

# CHESAPEAKE BUSINESS LEDGER

Volume 6, No. 10

Serving business leaders in Kent and Queen Anne's counties

SEPTEMBER 1998

*The two most recent generations of Gillespies pose next to the company's concrete batch plant in Chestertown. They are the fourth generation sons, James (right) and Todd (left) and their father, Ed (center).*



## FOCUS ON REAL ESTATE

# Through four generations Gillespies deliver smiles

By Tom Martin, Editor,  
Chesapeake Business Ledger

**CHESTERTOWN** — The third and fourth generations of the Gillespie family, who currently manage and own the 76-year-old Gillespie and Son Inc. concrete products company, have not lost their sense of humor.

Ed Gillespie, representing the third generation of family interest, said that his company has always made "happy" concrete blocks. "See that big gear up there," he said pointing to a three-foot diameter wheel that propels block moldings up and down before they are pushed into a curing structure.

"Well, I always thought it looked like a Ferris wheel, so I always figured that made our concrete blocks 'happy,'" he quipped with a smile as his two sons, James and Todd, held back laughter at hearing this old line again.

But James, part of the fourth generation of family ownership with brother Todd, also has his inside joke, which comes in the form of a calendar photo that depicts one of the firm's ready-mix trucks emblazoned with "75 Years," representing the company's 75th anniversary last year.

The calendar, put out by the McNeilus Co., which manufactures ready-mix delivery vehicles, had that picture on only one month of the year. "But I wanted to see it on every month," said James, "So I tore it out, and when I change the calendar, I clip it on that month, too."

dedicated in his name, which continues to be a source of family pride, according to Ed and his sons.

Although Ed has now reached the stage of president emeritus, he still holds controlling stock in the family firm while James has taken over as general manager and Todd directs sales and marketing efforts. A third brother is an executive for a natural gas firm in Virginia.

James came into the company with a business degree from Northern Colorado University. Todd attended High Point, N.C., College, but came into the firm before graduating.

The firm makes three concrete products from its two sites in Chestertown, and each is marketed over a slightly different territory, according to James and Todd.

Concrete blocks, which can be manufactured in at least 50 different designs and shapes, are marketed over a region of about a 40-mile radius from the plant, according to Todd.

Ready-mix concrete, because it is a perishable product, is marketed over a 25-30 mile radius, mostly to jobs in Kent and surrounding counties, according to James.

Precast concrete products, for such items as septic tanks, catch basins, inlet boxes and culverts, are distributed throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, custom-made for each client. Precast products are made at a separate 6.5-acre facility just east of the ready-mix and





Although some would say that's not as good as the "happy bricks" quip, it shows the family's devotion to the firm that started in 1922 on the farm of the great-great grandfather of Todd and Jim, George Edward Gillespie.

"Well, George was a dairy farmer, and he needed a concrete block building in 1921, so he bought a mold to build it," said Ed. "So in 1922 he started making blocks for other people. George's son, Victor P. Gillespie, continued the company, and Ed started to work for his father when he was a teenager after World War II.

Victor achieved distinction in World War II as part of the D-Day invasion of France, and later joined the Maryland National Guard, serving a total of 31 years. The armory in Queen Anne is

blocks."

While Jim cites quality of the product and good service as the reason for the company's continued success, father Ed said word-of-mouth references from customers continue to be the firm's best marketing strategy. "You get good references when you don't do many things wrong," Ed said.

Todd also gives credit to the company's employees, some of whom have been with the firm for more than 30 years and the majority more than 10 years apiece.

"We have had no layoffs in 15 years," he said, "And we try to keep all of our drivers working in the winter by cutting back hours." Another factor in employee retention, James said, is a benefits package that includes a profit-sharing pension plan, health plan and cash bonuses for performance.

In the marketplace, Gillespie bids to contractors that are also making bids for contracts in the both public and private sectors. "Contractors and their (ultimate) clients look at our bids, and that's how we get most of our work," said James. Many of these contractors, such as roadbuilder David A. Bramble, have been supplied by Gillespie for many years.

The biggest single job in which Gillespie's products were used was the concrete that was poured during construction of the U.S. 301-50 freeway in

block operations.

The Gillespies have also operated a builder's supply store at the 9.5-acre Dixon Avenue address since 1983,

The firm's original location was at Dudley's Corner for 40 years of operations, with the precast location in Sudlersville for many years. In 1963 concrete block and ready-mix operations came to the current address, and in 1971 all operations were consolidated in Chestertown when the company invested in a new precast plant.

James said that the mix of sales depends on the jobs available during a given year. "There can be a lot of diversity," said James, "When there is a lot of roadbuilding we supply a lot of concrete to contractors, and when there are new buildings going up we sell a lot of

**continued left column below...**

the late 1980s from The Bay Bridge to the Split, according to the family.

Technology also plays a role at the Gillespie plant, where computer systems control loading of trucks and the block manufacturing plant. In the loading process, drivers operate the computer that not only properly weighs their loads, but the documentation also becomes part of the billing process.

The firm also has a testing laboratory on the premises, where all of its materials are tested in-house as well as by such public agencies.

The company reclaims unused aggregate in concrete loads by cleaning out the trucks with water that is drained into settling ponds on site. "We designed and built that facility in-house, saving a lot of money," said Ed.

The plant also includes a machine shop to repair equipment on site as well as a maintenance shop for the firm's vehicles, which include dump trucks, flatbed trucks and ready-mix trucks.

The plant's block-making facility can produce 8,400 units per day and will be expanded in the future, potentially becoming a 24-hour operation if there is enough demand, according to James.

The family did not disclose when and if James and Todd would take over majority interest in the company. But father Ed did say that there would be time in the near future when the sons "would probably be in charge."