

LAKESHORE: OHIO TURF DEALER GROWS INTO NATIONAL MANUFACTURER

In 1961, there were three ways for a golf course superintendent to buy products he needed; from an agricultural supplier, garden center dealer or, in a few cities, from a localized "turf distributor" such as Bob Burkhardt in Rocky River, Ohio. Regional distributors of turf and landscape supplies hadn't developed in most areas of the United States by then.

Today, Bob Burkhardt looks back with partner Jim FitzGibbon and smiles, almost in disbelief, at the state of Lakeshore Equipment & Supply Co., one of the first "regional turf suppliers," now a national distributor of turf supplies. The \$75,000 gross of 1962 has grown and is now approaching \$40 million including chemical and equipment manufacturing divisions.

FitzGibbon, a lumber broker and hardware merchant, joined up with Bob Burkhardt in the early 1960s. Since 1962, Lakeshore has had four homes in the Cleveland area, but next year the company returns its offices to where it started out, Rocky River. Lakeshore is in the process of renovating the old hardware store to make it the new headquarters for LESCO.

The company's current headquarters in Elyria, OH, doesn't have the Musac atmosphere of some companies. It is more like the floor of the stock exchange with orders being announced over the intercom and all kinds of activity in the hallways and offices. The only time the principals really have time to discuss business is over lunch.

As the name implies, Lakeshore started as an equipment and supply dealer located on the south shore of Lake Erie, supplying local golf courses, cemeteries, greenhouses and nurseries. More than 80% of its business in 1963 was equipment. Lakeshore represented National, West Point Products, Sod Master, Goodall, H.D. Hudson and Smithco, among others. Its first

salesman, Herb Cole, came from H.D. Hudson in 1963. Sales people Gene Probasco, Ed Williams, Barb Craycraft and Ron Giffen joined the company shortly thereafter.

FitzGibbon and Burkhardt weren't satisfied with the territorial limitations placed on equipment distributors by manufacturers. They had a concept for a regional business and restrictive territories were counterproductive. Even so, Lakeshore grew to become the largest distributor of many equipment lines. "There are two thoughts on marketing equipment," says FitzGibbon. "One is to sell by territory. The second is to allow competition to take its course." Though the second choice was not popular in the turf industry, Lakeshore was ready to let competition take its course. The course led straight to growth.

In the early days, Lakeshore also sold a line of fertilizers manufactured by Agrico. Today, its subsidiary Ag Industries Mfg., Columbia, Alabama, produces sulfur-coated urea and sulfur-coated fertilizers. Facilities in Wellington, OH, produce fertilizer, formulate chemicals and serve as a warehouse. Manufacturing, formulating and warehouse facilities are also located in Sebring, FL, and a new warehouse is located in Landover, MD.

Lakeshore added chemicals to its line in 1970 when Morton Chemical was selling out its line of turf herbicides. Lakeshore bought the products and originated its first private label chemicals, Lescopex—MCPP—and Lesopar—a combination of MCPP and 2,4-D. Today, Lakeshore formulates a line of 20 proprietary chemicals including Lescosan, A,4-D (2,4-D), Dursban® and Diazinon® granular and fertilizer combinations. Plans for 1983 include more formulating facilities and more facilities for the manufacture of after-market replace-

ment parts for turf equipment and golf course accessories.

If Lakeshore has symbol to tout, it is its LESCO Truck showroom system. With 21 trucks and growing, Lakeshore brings a showroom on wheels to its golf course customers once a month, or more often if needed. Chemicals, equipment and accessories are displayed and supplied from the trucks. In between salesmen's visits, customers can order directly from Elyria. Ads encourage phone orders suggesting customers "Call Barb" for fast service.

Lakeshore's first LESCO Truck was placed in Florida and proved to be a disappointment. A second chance in Florida proved to be successful, however, and Lakeshore has expanded its truck routes ever since. Prior to instituting truck sales, Lakeshore served the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and Illinois. Today, the company serves 25 states with its sales force and the entire country with its mail order business.

The trucks have enabled Lakeshore to grow more into Southern markets which have year-round sales. Growth there has also encouraged Lakeshore to enter the overseeding market. A relationship with Turf Seed, Inc. in Hubbard, OR, has prospered with CBS overseeding mixture. Future seed varieties are being tested by Turf Seed's Dr. Bill Meyer.

The lawn service business has given Lakeshore another area for growth. FitzGibbon sees continued growth there as well as in the golf course and nursery areas. A new line of spreaders, including an electric model, might be the beginning of a national equipment manufacturing division. "We already make many replacement parts for golf equipment, we just don't assemble the units yet," says FitzGibbon.

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