

For fishmonger, hard work pays off in fins

Newman's Fish company owner Dwight Collins relies on the work ethic he learned as a child

By **TINA OREM**
For The Register-Guard

The story of Dwight Collins, owner of Newman's Fish Company, is in some ways a lesson in the value of cutting grass.

As a child, Collins had chores — mostly weeding and mowing the lawn — but instead of dreading the work, he turned it into a small business.

"I didn't enjoy it initially, but through high school I would do half a dozen lawn jobs in the neighborhood," Collins, now 53, said. He also had a paper route.

Collins became part of the Newman's story at such a young age that he essentially went right from cutting grass to cutting fish.

In addition to being a bright, enterprising young man, it was a form of networking that helped him land his first job at Newman's around 1974.

"I was dating the owner's daughter," Collins chuckled, remembering the day Ben Bay hired him. "He said, 'Here, why don't (you) come down to work since you're around so much?'"

The girlfriend ended up going away to college, but Collins kept the part-time job and stayed close to home, attending the University of Oregon. Becoming a professional fishmonger was nowhere on his radar screen at the time.

"I kind of was on the track to go to law school or go into that direction. I certainly wasn't into business," the Eugene native said.

But business is exactly where Collins ended up.

In 1979, the Bays wanted to sell the business, which had been founded in 1890 by 13-year-old John Henry Newman, so they could fish full-time in Alaska.

Casting aside a potential legal career, Collins and fellow employee Leo Odegard, a former Navy aviator who is about 10 years older than Collins, bought the company by combining their money and their know-how, and



KEVIN CLARK/The Register-Guard

John Newman, who started Newman's Fish Co. in the 1800s, is shown selling fish from the back of a horse-drawn wagon in downtown Eugene in 1910. Dwight Collins has owned the business since 1979.

agreeing to pay off the Bays over the next 25 years.

Collins was just 24 at the time, but he said he didn't find the prospect of owning a business intimidating.

"I look back at that, and I am simply amazed that (Bay) had that much trust in me to pass the business on," Collins said. "I did have experience managing it during the summer-time when he had been going to Alaska, but certainly I didn't go through business school or anything. It was what I learned from him that kept me going in the business."

He hatched the popular fish-and-chips sideline — which now brings in about 40 percent of the company's sales — in the early 1990s after Newman's expanded into Portland.

By 2006-2007, Collins said, the foot traffic at the store on Willamette Street was so high that "we were maxing out our

location." Newman's Grotto, with its light-green tiles and floating octopus sculpture, was the solution.

Expansion — and success in general — hasn't always come easily for Collins. He has opened and closed at least four retail locations over the years. There were also times when, for various reasons, the business was only breaking even. And the recession hasn't done Collins any favors, either.

But having a diversified retail, wholesale and restaurant operation has been an advantage, he said, securing the company a niche in an industry — independent fishmongering — where many competitors have fallen away.

Fewer fishing boats, fewer fish in the ocean and business consolidations all contribute to the decline of the industry in places such as Newport, he said.

But the dedication Collins learned from mowing lawns many years ago is still there. He credits his parents' encouragement for his entrepreneurship, his work ethic and his attention to detail. They never pushed him to find those lawn jobs as a kid, he said, but "they made it so that it was easy to happen and made time once it did."

When it came to work, he said, "you didn't slack off on it."

Thirty years after buying Newman's, Collins is up at 6 a.m. every day talking to suppliers about prices, what fish are available and what boats are at work. The rest of his day involves preparing fish, helping customers and managing employees.

"Administrative work does take up more of my time than I would like," Collins added, noting that he recently received about 50 resumes within 24 hours of posting two job openings.

NEWMAN'S FISH COMPANY

Address: 1545 Willamette St. and 485 Coburg Road, Eugene

Employees: 36

Founded: 1890

Secret of success: Attention to detail. "You have to make sure that you're on top of your financials daily"

Annual revenue: Not disclosed

And time is one thing Collins is keenly aware of when it comes to running a business.

"A lot of people go into it with the idea that they're going to start the next Starbucks or they're going to have the next McDonald's or whatever it is," he said. "But for 99 percent of the small businesses out here, it's going to work every day, working 10 or 12 hours a day and keeping really close track of all the aspects of the business."

Those long hours have, however, also given him some rare gifts.

"What I've probably enjoyed the most out of the business," Collins said, "is being able to work with my kids — give them a job, see them learn how to work the responsibilities, employing some of their friends. Just being able to have them around and see them grow up. I would have initially never thought that that would bring such satisfaction."

Collins, who describes the taste of fish the way others describe wine, once decided to count how many days in a row he could eat salmon before he tired of the challenge.

"I got up to about 40 or 50 days and said, 'Oh, you know, maybe I'll try something different,'" he laughed. "But I never tired of eating the salmon!"

He approaches his career with a somewhat similar attitude.

"You know, it would be a fun goal to say you were in the same job and did the same thing for 50 years of your life," Collins said. "I think that would be an accomplishment."

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Twin Rivers has been frustrated to see ten major certified-wage projects the past six months be awarded — some by a very small margin — to plumbing contractors outside of Lane County. This is also happening to