



Lee Plumbing Mechanical Contractors, Inc.

*A History of Lee Plumbing, Heating,
Cooling and Electric
1976-2011*

By
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Bob Lee Sr.



Bob Lee Jr.



Mike Lee

INTRODUCTION

In 1976 people across the United States were planning and participating in Bicentennial Celebrations. Banners, parades and fireworks were widespread as citizens around the country joined in celebrating the nation's 100th birthday.

In Kenosha, Wisconsin, another celebration was taking place with the birth of Lee Plumbing. With his knowledge as a skilled tradesman and the support of his wife, Robert Lee Sr. left the security of working in a union shop to start his own plumbing business.

Thirty-five years later Lee Plumbing is still a fixture in the community. Many contractors have come and gone during that time but Lee Plumbing has survived and thrived. The pages that follow chronicle the past thirty five years of this well known and respected family business.

— MITCH ENGEN
Author

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BOB AND NATALIE

Robert “Bob” Lee was born on April 17, 1937 at St. Catherine’s Hospital in Kenosha. He was one of four children born to Bill and Lucille Lee. He and his siblings were raised in the family home at 6324 24th Avenue and educated in the Kenosha public schools. Bob was an okay student but his real passion was sports. Active in all sports early on, by the time Bob reached high school he was focused on baseball and especially pitching. Like many young ball players, his dream was to make it to the “Big Leagues.”

Bob got that chance in 1955. Upon graduation from high school he signed a professional contract with the Milwaukee Braves. His \$4,000 signing bonus was the most teams could pay to a rookie without putting them on their major league roster and showed the Braves saw a lot of potential in the young pitcher.

In the 1950s the baseball season ran from February through Labor Day. Players would report for spring training, get their team assignments, play through the season, and then go home for the winter months. Most players, Bob included, would then take on a temporary job to support themselves during the winter. During his first four years in the minors, Bob would return to Kenosha to get a job with a local retailer until he had to return to Florida for spring training.

It was during the off season in 1957, while watching the John Lounsberry show “The Rock Hop” on WGN TV, that Bob was smitten with one of the young ladies dancing on the show. A co-worker and friend told Bob he knew the young lady and Bob asked for an introduction. While the accounts vary as to whom first approached who, it wasn’t long that a young lady named Natalie Reuter and Bob were dating.

Natalie Reuter was born on November 9, 1939. She was of one of three children born to Otto and Betty Reuter. The family moved several times while Natalie was growing up. Her father would renovate an apartment and then move on to the next. As a result she and her siblings attended several different schools in Kenosha’s public school system. Natalie says she was a typical student going to classes, checking out the boys and dancing. Natalie loved to dance. Her dancing lead to dating Bob and by the fall of 1957 she decided to forego her senior year of school so she and Bob could get married on September 17, 1957.

Natalie accompanied Bob when he returned to Florida for spring training in 1958. That year Bob was assigned to the minor league team in EauClaire, Wisconsin, so he and Natalie spent the summer there before returning to Kenosha in the fall. On December, 18, 1958, Natalie gave birth to their first son, Robert Lee Jr. Bob worked through the winter to support his family and then returned to Florida to resume his baseball career. Unfortunately his pitching career was cut short by a shoulder injury



Bob Lee is another lefthanded pitching prospect signed by the Milwaukee Braves last summer after high school graduation. He pitched for Corpus Christi in the Big State League, a Braves farm which not only won the regular season championship but also the league playoff. Connie Ryan, his manager last year, calls Lee a better prospect than Johnny Antonelli at a comparative age.

he had suffered during the previous season. Bob, now all of 21, returned to Kenosha to figure out how he was going to support his family.

Bob tried several jobs upon his return. He sold vacuum cleaners, bartended and worked as a construction laborer. While working as a laborer, his co-workers advised Bob to get an apprenticeship. He heeded their advice and signed up for the apprenticeship program. Then in 1960, Bob got the break he needed when his brother-in-law Irv Stengert offered him an apprenticeship with Stein Plumbing. Bob didn't know much about plumbing but his baseball career was done and he had a family to support so he accepted the job. In Bob's words, "You can't look back . . . you have to be a realist".

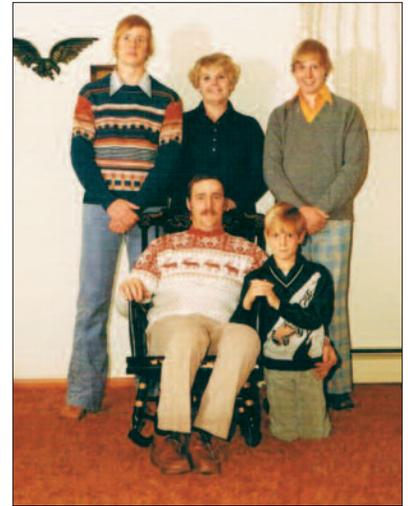
The early years were not easy for Bob and Natalie. Apprentices worked at reduced wage rates and work was not always steady. Bob would often have to work part-time as a bartender and take on side jobs to make ends meet for him and his growing family. On May 10, 1960, Natalie had given birth to their second son Michael and on May 26, 1968, he and Bob Jr. were joined by another brother Greg. More often than not Bob was working two jobs to support their family.

In the 1960s and 1970s Kenosha's economy was tied to the manufacture of durable goods. Good transportation, the availability of supplies and raw materials, plus the proximity to major urban markets drew a number of manufacturers to the city. While companies like Macwhyte, Eaton Manufacturing, Ladish Company Tri-Clover Division, Snap-on Tools, and Anaconda American Brass provided relatively stable employment, it was the American Motors Corporation (AMC) which dictated the local economy.

AMC was created in 1954 through the merger of Nash Kelvinator Corporation and the Hudson Motor Company. From its inception through the mid-1960s, AMC focused on its Rambler products and was quite successful. By 1960 AMC accounted for 7.2% of domestic auto production and employed 14,000 production workers in Kenosha.¹ By 1961 AMC was debt free and offering profit-sharing to its employees. That would change, however, with new management, new products and a changing national economy.

By 1976 Bob now had sixteen years experience as master plumber but was growing disillusioned with his second shift job as a pipe-fitter at the AMC Lakefront plant. To make matters worse there were not many jobs available outside of AMC. The oil embargo of 1973-1974 had driven gasoline prices to \$.45 a gallon. A barrel of oil had risen from \$1.50 in 1970 to \$13.10 in 1974. Inflation was averaging 5.8% and mortgage interest rates were in double digits. AMC had begun shutting down its plants for a month at a time due to poor sales of its larger vehicles and the costs it incurred for the introduction of the ill-fated Pacer. Kenosha's economy was experiencing the same depression going on throughout the nation.

Nevertheless, after considerable soul searching, Bob and Natalie decided if Bob was going to continue working as hard as he had been he should be working for himself. So, after a family meeting at the kitchen table with Father Jerry from St. Peter's Church, Bob and Natalie decided to start their own plumbing business. They were both scared and excited. They didn't know anything about running a business but they believed if they worked as hard as they could they would be successful.



Bob Jr., Natalie, Mike, Bob Sr., and Greg Lee in 1977.

THE EARLY YEARS

Lee Plumbing started operations in September 1976 out of the basement of the Lee home at 1305-25th Avenue. They started knowing they would only have three months before they ran out of insurance from the plumbers union. It was imperative that their new business start generating a cash flow soon. Bob and Natalie capitalized their new business with a \$3,000 line of credit from the Brown National Bank. Bob knew he didn't know anything about running a business but he knew George Connelly, then president and CEO of Brown National Bank. To this day Bob Sr. credits George with being his financial and business mentor and an important reason for his and Natalie's success. One of Lee Plumbing's first purchases with their new line of credit was a used 1972 Chevrolet Suburban which Bob converted to a plumbing van and numbered 35 so people would think Lee Plumbing had several vehicles.

Bob started out doing mostly residential repair work because other contractors, in Bob's words, "Didn't want to be bothered with it". He was also doing some basement and bathroom plumbing on new homes. Bob knew he wanted Lee Plumbing to be more involved in new construction but he did not know how to bid the work or how to prepare a "take-off" on his costs and supplies. So, he brought in his accountant who taught him how to calculate his net costs. It was enough for him to start profitably bidding on new construction.

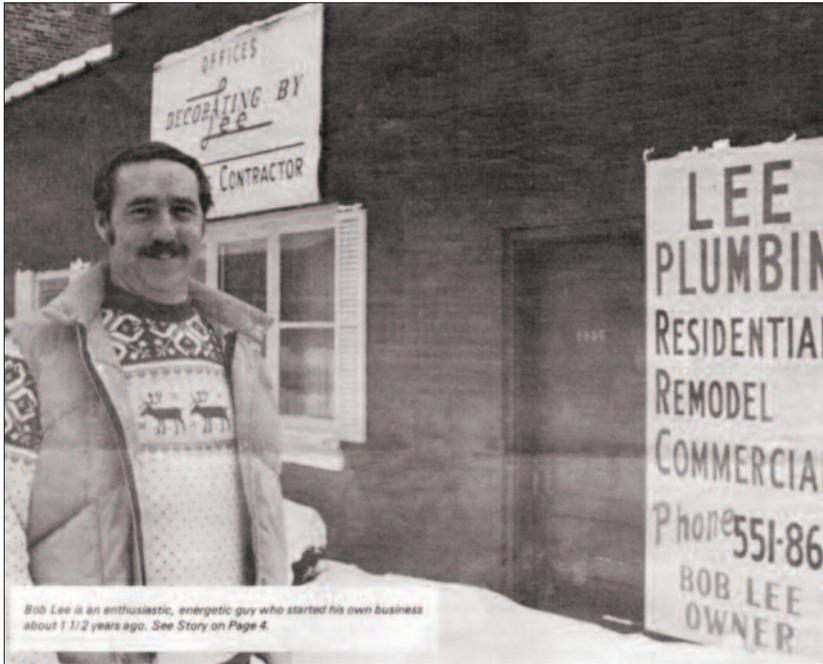
Meanwhile, Natalie had taken typing classes at the Gateway Vocational School and was getting a crash course in accounting from their accountant. For the next seven years Natalie was, for all intents and purposes, the business manager for Lee Plumbing. She did all the accounting, made sure contracts were in place, paid invoices and collected payments. In the early years, she would personally go out and collect payments on their accounts so Lee Plumbing could pay all their vendors by the tenth of the month, a practice Lee Plumbing continues to this day. Bob and Natalie were a team from day one and they worked hard to insure Lee Plumbing would succeed.

Bob lined up enough work that first year that Lee Plumbing was able to hire a local plumber, Ole Jensen, as an independent contractor to take on some of the work. Ole was a master plumber who had been partially disabled from an accident on the job years before. Following his rehabilitation, he bought a truck and started doing service work on his own.

1305-25th Avenue was the first home of Lee Plumbing.



Bob and Natalie in the office.



Undated Kenosha News Photo.

It was a perfect fit; Ole could use the work and Bob Sr. was getting an experienced plumber who had his own service truck and liked doing service work. One year later business had grown to the point that Ole was working as a full-time employee and Bob Jr., recently graduated from high school, was hired as an apprentice plumber.

1977 also witnessed Lee Plumbing moving from the basement of the Lee home to an office at 2905 - 60th Street. Bob Sr.'s brother, Bill Lee, was a painting contractor and had enough room in his building that he offered to rent some of the office space and a small storage area in the back of the building to Lee Plumbing. By 1978 business had been good enough that Lee Plumbing bought their first new truck. And, by 1980, Lee Plumbing had grown out of their original office space and was leasing the entire back half of Bill Lee's building.

The fact that Lee Plumbing had survived and had grown during this time was contrary to national trends. The United States was living with 10% inflation and interest rates had risen to 20%. Unemployment rates were in the double digits. When Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 he immediately faced the deepest recession since the Great Depression. Lee Plumbing had prospered during these times because they were willing to take on jobs other contractors didn't want, they always tried to give their customers the best service possible, and their reputation was growing through word of mouth that Lee Plumbing was a good contractor who did what they said they were going to do.

Since its startup in 1976, Lee Plumbing had been working exclusively on residential plumbing. That changed in 1979. Arnie Johnson, a local masonry contractor, hired Lee Plumbing as the plumbing contractor for the three story apartment building he was erecting in Library Park. Jerry Thomey and Bob Jr. did the rough-in and all the final plumbing for the building. With that project Lee Plumbing had finally moved into the realm of commercial plumbing.



Lee Plumbing expands to the back half of 2905-60th Street.

A second milestone for Lee Plumbing started with a referral by Bob Lasky at Lasky Electric. Bob recommended Lee Plumbing to Arthur Villup, the business manager for Carthage College. Carthage had a hot water problem in one of their dormitories and no one had been able to solve it. Jerry Brockhouse, a plumber at Lee Plumbing, and Bob Sr. looked at the whole system and realized the heating system was plumbed backwards. They were able to correct the problem and the heating system worked as designed. That one project lead to Lee Plumbing returning to Carthage College every year for many years. They replaced all the old plumbing on campus – one building at a time – plus working on several new buildings on campus.

The next big step in Lee Plumbing's growth into commercial plumbing came in the early 1980s. The American Motors Corporation had witnessed a rebirth with the introduction of the Renault Alliance in 1978. By 1978 AMC showed a record profit based on the Alliance sales and in 1980 Renault lent AMC \$90M to upgrade its facilities and operations.

One of the upgrades AMC put a lot of time and money into was separating its underground storm and sanitary sewers. Much of AMC's plumbing work was already being done by Kaelber Plumbing, Lakeshore Mechanical, and Advance Mechanical. They were not interested in sharing any of the work with Lee Plumbing but Bob Sr. was not to be denied. In 1981 he set up a meeting with the local plant engineers and made his pitch to get Lee Plumbing into AMC. It worked. Lee Plumbing started getting some small projects in the Lakefront plant. Bob Jr. describes it as being the backup to the backup to the backup. But they had their foot in the door and in 1983 they got the chance they had been looking for. AMC had a scheduled two week shutdown. During those two weeks, the engineers wanted to install a new air compressor system in the plant using welded pipe. In retrospect, it was a make or break opportunity for Lee Plumbing. Get the job done and do good work and Bob Sr. knew they could get more work in the plant. Fail, and Lee Plumbing would probably never get another job at AMC. Bob Sr.'s first hurdle was the fact that he had no pipe fitters working for him at the time. So, Bob Sr. contacted Arlan Thompson, a local journeyman pipefitter, who called all his contacts and put together a crew of 12 pipe fitters who could do the work. Unfortunately, they all had a reputation as being screw ups; good mechanics, but not very reliable. So the first thing Bob Sr. did was meet with the "Dirty Dozen" as they became known and laid it all on the line for them. Lee Plumbing's reputation and future success could depend on this one job and he needed them to do a good job. They did. Working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the Dirty Dozen finished the job ahead of schedule and did the work so well AMC engineers brought in their own maintenance workers to learn from the work Lee Plumbing had done.

“Lee Plumbing Mechanical Contractors has provided us with outstanding service for over a decade on projects ranging from the trite to the extremely difficult. There are levels of service commitment that define the value of a contractor. Lee Plumbing Mechanical Contractors consistently sets the standard.”

— WILLIAM D. HOARE
Associate Vice President
Carthage College

THE TRANSITION

The expansion into commercial and industrial/manufacturing plumbing was not the only change occurring at Lee Plumbing in the early 1980s. By 1980 they had hired Jerry Thomey as a full-time employee and Mike Lee had started his plumbing apprenticeship. By 1981 they also needed more office help so they hired Sara Reuter to work with Natalie to keep the office running smoothly. Bob Jr. was now working in the field during the days and estimating jobs at night. Everything was looking bright for the Lee family and the business seemed poised for continued growth and prosperity. Then in 1984, everything would be shaken up when Bob Sr. was given an opportunity to get back into baseball.

In the fall of 1983 Bob Sr. called his old friend Roland Hemond to talk baseball. Roland was the general manager of the White Sox at the time and had been the minor league farm director who had signed Bob to his major league contract in 1955. Bob asked him if there was any chance of getting a minor league team in Kenosha. Roland said he would check into it and a short time later George Brophy with the Minnesota Twins minor league system came to talk to Bob. Wisconsin Rapids was losing their minor league franchise and the Twins were looking for a new location for the team. Bob was excited with the prospects of getting back into baseball and equally excited about getting a minor league team in Kenosha.



Mike and Bob Jr. in the field



Bob and Natalie at a Twins Game



So, with his typical enthusiasm and can-do spirit, Bob put together a group of local investors and he and Natalie set about the business of setting up, marketing, and running a minor league baseball team. It was more work than they ever imagined but for the next seven years the City of Kenosha had the pleasure of being able to watch America's pastime in their very own Simons Stadium. And Bob Sr. had the thrill of being in major league baseball again. Bob Jr. recalls it as being the happiest and most stressful time in his parents' life.

By the spring of 1984, Bob Jr. had taken over daily operations of Lee Plumbing while Bob Sr. took on the role of consultant and good will ambassador for the company – a role he relishes and performs to this day. Bob Sr. would help out in the office when the team was out of town and promote Lee Plumbing when the team was playing in Kenosha. Bob Jr. was still spending some time working in the field, but more and more of his time was being spent in the office and studying for his state designers license. When he wasn't working or going to school, Bob Jr. also found some time to spend with Linda Dibble, a young lady he had been introduced to in 1983 and who subsequently cut his hair every 6 weeks for the next 2 years.

In retrospect, the timing of this transition worked well for the company. Kenosha's economy was still recovering from the recession of 1981 and work was steady but slow. Lee Plumbing had two trucks and a half dozen employees at the time so Bob Jr. was not overwhelmed with running the business. While he didn't have a business plan to guide him, Bob Jr. had learned first-hand the value of customer service and customer satisfaction. It is his commitment to both that would serve him well in the years to come.



Mike Lee, Bob Lee Sr, Kenosha native Ray Berres, Bob Lee Jr. at Ray's induction to the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame in 1999.

Bob Jr.

Bob Jr. took over the business with a simple business philosophy – treat your customers like you’d like to be treated while offering quality service at a fair price.

He also believed that every dollar looks the same. So he continued to bid on residential, commercial, and industrial work. While a combination of the three kept the business busy, it was the industrial work that would ultimately have the biggest impact on the company.

Back in 1981, Bob Sr. had convinced Chuck Lamb, Bob Visintainer, and Fred Mancusi, engineers at the AMC lakefront plant, to give Lee Plumbing a chance. As important as the work was, the vendor number Chuck Lamb secured for them was the key to getting an opportunity to bid on future work – an opportunity Bob Jr. continued to pursue once he took over. Most of the work was small jobs at the Lakefront plant but it kept Lee Plumbing in the mix. It also gave Bob Jr. an opportunity to meet and work with an engineer named Leon Fasano. That relationship would prove to be invaluable when Chrysler bought out AMC in 1987.

By 1985 Lee Plumbing had outgrown their rented office and shop space at 2905-60th street. As luck would have it, the Rosko brothers owned a building next door at 2915-60th St. They had run their sign business from the building for years and had decided to get out of the business and sell the building. The price was right and the move next door convenient. After some remodeling by Chuck Lombardi, Lee Plumbing moved into their new 3,000 square foot offices in March 1985. Bob Jr. felt like he was on top of the world.

The next couple of years were more eventful on the family side than the business side. Bob Jr.’s youngest brother Greg graduated from high school in 1986. However, rather than follow in his brothers’ footsteps and start a plumbing apprenticeship, Greg decided to enlist in the Air Force. Then, on February 21, 1987, after four years of dating, Bob married his long time girl friend Linda Dibble. One year later their first son Austin was born.

Despite the stock market crash on October 19, 1988, and the savings and loan crisis, Kenosha’s economy was starting to pick up. Chrysler had bought out Renault’s shares in AMC and would eventually invest millions of dollars in its Kenosha facilities. At the same time WISPARK LLC had begun developing LakeView Corporate Park in Kenosha County.



Lee Plumbing – 2915 60th Street

WISPARK LLC is the real estate subsidiary created by Wisconsin Energy Corporation, a \$13 billion public utility holding company, to develop business parks in southeastern Wisconsin. WISPARK began the 2,400-acre mixed-use real estate development known as Lakeview in 1988. By 2008, seventy-six businesses had located in the park. Those seventy-six businesses represent 10,330,626 square feet of manufacturing, warehousing, office, and retail space. Lee Plumbing secured their first project in the park, Calumet Meats, in 1988. Since then Lee Plumbing has worked on a building in the park almost every single year. To date, Lee Plumbing has been the plumbing contractor on over 25% of the buildings constructed or remodeled in the park.

While the commercial work was good business for Lee Plumbing, Bob Jr. never abandoned their formula of keeping busy with any industrial or residential work he could pick up. Throughout the early 1990's Lee Plumbing had a good mix of all three types of work as Kenosha's stagnant economy had started to grow thanks to the industrial parks, Chrysler, and growth in the housing market. Based on their company's growth and Bob Jr.'s vision for the future, Bob re-named and organized Lee Plumbing as Lee Plumbing Mechanical Contractors, Inc. Bob Jr. also realized the company was running out of room. They needed more space so he and Bob Sr. began by looking at the new business parks being developed. However, the cost of a new building did not appeal to either one of them. After weighing all his options, Bob Jr. decided to add on to his existing building at 2915-60th Street. In 1992 work started on a 3,000 square foot addition doubling the size of the building.

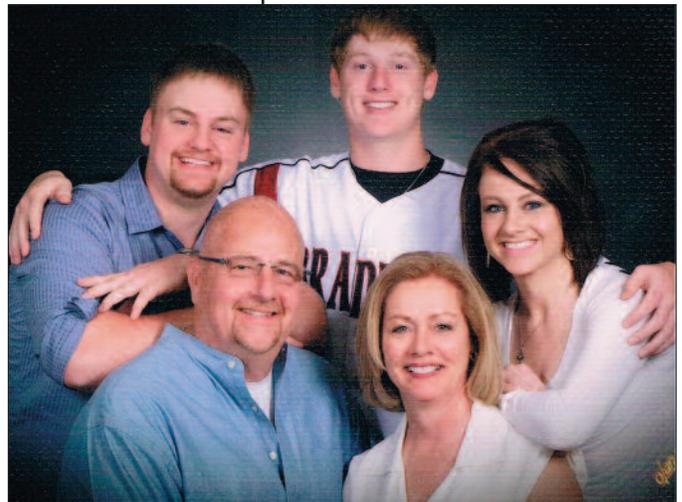
Bob Jr.'s family was also growing. In 1991, son Austin was joined by his sister Emma. Then, in 1995, Linda gave birth to a second son, Colton. With his family of five to support, Bob Jr. borrowed a page from Bob Sr. and just worked as hard as he could to make sure the business succeeded.

1995 was also a memorable year for the business. Chrysler Corporation had decided to upgrade their engine plant on 52nd Street. Fortunately for Lee Plumbing, Leon Fasano had stayed on as the plant engineer when Chrysler bought out AMC. Following their purchase of AMC, Chrysler began purging their vendor lists to eliminate many of the smaller businesses on the list. Leon made sure Lee Plumbing kept their vendor number. That number was a prerequisite for Lee Plumbing being able to bid on any plumbing work done in the plant. Leon also introduced Bob Jr. to Walbridge-Aldinger, the construction management firm in charge of the construction project.

Walbridge-Aldinger started by hiring Lee Plumbing to install new utilities on the site. At first the work required bids but was soon replaced

“Experience has taught us we can always count on Lee Plumbing Mechanical Contractors to complete a project in a high quality manner, on time and within budget. We truly enjoy working with them. Obviously, customer service is very important to their company.”

— JERRY FRANKE
Senior Vice President
Wisparke Corporation



Austin, Colton, Emma, Bob Jr., and Linda Lee, 2012.

by a “fast track” process. The plant was on a tight schedule so Lee Plumbing was soon given additional work and Walbridge-Aldinger would simply come in and audit Lee Plumbing’s records to confirm the records matched with the work done in the field. They were so satisfied with the work and the record-keeping that Walbridge-Aldinger kept Lee Plumbing working non-stop on Phase 1 expansion for two years. It was an opportunity not many small companies ever receive. Jim Abbott, the onsite engineer from Chrysler’s headquarters in Detroit, gave Lee Plumbing an opportunity to prove themselves and they did. The project was very important to the growth of Lee Plumbing and Jim Abbott remains a friend of Bob Jr.’s to this day. As a result of the Phase 1 expansion, work was so busy that Mike Lee moved into the office to oversee expediting and manpower for the Chrysler project. Mike proved adept at the task and soon added geothermal and residential work to his duties. But Lee Plumbing’s presence at the plant didn’t end in 1995.



Mike Lee in the office.

In 1999, Chrysler started a second expansion at the engine plant. Greycor, a multi-national contractor with years of experience in automotive plants, had been hired to provide construction management services. Greycor brought in Wayne Everett, a retired AMC engineer, to provide consultant services on the project. Wayne referred Greycor to Lee Plumbing. Greycor hired Lee Plumbing to do some preliminary work to set up their job trailers. Bob Jr. took that opportunity to point out to Greycor engineer’s work that would need to be done as the project moved forward. Bob Jr.’s and his father, Bob Sr.’s years of experience at the plant and knowledge of the plumbing paid off. Joe Brajdich, the project engineer for Greycor, believed in Lee Plumbing and was so impressed with their honesty and integrity that he went to an open book system with Lee Plumbing. Greycor ended up hiring Lee Plumbing to install 95% of all the plumbing at the new engine plant. From 1999 through 2001, Lee Plumbing had two shifts of up to 40 plumbers working seven days a week on the new plant. For Lee Plumbing it meant \$8M worth of plumbing work. Looking back Bob Jr. laments that he probably won’t see another project like the Chrysler project in his lifetime.

But Bob Jr. was never one to rest on his laurels and he could see that the economy was in for a change. He decided to diversify and strengthen his business base by adding a heating and cooling division in 2000. In the long run it proved to be an important addition but at the time it was a big step. The NASDAQ crashed in March 2000, when the Dot.com bubble burst. Business outlays and investments fell and the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, all combined to end a decade of growth. The result was a recession that lasted from March 2001 to November 2001. Throughout it all Lee Plumbing continued to prosper.

In addition to running a growing plumbing and heating business, Bob Jr. also found time to coach little league baseball and youth basketball. In addition to his time, Bob Jr. was a financial supporter of many organizations in Kenosha. A respected businessman in the community, Bob Jr. also served on several boards including the Boys and Girls Club of Kenosha, St. Peter’s Church, and the United Hospital System. Bob Jr. was recognized for his

business acumen and community involvement in 2003. The Kenosha Area Business Alliance (KABA) designated Bob Jr. as its Business Leader of the Year. They described Bob Jr. as hardworking and humble, balancing business acumen with family life and community involvement. Their recognition was soon followed by Certificates of Special Recognition from the offices of Congressman Paul Ryan and Senator Russ Feingold.

Following the two year Chrysler project, Lee Plumbing settled back into their tried and true formula of taking on any residential, commercial, or industrial work they could find. It wasn't easy. George W. Bush had won re-election as president in 2004 and immediately faced a budget deficit of \$412.7B. The economy was slowing down and oil and food prices were soaring. Then in 2007, the subprime mortgage crisis led to the collapse of the housing market which ultimately contributed to the failure or collapse of some of the United States' largest financial institutions. The president and congress responded by passing the Economic Emergency Stabilization Act in 2008. The act authorized an unprecedented \$700B bank bailout and a \$787B fiscal stimulus package. Try as they might, the Federal Government could not forestall the recession that economists say started in December 2007 and lasted until June 2009.

Despite the turbulent economic times, Bob Jr's personality and history of treating people right would come back to reward him with another big project. Garret Grana was a welder who had worked for Lee Plumbing for a short time at Carthage College. By 2008 Garret was working for Alstom Company, an international firm based in Knoxville, Tennessee. Alstom was working on a demonstration carbon recapture project at the Pleasant Prairie power plant in Kenosha County. The project involved installing and testing their patented system to remove carbon dioxide emissions from the coal-fired power plant. There was a lot of pressure to get the carbon recapture project on line and Alstom was not happy with the contractor they had doing the work. Alstom superintendent Paul Foster fired their contractor and asked Garret if he could give him a referral for a good mechanical contractor. Garret had been so impressed with Bob Jr. and Lee Plumbing during the short time he worked there that he immediately referred Alstom to Lee Plumbing.

Garret tried calling Bob Jr. a couple times to let him know about the referral and finally came into his office to talk to him about the project. Bob Jr. called Paul Foster on a Friday to discuss the project. Paul told him the project had to start by May 1 and be finished by June 1 so he needed a price by the end of that day. Bob Jr. sat down and started working out his bid. He met Paul at 8:00 p.m. that night with a handwritten proposal. Paul liked the proposal and offered Lee Plumbing the job on the spot. Bob Jr. spent the weekend getting the equipment they



2008 Carbon Recapture Project

would need and Garret spent the weekend rounding up some other pipefitters to work on the project. Work started that Monday morning and was finished by June 1. Once in place, Alstom began the testing phase. From June 2008 to November 2009 Lee Plumbing had from two to five pipefitters on site 40 hours a week to make any changes to the system requested by the Alstom engineers. In November 2009, the carbon recapture system was torn down. In the process, Paul Foster and Jeff Millikan from Alstom had given Lee Plumbing a chance that just doesn't happen to small companies. Not only did Bob Jr. learn from the project but the work opened new doors for Lee Plumbing. The world's first carbon recapture project had exceeded expectations and Alstom Company, in recognition of work Lee Plumbing had done on the project, named them their Contractor of the Year.

Shortly after starting the carbon recapture project, Lee Plumbing also began working on an expansion project at St. Catherine's hospital. The challenge on this project was that the work involved a vertical expansion that could not interfere with hospital operations below. Progress was slow and often times disjointed. The project ended up lasting until 2011 but Bob Jr. is very proud of the fact they did all the work without a single problem for the hospital.

The versatility of Lee Plumbing also showed itself in 2009, when they were hired to perform some underwater plumbing for the Kenosha Unified School District. A tragedy at a school swimming pool resulted in the State of Wisconsin mandating that all school swimming pools have special grates installed on the pool drains. Unified staff contacted Lee Plumbing to explain the requirement and see if they could install the grates while the pools were full. Unified could not afford to empty all their pools to have the grates installed. Enter Mike Lee – a certified scuba diver. Mike said he could do the work with the pools full. So, the grates were ordered and Mike installed them at a substantial savings to the school district. Mike did not think much of the feat but it was an unusual job and again demonstrated Lee Plumbing's commitment to providing good service.

At the same time Bob Jr. was also looking at what he could do to further diversify and enhance the fortunes of Lee Plumbing. Bob Jr. was happy with the growth of the heating and cooling division since 2000 but continued to explore additional ventures. After considering his options, Bob Jr. decided to buy out Wamboldt Electric and add an electric division to go along with the heating and cooling division. Lee Plumbing was now a full service shop offering plumbing, heating and cooling and electric services.

As has often been the case for Lee Plumbing, it has been personal experience and customer satisfaction that has led to new jobs. During the



Mike Lee – Underwater plumber

carbon recapture project at the Pleasant Prairie Power Plant, Bob Jr. became acquainted with Brad Smith, an engineer for the Wisconsin Electric Power Company (WEPCO). When the project finished, Brad was transferred to the Oak Creek Power Plant to oversee the expansion at those facilities. The contractor for the project, URS, asked Brad if he knew a plumber he could recommend for some preliminary site work. Brad recommended Lee Plumbing. Project Manager Roger George started by having Lee Plumbing hook up the job trailers in April 2010

That led to some underground pipe fusion work. When that was done, URS needed the relief vent stacks on the SCR building relocated. Two years later Lee Plumbing is still on site working on additional projects thanks to URS's confidence in Lee Plumbing and Lee Plumbing's ability to provide quality service at a fair price.

*Underground fusion work –
Oak Creek Power Plant*



*Oak Creek ventrelocation
and extension*

The Future

Lee Plumbing has been a fixture in Southeast Wisconsin and Northern Illinois for thirty-five years. It has grown from a one man shop in the basement of the Bob Sr.'s home to a multi-million dollar, full-service mechanical contractor with a dozen full-time employees. Its success has in large part been due to treating people right . . . a business philosophy Bob Sr. held dear and passed down to Bob Jr.

Bob Jr. is now faced with an unknown future. He has no successors. His brothers Mike and Greg have moved on to pursue their own careers. His children have tried working in the business but are not interested.

Bob Jr. readily admits the biggest asset Lee Plumbing has is the people who work there. There is really nothing to sell other than some equipment and a building. Given the challenges in today's contracting business and the changes in the local economy he's not sure what will happen. For the present time, he is keeping his key people by bringing them into the business in hopes of keeping a somewhat smaller but full-service business. If that doesn't work he's not sure which direction he will go. It could mean the end of Lee Plumbing in Kenosha.

That would be a sad day for the family and a loss for the community. However it would come as no surprise as only 40% of family businesses succeed in making it from the first to the second generation. Just 12% make it from the second to the third generation.²

While no one knows what the future may hold for Lee Plumbing, two constants will remain true. Bob Sr. will continue to market and promote Lee Plumbing, Heating, Cooling and Electric with the same enthusiasm he has for the last thirty-five years. Bob Jr. meanwhile will go about his business of offering the best service he can at a fair price.

ENDNOTES

1. Richard Keehn, *Kenosha County In The Twentieth Century: Industry and Business*, 1976 p.191.
2. *American Management Services, Inc. Family Business Statistics*. March 13, 2011.

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