

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.

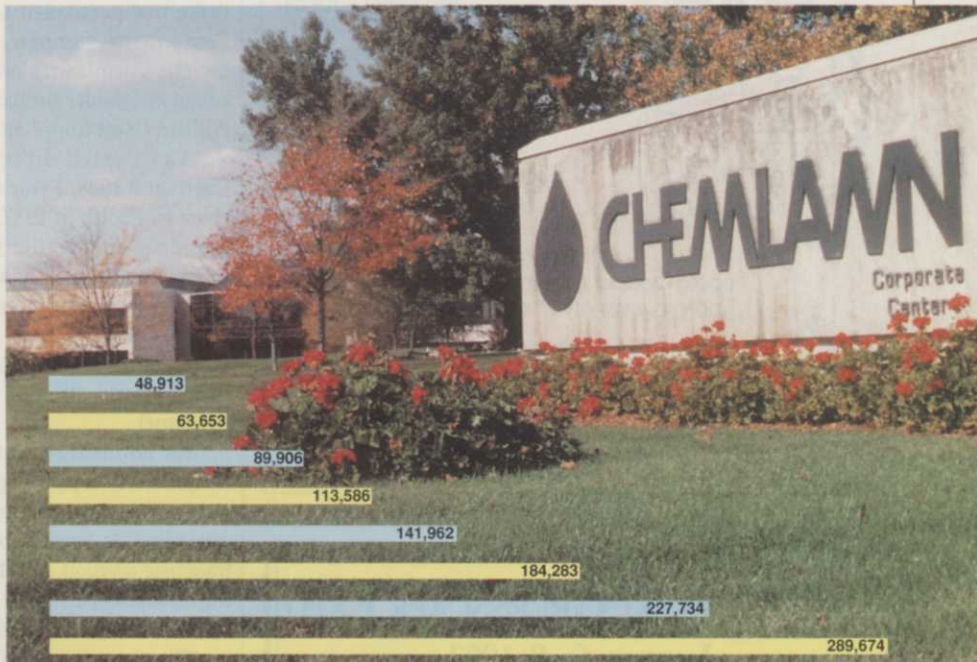
Many former ChemLawn co-workers agree with Knepper. The company's business explosion in the middle to late 1970s colored their lives with the kaleidoscopic excitement of a circus: the next brass ring being no farther away than the next big city with suburbs and lawns.

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.

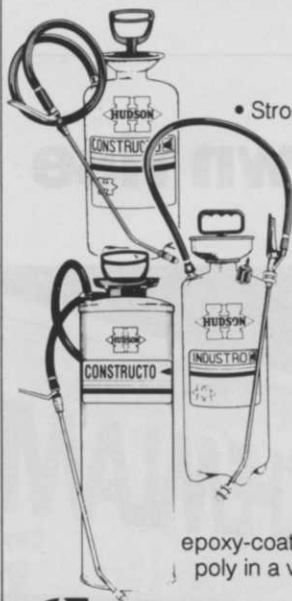
Responsibility—This was partly due to a management system that Duke constructed. Or, perhaps more accurately, he allowed to evolve. Duke couldn't imagine that most people didn't crackle with the same fire to succeed that he did. He willingly—gladly almost—surrendered responsibilities to others, if they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

Buy a sprayer that lasts... Year after year!

For the times you need a compression sprayer, buy a Hudson professional sprayer from Green Garde®



Built with you in mind, Hudson professional sprayers feature...

- Strong, maleable steel pump handles.
- Heavy-duty Kem Oil™ hose.
- Efficient brass or polyamide pumps that pressurize with fewer strokes.
- Viton® (fluorocarbon) soft parts.
- Exclusive Roto-Valve™ or thrustless brass shut-offs.
- TeeJet® or TeeJet adaptable brass nozzle assemblies.
- Choose stainless or Endural® epoxy-coated galvanized steel or heavy-duty poly in a variety of sizes and configurations.

Call or fax now for your Hudson professional sprayer catalog.



**green
garde®**

Green Garde Division
H. D. HUDSON MANUFACTURING COMPANY
500 N. Michigan Avenue • Chicago, IL 60611-3748
312-644-2830 FAX: 312-644-7989

Circle No. 106 on Reader Inquiry Card

1993 MIDWEST GREENSCAPE EXPO

JANUARY 6 - 8, 1993

INDIANA CONVENTION CENTER
INDIANAPOLIS, IN

SPONSORED BY

THE INDIANA ASSOCIATION OF NURSERYMEN
AND
THE MIDWEST REGIONAL TURF FOUNDATION

- GOLF COURSE, SPORTS TURF, LAWN CARE, AND LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT SESSIONS
- IN-DEPTH WORKSHOPS ON ASPECTS OF THE TURF AND ORNAMENTAL INDUSTRY
- EXPANDED TRADE SHOW WITH OVER 300 EXHIBITORS AND EQUIPMENT ON DISPLAY

CONTACT JO HORN AT (317) 494-8039 FOR
INFORMATION AND REGISTRATION

Circle No. 113 on Reader Inquiry Card

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). Gollllleeey!
- 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

NEW YORK STATE



★ Keynote Speaker
Tommy Lasorda

TURFGRASS ASSOCIATION

Turf and Grounds Exposition

November 10-13, 1992

Rochester Riverside Convention Center
Rochester, New York

Sponsored by the New York State Turfgrass Association
in cooperation with Cornell University

Special One Day Seminars

- Ornamentals, Site Assessment and Early Maintenance
- Turfgrass Management: Back To Basics
- IPM Program Implementation
- Irrigation
- GCSAA Seminar, Developing Your Hazard Communication Program

Speakers

- Mr. Charles Vander Kooi, Vander Kooi and Associates
- Mr. David Frey, Cleveland Stadium
- Nationally renowned experts in Turfgrass Management, Business and Environmental Issues

Mail the coupon for further information
or call 800-873-TURF or 518-783-1229

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------|-----------|
| PLEASE SEND: | | MAIL TO: | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Conference Program | NYSTA | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Packet for Exhibiting at Trade Show | P.O. Box 612 | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | NYSTA Membership Application | Latham, NY 12110 | |
| Name _____ | | _____ | |
| Telephone _____ | | _____ | |
| Firm _____ | | _____ | |
| Mailing Address _____ | | _____ | |
| City _____ | | State _____ | Zip _____ |

Circle No. 114 on Reader Inquiry Card