

## Three Generations Are A Charm

By Ellen O'Connor - Special to the Worcester Business Journal

More than 85 years ago, Ralph H. White founded his company on a simple, yet powerful premise: do what it takes to satisfy the customer.

It is a philosophy that served him well during the fledgling days of his business and one which is followed to this day by the third generation of Whites to operate R.H. White Cos. Inc.

"We meet the customer's needs, regardless of what they are," said David H. White, who is CEO and president of the company his grandfather started back in 1923.

Then, R.H. White, which is a construction firm, operated out of a barn on Central Street in Auburn. The company, which Ralph started in order to fulfill his dream of becoming a contractor, was comprised of three people — the founder and two close friends. Today, the business still occupies the same spot at 41 Central St., but it has grown exponentially. R.H. White now has more than 400 full-time employees, four operating groups, annual revenues of \$100 million, and four offices — two in Massachusetts and two in New Hampshire.

Although the business has become a big player in the construction world, it still remains, above all else, a family-run company that views its employees as a part of the White family. Call it an extension of the taking-care-of-the-customer philosophy.

"You can't buy people. You can't buy good people, dedicated people, committed people," explained David White during an interview at his 41 Central St. office, which has been extensively renovated to house the growing operation. "Our employees are the driving force of our organization. They are our biggest asset and our biggest focus."

The company hosts frequent parties for its employees, as a way of thanking them for their effort, good work and loyalty. It offers loans to employees in need of financial assistance. It has a training program for employees, committing more than \$300,000 annually to it. The company also allows its workers to use any tool or piece of equipment they wish. If the employee does not know how to operate the piece of machinery, they can have another employee operate it for them. The only cost to the employee is replacing whatever fuel or expendable attachments are used.

"I can't think of any other business that does that," said David of the equipment loan program.

It is not uncommon for second or third generation family members to work at R.H. White. It is also not that uncommon for people to put in 40 or more years at the company.

"We have had a couple of people who have been with us for 50 years," said David. They retired from a company they had worked at nearly the entirety of their adult lives.

There are also plenty of Whites who work at the company. Thomas White and Heather Whitney, both of whom are David's children, are a part of the company, as is Heather's husband, Jared. There have also been various nephews and nieces over the years. And of course there is David's father, Leonard, the 91-year-old chairman of the board, who still travels to his office every day.

### Staying Tough

When R.H. White was founded by Ralph, its focus was primarily on home building and water works. Today, the company specializes in construction for wastewater, industry and utilities, such as natural gas, water and sewer. The man perhaps most responsible for the evolution of the company into what it is today is Leonard H. White.

Leonard began working at the company on April 1, 1946. He had graduated from Worcester Polytechnic Institute, served in World War II and worked in New Jersey for a time as an engineer.

"We started small and grew from there," said Leonard, recalling what the company was like when he first began. During his early years at R.H. White, construction was a different world — no permitting agencies, no conservation committees, no red tape.

It is evident that the Whites love to do what they do.

The founder of the company died on his last day at work. The second generation, represented by Leonard, comes to work every day. The members of the third and fourth generations are trying to get him to cut back a bit on his hours, but it is not easy.

When David goes on vacation for a week, he is more than ready to get back at it when those seven days have ticked by.

He doesn't have to explain why, but he does nonetheless. "This is our life."



Pictured from left are: Jared Whitney, David White, Thomas White, Leonard White (chairman), Matthew Gibbs and Heather White-Whitney.

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