

Anti-gravitational Ciardelli Fuel Co. in the growth mode

Back in the 60s, Babe and Chick Ciardelli (sounds like “Char-delly”) were regarded as among the best, most reliable sources of fuel oil in the town of Milford, N.H. It’s a good thing a newspaper reporter wasn’t nearby one day in ’67 when Babe — with his bench seat partner, Topaz, a golden retriever — stopped the truck on a hill to deliver fuel to a home in town.

Topaz, being a faithful canine companion, had complete confidence in Babe, assuming that this fuel delivery would be no different than any of the hundreds of other house calls they’d made together.

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What went through the dog’s mind, with Babe around the corner, fuel line in hand, when the truck’s brake slipped and the vehicle began its slow descent down the hill? Whatever scenes may’ve flashed before his eyes at that moment, one thing was sure: Babe came running at full tilt when the hose went tight and then began its course across the lawn without him!

Down went the truck and dog with Babe in hot pursuit. The dog dutifully barked his encouragement from inside the truck as Babe made a final, last-second effort to reach the vehicle, and succeeded. Babe recalls he’d never seen the dog so happy



One of the original “Two Birds,” Babe, 86, with a successor to Topaz, the Golden who in the 1960s took an unexpected downhill tanker ride alone.



Ciardelli’s new 2,400-sq.-ft. headquarters is a testament to craftsmanship and radiant floor heating, a field of business that the company recently entered.

when he jumped in the seat, jammed in the e-brake and gear, then moved quickly back outside to stop the flow of fuel.

Anti-gravity

Today, the story is one of those invariably told at company cook-outs and family reunions. And though Topaz is gone (to be replaced by generations of new, loyal Golden Retrievers), the downhill economy has tugged with all its might to at Milford-based Ciardelli Fuel Co. Inc. (www.cfuel.com).

“We’ve fought gravity before,” recalls Babe, now 86, of that early experience. “Through the oil embargo years, during recessions and now while things are tough once again — we’ve always managed to roll with the punches. We’ll be here when the economy strengthens.”

The firm traces its beginning back to 1957 when Babe (his given name is Ernest Ciardelli) financed his early enterprise by taking out a mortgage on his mother’s house. Together with his nephew Albert Eugene (Chick) Ciardelli, the two acquired a small local oil company to be re-opened as Ciardelli Fuel Company.

In ’57, Chick and Babe served six towns nearby and delivered 200,000 gallons of fuel. They quickly became known by their slogan “Chick and Babe — We’re the Birds to Call” for fuel oil

and service. Through hard work, long hours and the building of long-term customer relationships, many that are still intact today, Babe and Chick managed to pay off that loan — and re-securing the family home — just 10 years later.

Wait’ll you see this HQ

Today, the three-generation, family-operated Ciardelli Fuel Company has grown to include more than 20 employees, serving all of Hillsborough County, including 16 towns and 5,000 customers in a 20-mile radius of Milford. They just moved their operations into a new headquarters facility located on the same Nashua Street property in Milford. The family, a hands-on group with unique drive, had a lot to do with its construction.

There’s a history to it: Back in the 60s, Babe’s brother Tedo worked with Babe and Chick on the building of a 3,000-sq.-ft., three-bay cinder block garage that, with the house next door, became their base of operations for decades. After graduating from college in the late 70s, Babe’s son Mike took an interest in construction. He built several post-and-beam buildings, and also got deeply into the profession of making of fine wood furni-



ture. That background led to the hands-on approach when planning for the new facility began.

Though they hired friends and customers, Phil Brooks and Paul Freeman, S. P. Brooks & Co., full-time timber framers, to cut and erect the new post-and-beam frame, the family worked together to handle many other facets of the building’s construction. The building is now a testament to generations of skill and talent, attributes that attest to their endurance not only as a successful business, but as a family that works well together, year after year.

Outside, the new 2,400-sq.-ft. headquarters is elegantly sided and shingled with cedar, a hilltop’s crowning jewel surrounded by spruce and fir trees.

Inside, the exposed timber-framing and the rich use of stained wood make the building a feast for the eyes. Even the floor, hand-crafted and fit with many different hardwoods, includes an intricately-inlaid pattern of the company’s emblem, a throw-back to the two-birds slogan. Shown in the center of the lobby are two ibis birds, each with its own old-fashioned monocle (hey, the “two birds to call” are just a bit older today).

All in the family

Matt explained that Heather and Michael Ciardelli (Babe’s son) still manage the business but have let day-to-day operations become the responsibility of their two sons, Matt and Andrew. And Babe, with his 51



Three generations of the Ciardelli family (r-l): Babe, Mike, Matthew, Andrew and Heather, kneeling with two in a long string of Golden Retrievers.

Diversifying into renewable energy was a good business decision. Today, they're also looking at the possibility of solar, wind and geothermal. "Who knows," says Matt, "we're certainly hearing a lot about renewable energy these days. We've seen a lot of change over the years. No doubt, there's more to come."

years of experience, still pays a vital role in company operations.

True to their all-in-the-family roots, Babe and his wife Tooty (who passed away in November of '09) still made lunch three times a week for their family at the shop. That tradition is carried on today by Andrew, Matt's younger brother, and Matt. "Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday," said Matt . . . "you're not likely to find us anywhere but here for the family lunches. We all miss Tooty dearly, and this is just one of the ways we all feel closer to her, preparing and sharing lunch together."



Ciardelli made extensive use of Watts Radiant's Onix EPDM rubber staple-up tubing in the radiant-floor heating system of its new headquarters.

Andrew, 27, handles all of their service work while Matt sees to purchasing and fuel deliveries. Their mother, Heather, has been the office manager and chief of all financial matters for more than 30 years.

After completing a Bachelor's Degree in business in '05, Andrew joined the company full-time. Though, it should be pointed out, he was happily involved each summer from the age of 15, running errands, pulling a hose, then hauling oil after earning a CDL. Later, he made service calls and learned from "some of the



A Watts Radiant manifold distributes heated water to the loops of PEX in Ciardelli's new facility.

best pros in the business" — their very own service technicians:

- Chuck Fitzgerald, installer and technician (and, now, says Andrew, a big asset to the radiant and hydronics team)
- Stephen Cough, manager, installer and technician
- Dwayne Smith, manager and technician
- Rick Rich, technician
- Eric Miller, technician
- William Metzger, technician

Renewable fuel, radiant heat

Of course, Ciardelli's stock in trade is fuel oil. They store more than 100,000 gallons of fuel oil and kerosene there and, a few miles down the road, they store 90,000 gallons of liquid propane.

A few years ago, Ciardelli branched into wood pellet heating equipment sales and fuel deliveries. "Last year when things were looking really grim for oil, with prices going through the roof, we sold 45 to 50 pellet stoves," explained Matt.

"This year, as fuel oil prices have gone down substantially, oil sales have gone back to an even keel, and pellet sales are down.

"By the end of '08, we took a look at pellet sales and saw that we'd moved 600 to 700 tons of pellets," he added. So the pellets — delivered by the one-ton pallet, heaped with 40-pound bags and skid-wrapped — helped to offset their customer's disinterest in oil, favoring not only renewable fuel, but the equipment to make heat with it. Diversifying into renewable energy was a good business decision. Today, they're also looking at the possibility of solar, wind and geothermal.

"Who knows," said Matt, "we're certainly hearing a lot about renewable energy these days. We've seen a lot of change over the years. No doubt, there's more to come."

Another recent shift at Ciardelli was the urge to branch into radiant heat and snow melt installations. To get into the technology in a way they felt good about, they began with their own facility, outfitting it with abundant radiant heat and some use

of snow melt, and then put that learning to work again when Mike began construction on his new home.

"There's nothing like radiant heat for comfort and efficiency," said Matt. "We're real glad that we made the choice to pursue it, and to connect with Watts Radiant on it through our supplier, F. W. Webb."

Loyalty to suppliers, manufacturers

"We're loyal to our suppliers and the manufacturers who've stood behind us through the years," continued Matt. "Through F.W. Webb, we had no hesitation in striking-up a relationship with Watts Radiant as the supplier of choice for radiant tubing, both PEX and the EPDM rubber, Onix — a product we really like and have already used a lot of. Also, their manifolds and Hydronex panel line. It's opened a whole new world of hydronic technology, customer comfort and profitability.

"We've also installed Bradford White water heaters for years, favoring them because of their reputation for reliability and, through our own experience, trouble-free operation," said Matt.

"We also use Watts products, and, for as long as I can remember, Taco pumps," added Andrew. "In fact, we won't install another pump company's products. We have excellent results with Taco every time."

"For hydronically-heated homes with no ductwork, another technology we've grown very fond of are Fujitsu mini-split A/C and heat pump systems," said Matt. "They now have



Above: Part of Ciardelli's tanker fleet in the 1960s, when the trucks were smaller and headquarters was a three-bay cinder-block garage. Today, more than 20 employees handle a fleet of shiny tankers delivering fuel oil to 5,000 customers.



heat pumps that provide 26 SEER efficiency at zero-degree ambients — the best on the market today. We couldn't ask for smarter, more efficient technology than that."

So, if you're traveling through New Hampshire and want to visit one of the most unique firms in the business, stop in at Ciardelli Fuels. Chances are, if you arrive between 12 and 1 on a Monday, Wednesday or Friday, they'll feed you. Be sure to ask about Babe's experience with the rolling tank of oil. ■



Ciardelli recently branched into radiant heating and snowmelting, and to gain more experience with the technology, installed radiant floor heating in its new facility.