We were there at birth of lawn care

WT&T and LCI first to recognize the 'new' lawn application industry.

BY JIM GUYETTE and RON HALL

Professional lawn applicators proved that they could apply fertilizer products more efficiently than most homeowners--and with better results.

The chemical lawn care industry emerged and grew since publication of the first issue of LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT (then called WEEDS AND TURF) in 1962.

There were some lawn care companies then, most in the Northeast and a few in the Midwest and in Florida, but no recognizable industry.

Most homeowners fertilized their own lawns, about once or twice a year.

Only a few entrepreneurial individuals worked to develop products and systems to treat many lawns in a day. They thought that if they could substantially improve those lawns, that they could build a profitable business. Even so, few could foresee the demand for professional lawn care. Once homeowners learned that they could hire "professionals" to improve their lawns, at an affordable price, they embraced the service.

Within a decade, the few applicator companies grew into many.

The 10 to 15 years following WT&T's first issue saw the birth of many of the companies that later became so familiar--Lawn Doctor, ChemLawn, Davey, The Weed Man, and Barefoot Lawn among others. Some opted for company-owned branches. Others offered franchises.

Meanwhile, many other smaller, local application companies began shortly thereafter, in the mid to late 1970s. Those that haven't been bought by larger companies remain some of today's strongest local and regional companies, and they're still family-operated.

"It was a very heady time. It was really exciting," recalls Bob Earley, former editor and publisher of LAWN CARE INDUSTRY (LCI) and LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT magazines. (LCI published its first issue in July 1977 and continued until 1991.)

"The industry was full of entrepreneurs and guys with farming backgrounds," says Earley, who lives near Chicago and remains in publishing. "The guys were all 28 to 32 years old and they were ready to branch out. They said, 'hey, I can do that.' " And, they did.

Duke an inspiration

Many of these young entrepreneurs were inspired by the success of the charismatic

Richard Duke who, in the early 1960s started experimenting with systems to deliver homeowner lawn service. In the winter of 1968 Richard and his father Paul closed their garden center in Troy, Ohio, and started a chemical lawn service. By the end of the season they'd attracted 400 customers.

They called their company ChemLawn and it became, within a decade, the most recognizable name in lawn care. But, it wasn't the first successful lawn care company--not by a longshot.

Early innovators

Millard C. Dailey offered contract spraying of liquid fertilizer onto home lawns in the early 1950s. His business, known as Liqui-Green, took off after he consulted with an engineer to build a truck with agitator tank, pump and 300 feet of ¾-inch hose.

In 1961 Daniel Dorfman founded Lawn-A-Mat on Long Island. He developed a multipurpose Lawn-A-Mat machine to make the service affordable for homeowners. Towed by a small tractor, it aerated and rolled a lawn as it dispensed several dry materials. You could even use it to make spot treatments of liquid material.

Even so, Dorfman said that he still had to market his service.

"It is no longer enough to pass out a few leaflets in a neighborhood which is often all that is necessary to obtain customers for mowing, clean-ups and hedge and shrub trimming," he wrote in WT&T. "A many-pronged advertising and promotional program must be undertaken, and this costs money too."

Floridians active too

Meanwhile in Florida, Ron Collins, was working with his uncle Bruce in Fort Lauderdale, delivering liquid pest control to homeowners' lawns. The uncle came up with the idea of delivering the service in clean trucks with technicians in white uniforms and red hats, recalled Ron Collins in an interview with LCI in the mid 1980s. Ron founded R.W. Collins Inc. in Satellite Beach on Feb. 20, 1962.

The services were sold as "power spraying," and the first spray guns, designed for use in orange groves, delivered 60 gallons a minute under 800 pounds of pressure. When Collins deemed that the old iron 1,000-gallon red tanks were too heavy, he had a fiberglass tank made.

Other early lawn care companies sprang from fuel oil delivery companies in the Northwest seeking ways to generate income from their trucks in the growing season. Or from tree companies that already had tanks and spray equipment, and were familiar with professional application.

But it was ChemLawn that popularized lawn care nationwide. CL opened markets at an amazing pace. In 1970 CL had expanded to Louisville, Indianapolis, Cincinnati and

Toledo, and passed the $1 million mark. Just over a decade later, there were ChemLawn locations nationwide as it recorded sales of $180 million.

Tragically, founder "Dick" Duke never saw how successful CL eventually became. He died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 48 on August 23, 1977. He left behind a valuable legacy--dozens of highly trained, highly motivated and still relatively young lawn experts. Many remain active in the industry.

Media hysterics

The lawn care industry's growth hasn't been without problems. The most persistent has been the assertion by some critics that lawn care chemicals pose risks either to humans or their pets, and/or the environment.

Erbaugh: lawn care industry became an easy target.

"In July of 1986 Dan Rather of CBS brought us into the environmental battle," recalls James Brooks, former executive vice president of PLCAA.

"A few politicians realized that there was hay to be made by attacking lawn care," adds J. Martin Erbaugh, who got his start working at the Davey Tree, then built up his own large regional company, Lawnmark .

While incidents arising from chemical misuse by LCOs have been rare, public concern helped push the industry to be more responsive to customers through such practices as posting and pre-notification.

Positive thinking

In January of 1987, Jerry Faulring, founder of Hydro Lawn Inc., wrote to LCI telling his colleagues to ease off with the "hyper emotionalism." Posting laws were actually a plus for the industry, he pointed out. Generally the public accepted the idea without fuss. Any way, it's free advertising. "Tens of thousands of flags got planted," wrote Faulring. "And guess what? The birds are still singing and the pets and children are okay."

The mid 1980s were a watershed in another way. The number of million dollar lawn care companies (those with annual revenues exceeding $1 million) leveled off, and began to shrink due to buy-outs and consolidations. The trend has continued with TruGreen/ChemLawn, now industry's powerhouse.

"Their production can outnumber anyone else's," says Neal DeAngelo, president of Lawn Specialties in Hazelton, PA.

"Don Karnes and those guys did a real nice job of consolidating," Erbaugh points out, marveling at TruGreen's rise in the industry.

As a division of ServiceMaster, TruGreen acquired longtime competitors ChemLawn and Barefoot Grass, and gobbled up dozens of regional and local companies too in the 1990s. Not bad for a company with humble beginnings as a small application company in central Michigan in the early 1970s.

Lawn Doctor co-founder Tony Giordano, right, presents a 10-year Service Award to Service Manager George MacDonald.

Karnes, who started out as an applicator with TG in western Michigan about 20 years ago, is now group president for lawn care and pest control at TruGreen/ChemLawn/Terminex.

Burning up the phone lines

Karnes says there several reasons why TruGreen succeeds, not the least of which is its success in selling over the telephone. "Telemarketing has had a huge impact on our industry," he says.

Karnes: TruGreen knew how to sell over the phone.

As TG/CL grows, the industry itself grows. Karnes credits better training for technicians and more efficient equipment. Regulations have also helped move the industry "in the right direction," he says.

Russ Frith, president of Lawn Doctor, Inc., the largest lawn care franchise operation in the U.S., believes consumers have a greater understanding of lawn care today, and that he has faith in the industry.

"The marketplace is expanding. There are more housing starts now." Also he points out that 15 years ago, about 45 percent of American households had dual incomes. Now the figure approaches 85 percent. And what American adult doesn't want more leisure time, he asks?