

# LAWN CARE INDUSTRY

## 'People power' fuels ChemLawn rise

**A year or two on customers' lawns and ChemLawn specialists think they know it all—or at least enough to be a manager.**

■ "A circus," says Rick Knepper, grinning enormously. "But I would do every bit of it again."

Consider the former nomadic existence of one-time ChemLawn employee Knepper: 1973, Toledo, Ohio; 1975, Findlay, Ohio; 1977, Pittsburgh; 1978, Buffalo, N.Y.; 1980, Detroit; 1981, Columbus, Ohio.

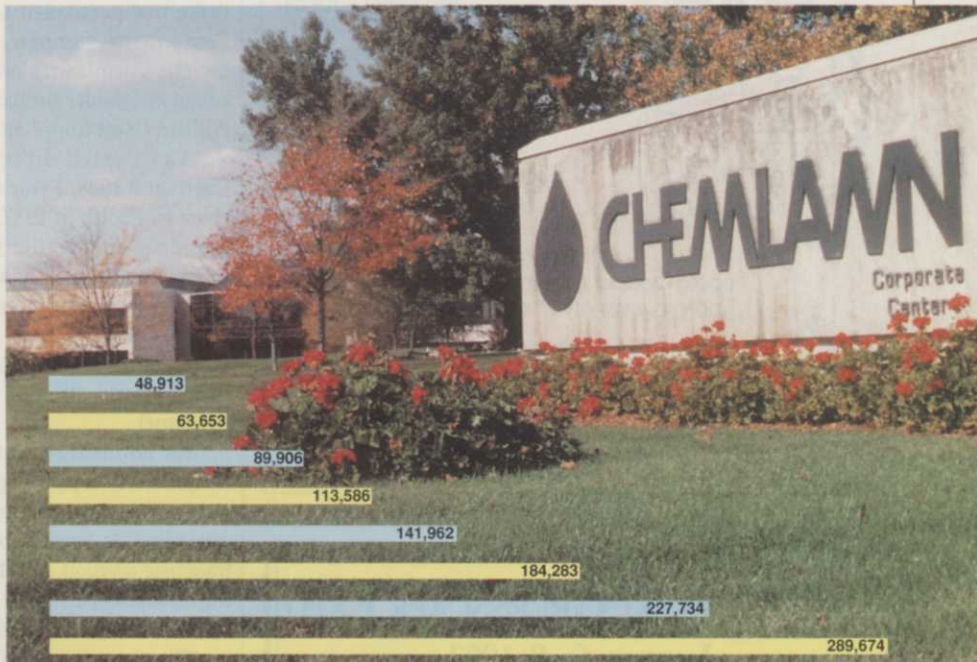
Many former ChemLawn co-workers agree with Knepper. The company's business explosion in the middle to late 1970s colored their lives with the kaleidoscopic excitement of a circus: the next brass ring being no farther away than the next big city with suburbs and lawns.

ChemLawn employees, confident that their efforts would be recognized and rewarded, fed off their own momentum. First opening markets in the Mideast. Then the East Coast and the Northeast.

"ChemLawn 'MacDonaldized' the market here. It changed the face of lawn care in the Northeast," says one longtime independent Connecticut operator.

"We would take the trucks and move the guys to the next city ourselves. Load them up, and get the guys moved in," recalls Willie Vorn Holt, a 20-year ChemLawn employee.

**Up the ranks**—The combined career paths of Knepper and Vorn Holt hopped-scotched through a dozen Mideast and



**ChemLawn's sales (in thousands of dollars), between 1977 and 1984.**

Eastern cities. Starting as entry-level "lawn specialists" they rose to management jobs—Knepper in Columbus, Vorn Holt on the East Coast. (Knepper is now a franchise consultant in Columbus. Vorn Holt, in Baltimore, will be marketing a dry cleaning franchise system with several partners soon.)

"The strength of the ChemLawn organization was its focus on the individual," recalls Mark Cruse, 17 years with ChemLawn, vice president of operations 1980-85. "There were times when we had more opportunity than people."

Tad Grubbs in just eight years, for instance, worked in Columbus, Minneapolis, Buffalo, Toledo and Pittsburgh before becoming Detroit Regional Manager in 1981.

"I thought it would be a valuable experience, being a part of so many different marketplaces," says Grubbs, now national sales manager for C&S Turf Care Equipment, Canton, Ohio.

"Also, I think we enjoyed working with

a lot of different people. We were having fun."

Dick Duke himself probably didn't foresee the wildfire he'd ignite.

Could he have foreseen that when he climbed aboard his first lawn care tank truck in Troy, Ohio, in 1969 ("Gertrude") he'd tossed a pebble into the American business pond that would ripple outward for another 15 years. Years, in fact, after his death.

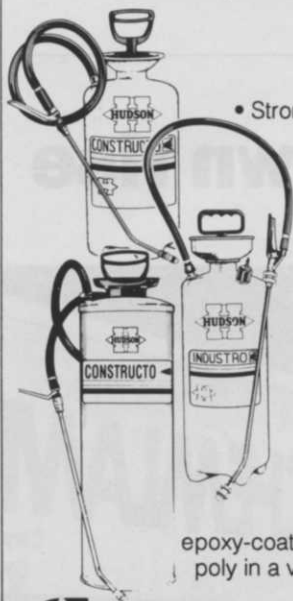
**Responsibility**—This was partly due to a management system that Duke constructed. Or, perhaps more accurately, he allowed to evolve. Duke couldn't imagine that most people didn't crackle with the same fire to succeed that he did. He willingly—gladly almost—surrendered responsibilities to others, if they displayed any willingness to accept them at all.

"As a manager you felt you had the opportunity to use your own skills and your own judgment as long as you stayed within the confines of the people and service philosophies that Dick Duke had start-

*This is part two of a three part series by senior editor Ron Hall outlining the rise and eventual disappearance of the ChemLawn Corporation from the lawn care industry.*

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ed the company with," says Grubbs.

Duke's judgment of people, in hindsight, now seems almost uncanny.

Two additions to ChemLawn's original management family—a group that remained basically intact through ChemLawn's first decade—sustained the company's unparalleled growth following Duke's unexpected death on August 23, 1977.

Several years before his death, Duke had persuaded Larry J. Van Fossen, the company lawyer, to become ChemLawn's president. The company founder similarly recruited William Grant from Johnson Wax.

(Van Fossen directed ChemLawn until 1988, a year after its purchase by Ecolab in 1987. Grant, vice president of operations, remained seven years before leaving the industry for personal business interests in Atlanta.)

**No crisis**—Duke's sudden death (heart attack) stunned ChemLawn personnel.

But no management crisis ever materialized, even though the company had, just months earlier, begun expanding its services by starting a franchise division, and test marketing ChemScape tree & shrub care and commercial maintenance.

"The reason why ChemLawn didn't miss a beat was because Dick Duke had already empowered people with responsibilities," says Cruse.

"Jack (Van Fossen) came in, he helped re-organize the company, and set us off on the next stage," says Vorn Holt. "It became very obvious he knew how to run the show. And the same thing was very true for Bill Grant. If you had a new idea on how to do something, he was all ears."

ChemLawn topped a hectic 1977 (26 new branches, \$49 million in sales) with \$63.6 million in sales in 1978: this after a numbing winter and late spring in the Mideast, ChemLawn's stronghold.

By the end of the 1980 season, ChemLawn, now also firmly established in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast, eclipsed the \$100 million sales mark. In that year it opened 22 additional branches (16 in new market areas), 11 new ChemScape locations and five more commercial sales offices.

**Decentralized**—It did this with basically the same structure it had always relied on: branches operating on a profit center basis with branch managers responsible for sales, expenses, and for producing a profit,

*continued on page 50*



**Knepper: "We didn't know how big it could get, we didn't know when to say stop."**



**Beecher Smith was part of ChemLawn's westward expansion.**



**Grubbs: Skills acquired in one market were used in opening the next.**



**ChemLawn** from page 48

training and motivating employees and expanding their customer bases.

Says Vorn Holt, "You'd go to work and feel like a gunslinger. If a problem came up, you found a way to solve it."

When ChemLawn was finally ready, West Coast markets were ripe.

Beecher Smith, who started as a lawn specialist in Columbus in 1971, was a part of the small ChemLawn team spearheading the opening of markets in Portland, Albuquerque

and Salt Lake City. It was heady business as markets like Los Angeles and San Jose, under sales pressures, split, like amoebas, into multiple branches.

Entering the 1980s, ChemLawn could legitimately begin describing itself as a "national" company even though it opened just five new branches in both '81 and '82.

In April 1982, ChemLawn registered its one millionth customer. By the end of '82 it had registered \$165 million in lawn care sales.

The early 1980s also saw the growth of a somewhat new phenomena for branch managers, particularly in some of the older, established markets—a growing number of customer cancellations.

Even so, when ChemLawn dedicated its new corporate center on October 8, 1982—a glass-enclosed lobby atrium surrounded by picture-book grounds, just north of Columbus—managers could justifiably look with pride at the company's 3,200 full time employees.

—Ron Hall

## Alabama groundsman helps keep Jim Nabor's hometown a prize winner

**Groomed, flowering landscape is 'just like having another salesperson on the payroll,' grounds manager says.**

■ Sylacauga, Ala., is grounds manager Greg Bolton's hometown. Both Greg and Sylacauga are glad it is.

Sylacauga (pronounced sil-a-cog'-a) is also:

- Jim Nabors's hometown (Gomer Pyle). Gollllleeeey!
- The location of quarries that produce the whitest marble in the world.
- The only town where a person was known to have been hit by a falling meteorite. (She survived.)

This city of about 13,000 people prospers in the low, green hills of east central Alabama. It's a quiet but industrious town with four sizeable industries either in or around it—textiles, paper, fertilizer, and marble quarries. Pine and oak trees cool Sylacauga's pleasant streets and provide shade for homes that are neat but, for the most part, modest.

"A man sure would be sorry if he couldn't find work here," comments local fishing guide William Davis, Bolton's lifelong friend and an employee at the nearby

*continued on page 52*

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**Alabama** from page 50

Kimberly-Clarke plant.

Landscape manager Bolton and his employer, fertilizer manufacturer Pursell Industries, do their part in making Sylacauga an even nicer city. Greg donates time and expertise, and his employer provides fertilizer and other material when it's needed. Greg does this in addition to overseeing the condition of Pursell's 80 acres (and growing) of property, much of it intensively maintained.

**You must share**—"If you have a skill or knowledge, you have to share it in a small city," says Bolton, a medium-sized man, with



Pursell Industries shows its best face to its home town, Sylacauga, Ala.

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hazel eyes and a sun-reddened, softly freckled face.

Pursell Industries, known until recently as Parker Fertilizer Co., has been a part of the community for 88 years. Greg joined the company 10 years ago—as a one-man crew. Most of the experience he brought to the job came from farming, a small nursery he had started, and some work with a local landscaper. Today he heads a crew of four other full-time employees and several seasonal helpers. "I consider all my guys foremen because we take care of so much property," he says.

Greg's department is virtually autonomous within the company, preparing its own budgets, recording and monitoring all expenses, scheduling its own activities.

"On the books, I suppose what we do looks like pure overhead," says Bolton, "but I feel that a beautiful landscape is a selling tool. It's just like having another salesman on the payroll."

Greg's crew mows the predominantly zoysiagrass grounds at least weekly, but it's the flowers, ornamentals, and trees, particularly the trees, that really excite Bolton, an avid and experienced outdoorsman.

**Trees that fit**—Bolton favors 3- to 5-inch caliper trees—which he establishes with extreme care—for new landscape plantings. He wants the landscape to evolve into a mature and natural appearance as soon as possible. (Bolton does almost all the company's landscape design work himself. Trees he likes to use include magnolia, maples, oaks, and river birch.)

"I want trees that are going to fit into the area around here, that look natural here, trees that aren't going to require a lot of pruning or spraying. I don't like those poodle-dog trees that you've always got to be trimming," Greg says.

Beds of begonias brighten entrances to

Pursell warehousing and manufacturing facilities through the summer and into October when Greg's crew replaces them with over-wintering pansies. Increasingly, says Bolton, he's adding perennials to his landscapes. Wildflowers will be seeded into less intensively maintained fescue areas.

But, as busy as Greg and his crew stays on company premises, they never turn down



Grounds manager Bolton won't plant trees that require much trimming.

a chance to help, if asked, with the grounds at local schools, or at the large modern library downtown, or the property surrounding the city building.

"The appearance of the city, after all, is a reflection on all of us, the company and even myself," says Bolton.

Greg and others in Sylacauga are apparently doing something right. Sylacauga, Ala., is a perennial National Beautification Award winner. And, the grounds at Pursell Industries, are just as regularly chosen by a city committee as the most attractive in the community.

—Ron Hall