard as we can to help them continue their story, as our company and product may be playing a role. Bob Walker calls it energy and he is right; I gain energy to continue to work hard when I see how our cumulative efforts as a company continue to encourage others in the extended Walker family.
- “People still like doing business with people.” I give credit for this quote to the late Walker pioneer, Bob Oestreich, from Precision Work Inc. who developed the northeastern states for Walker. He said this at a Walker distributor meeting about 15 years ago and it is still true today. We do have fancier technology today than we did then and we can communicate in some incredible ways, but I believe that, if Bob were still alive, he would still be talking with people face to face and truly getting to know them. People are truly the story of *Walker Talk*.

It was exciting to work on Volume 50 as we caught up with people from our earlier issues. In doing so, we were reminded what an honor it is to play a small role in the lives and successes of these customers.

To be sure, it gives us energy and a greater appreciation for this unique vantage point. **WT**



# SEEING and EXPERIENCING Is Believing

By Rod Dickens, Editor



Just as smartphones changed the way you do business, they altered the landscape for editors as well. Not only do they take professional-quality images, but smartphones also make busy folks like yourself available for a quick interview. Spend a few moments on your phone, have someone snap a photo of you, and the story is nearly ready to publish without the editor ever leaving his or her desk.

“Not so fast,” said Bob Walker. From the very first issue of *Walker Talk*, he put a premium on interviewing Walker Mower users in person and on taking real-life photos with machines working in all conditions.

He didn’t want the story subjects to dress up their operations or even spend extra time to clean up their mowers. If they used a competitive brand for an application, he advised to take a photo and talk about it. As he put it, there are applications for virtually every mower on the market, so don’t ignore them.

Hence, from time to time, a machine that wasn’t yellow appeared in a story, but that was OK. It was OK, as well, to talk with part-timers and do stories about them, even though some readers

objected. But Bob Walker pointed out that even the most successful landscape contractors often started out that way.

Still, the vast majority of stories over the last 25 years were about people who make a living mowing and maintaining lawns, and they all have a story to tell. Of course, not everyone wants to be as big as Sposato Landscape Company in Delaware, or instead work to contain their business as a family enterprise like Cutzgras in Florida and Top Job in Arizona did. Retiring at an early age like the Scapes owner did in Georgia would be attractive for some readers, but less so for people like Ralph Anderson who, at age 85, is still going strong in Illinois.

Who would trade a successful banking career to mow and maintain lawns? Bob Vickery did in South Carolina. Or how many landscape contractors like

Carl Polite started out by helping their sons mow lawns?

Their stories are all different, except for one common denominator, the Walker Mower. From day one, however, the Walker Manufacturing president wanted to make sure the magazine would not be viewed as a marketing piece. As he impressed upon me, “The magazine should be less about the mowers and more about the people who make a living using them, no matter how big or small their companies are or how young or old they happen to be.”

That’s real life and, from his perspective, the only way to accurately write about it is to see it and experience it in person. Hopefully, that message has come through over the past 25 years and remains consistent in this anniversary issue. **WT**

**“The vast majority of stories over the last 25 years were about people who make a living mowing and maintaining lawns, and they all have a story to tell.”**  
— Rod Dickens



# Walker Family to Gather for #150,000

Mark your calendar for July 13 through 15, 2018, for the third Walker Family Reunion at the factory in Fort Collins, Colorado, to celebrate the production of the 150,000th Walker Mower. This event will draw Walker owners, operators, salespeople, suppliers and friends from around the world who will participate in a variety of events, and enjoy a great family-style weekend. Registration opens in September at [walker.com/reunion](http://walker.com/reunion).



# New Distributors Welcomed

Two new European distributors have joined the Walker program and will be developing the Walker market in their countries. Walker Manufacturing welcomes Walker Mowers UK Ltd. working in the United Kingdom, and Walker Mowers Baltic SIA working in Latvia and Lithuania.



# Walker Updates Web Location

In late 2016, Walker acquired [walker.com](http://walker.com) as a simplified update to the company's main web location. Dealers are encouraged to update their web pages to include the new link on their web pages when linking to Walker.



## MORE COMFY SEATING

A new Comfort Seat option offers thicker cushions and bigger side cushions on the seat bottom and seat back for increased comfort and support. The seat bottom with the cutout for steering levers increases leg support.



### QUICKLY, EASILY RAISE MOWER DECK

Quickly and easily raise the mower deck on the Model H for maintenance and storage using the optional Power Tilt-Up Deck Kit.

### 14-HP KOHLER ENGINE WITH FUEL INJECTION

The new model MS14i has a 14-HP Kohler engine with Delphi® fuel injection.



### AGGRESSIVE DIRECTIONAL TREAD

Drive tires with aggressive directional tread increase traction for snow removal, dirt work and challenging mowing conditions. Available in narrow-tread size 18x7.00-8 or Model H size 23x10.5-12



### GRAMMER SUSPENSION SEAT NOW STANDARD

The Grammer suspension seat is now standard equipment on the Model H27i.



### FOR BETTER NIGHTTIME VISIBILITY

This optional headlight kit consists of LED lights mounted with a heavy-duty light bracket, light guards and shock mounting for extra durability; it gives operators excellent nighttime visibility.



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# The Walker Advantage: **Beautiful Cut**



**Bryan Starnes** - Irmo, South Carolina



**Erin Nash** - Wellington, Colorado



**David Bartlett** - Bottineau, North Dakota

## *My* **WALKER** *Story*

Over the years, we have heard from customers that the finishing cut of the Walker Mower just makes their lawns look better. There are some very specific reasons why the Walker offers high quality mowing that can be explained. See and hear from a number of Walker users who enjoy the distinct, beautiful cut of the Walker on their lawns.

[walker.com/advantage/beautiful-cut](http://walker.com/advantage/beautiful-cut)

