

Lewis & Jones Group celebrate 70-plus years serving Killarney and area

Birthday Lunch for customers at the Killarney Legion Hall Monday, July 4, 11 a.m. – 2 p.m.

Submitted by Brooklyn Scott

On Monday, July 4, a local institution will be celebrating their milestone of servicing Killarney and area for over 70 years by throwing a lunch party at the Legion Hall.

It all started back in the 1930s, when two small insurance agencies, Portage la Prairie Mutual Insurance Co. and Wawanesa Mutual Insurance Co., set up shop in Killarney, Manitoba.

Portage La Prairie Mutual Insurance was started by Archie Currie around 1930, while Wawanesa Insurance was set up by Doug Chapman in 1931.

Over the next number of years the agencies changed both hands and names.

Baker Agencies was officially established in 1946, when a WW II Royal Canadian Air Force vet by the name of Cyril Baker was appointed as the local agent for Portage Mutual.

He and his wife Jessie, along with their two sons, Jim and John, relocated to Killarney from the area of Teulon, Manitoba.

After training in a Winnipeg Insurance brokerage for just over a year, Jim joined his father and mother in 1953, and worked alongside both of them until Cyril passed away in 1964.

Meanwhile, the Wawanesa brokerage passed through the ownership of Jack Early (1951), and Willard Riddell (1966), who re-named the business Riddell Insurance.

In 1975 Riddell Insurance was sold to Norman Lewis, and re-named N.H. Lewis Agencies.

1976 was a historic year for both firms after Terry Lewis joined his father, Norman, in the business, and Jim Baker recruited David Jones to join Baker Agencies.

David was still in high school, and working at the local gas station, when he was approached by Jim. David had no post-secondary experience at the time; his only relevant education was a typing and business course that he had taken in school.

Terry joined his father's operation, and began working as a broker just two years after graduating from high school. Both men celebrated their 40th year in business this year, with Terry retiring on June 1st.

Over the years both agencies expanded their services, from general insurance to Autopac, real estate, and investments. N.H. Lewis Agencies added travel as well in 1981.

In 1983, David Jones and his wife Debbie officially purchased Baker Agencies from Jim Baker.

The businesses changed physical locations a number of times, operating out of the Killarney Music Store, a furniture store/funeral home, a small building in a hotel parking lot, the mall parking lot, and one building that they shared with an electrician.

It wasn't until 1990 that the present location of Lewis & Jones Group was built, in order to accommodate the space required for new photo-licensing equipment.

With Norm and Frieda retiring in 1998, and after several discussions between David and Terry, a plan was set in motion.

In 1998 Terry Lewis and David Jones formed a partnership, merging the two businesses of Baker & Jones Agencies and N.H. Lewis Agencies to form Lewis & Jones Group Ltd.

Within a matter of weeks the two businesses had set terms, purchased property, and began building an addition to the current property where Lewis & Jones now stands.

The success of the merger was attributed to the stars being aligned, but also to the hard work by all staff, and a long-term commitment to clients, the community, and their relationships with suppliers.

Shortly after the merger, long-time employee Kay McMurrich started a lottery pool for the staff, with everyone contributing \$10 every five weeks. It would prove to be a red-hot investment.

In 2001, the staff hit the jackpot, sharing a Lotto 6/49 win of \$1,005,279.00.

It was split by the 14 staff members, as well as Kay (who had then retired), and Alvin Jones.

The win, resulting in \$62,829.93 for each syndicate member, generated the buying of six new cars, seven house purchases/renovations, many children's education funds, the celebration of two marriages, and keys to one boat.

Both Terry and David were thankful that the win wasn't a \$10-million-dollar one, as no one quit the following week, or a year later, for that matter.

The staff still participates in a weekly lottery pool, and is currently holding out for their next big win.

Many dedicated and long-serving staff have worked at Lewis & Jones over the years, including Maureen Nicholls, 27 years (retired 2008); Debbie Jones, 25 years (retired 2008), Kay McMurrich, 16 years (retired 1999); Jim Moore, 16 years (retired 2013) Don Joye, 12 years, Dianna Harms, nine years (retired 2015), Bonnie Heide, six years; and Roberta Johnson, 27 years, (still employed).

Other current long-serving employees include Cathy Desrochers, who will be celebrating 25 years in 2017; Rob MacDonald (21 years); Anne Smith & Curtis Dickson (20 years); Karen Bernard (18 years); Lorrie Elliot (16 years); Candace Andries (11 years); and Travis Hilhorst (eight years).

More recent additions to the staff include Brett Warbeck, who began in 2010; Courtney Fisher and Marlee Cline, who started in 2015; and most recently Brooklyn Scott (nee Jones), David's daughter, who is currently learning the Financial Advising and Investment business from her father.

The loyalty of the employees may have something to do with high office morale.

Several times a year (in addition to the annual Christmas party) the staff get together for barbeques, pot-lucks, golf tournaments, and other fun outings, which have included sumo wrestling, paint balling, escaping from locked rooms, and Survivor challenges.

The staff have all watched each other's children grow up, shared in both joys and losses, and celebrated victories together. The feeling one gets while working at Lewis & Jones is definitely one of "family."

A succession plan has always been in the works for the future of Lewis & Jones, and in 2001 Rob MacDonald and Curtis Dickson became junior partners within the firm.

With Terry's retirement this year, they have taken over management duties along with Terry's ownership position, as David takes more time away, travelling and spending time with family.

When asked, however, when David plans to retire, he has said, "Retirement is doing what you love, and I love what I am doing."

Lewis & Jones Group is planning a 70th Anniversary Celebration to thank all current and past customers for their loyalty and patronage for the past several decades.

The event will take place Monday, July 4, from 11 a.m. – 2 p.m., at the Killarney Legion Hall.

They will be offering a pork-on-a-bun lunch for \$5.00, with all money collected going towards the Killarney Volunteer Fire Department. There will be prizes, cake, coffee, and possibly a few short speeches.

All current staff members will be in attendance, so the office will be closed temporarily while the event is taking place.

It is Lewis & Jones' hope that all former staff, family members, clients, customers and local businesses will attend the celebrations.