

Hampshire Fire Protection

By Laura Jean Whitcomb

Larry Thibodeau could have been an accountant. But thanks to a summer job, he's currently the founder and president of the largest fire protection company in New Hampshire.

Thibodeau started in the fire protection industry after high school. Before he went to college, installing sprinklers was a summer job and he found that it paid very well. Once at school studying credits and debits, Thibodeau realized that accounting wasn't in his future. He quit college and began to learn everything he could about sprinkler systems—from sales and design to fabrication and installation. In 1978, it was time to start his own company. "It was just me, my wife, and a pick-up truck," Thibodeau recalls.

Hampshire Fire Protection, headquartered in Londonderry, NH, started slowly. Smaller jobs (a sprinkler system for a local ValueHouse store) turned into larger jobs (Service Merchandise bought out ValueHouse and continued to use Hampshire's services). Word began to travel out of the state into Massachusetts, and the company just kept growing. "It's hard to believe that our first year in business we had \$300,000 worth of work," Thibodeau says. "Now, with \$10 million in revenue, we're the largest sprinkler company in the area."

That's a lot of sprinkler systems. Their popularity has much to do with the fact that they save lives. When properly installed and maintained, fire sprinklers react quickly, dramatically reducing the heat, flames, and smoke produced in a fire. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), sprinklers reduce the chance of dying in a fire and the average property loss by one-half to two thirds in any kind of property where they are used.

Thibodeau breaks down Hampshire's business into 75 percent new installations and 25 percent retrofit. New projects include the 12,000-seat Verizon Wireless Arena in Manchester, NH; the new 540-car parking garage at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center; and the National Guard facility in Concord, NH, to name a few. Recent retrofitting jobs include a residence hall at the University of New Hampshire; a Nashua, NH, high school; and the Leverone Field House at Dartmouth College.

"Leverone didn't have a single sprinkler," he says. "We worked with Trumbull-Nelson to install a sprinkler system as the existing athletic facility was being remodeled. This job alone used 1,000 sprinkler heads."

Imagine installing a sprinkler system this extensive under two acres of high, arching roof in a 37-year-old building. Fortunately, Hampshire Fire Protection has nine in-house designers to calculate the technical details, such as the length of piping, for each project. The installation teams follow the blueprints, making adjustments as necessary. "Our systems are totally prefabricated in our state-of-the-art facility in Londonderry and shipped to the job," Thibodeau says.

In the last 10 years, sprinkler technology has become extremely intricate. "An apartment building may require a different type of sprinkler than a warehouse piled high with product. There used to be just two basic products: a sprinkler head in the pendant position with piping behind the ceiling tiles or an up-right sprinkler system with exposed piping," describes Thibodeau. "Now there are probably more than 40 different types of sprinkler heads with different aesthetic looks."

Thibodeau's team is up-to-speed on all aspects of a fire protection system. "This means more training, intense design, and in-depth knowledge of all the types of occupancies and products out there," he says. "We even install foam systems for aircraft hangers—a very rare technical installation job, but one we just completed for Wiggins Airways at Manchester Airport."

Over the years, Hampshire Fire Protection has bought four small companies. The most recent purchase—Fire Security Services in Lebanon, NH—broadened the company's market geographically. "Much of our work is in Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire, and this was my opportunity to break into the Northern New Hampshire area," says Thibodeau. Today, the company has 90 employees, including a mechanic on staff to keep "our 55 vehicles in tip-top shape."

But don't think that if you have a small job, you can't call Hampshire Fire Protection. "Our projects range from \$100 to \$1.5 million," Thibodeau says, noting the 1998 job for the Suffolk Trial Court House in Boston, MA. He's proud of his company's high-quality customer service to contractors, private owners, and suppliers.

"We don't have an answering machine—there's always someone to talk to," he says. "It's upsetting when you can't get anyone on the phone and no one calls you back. We make sure that we are fully staffed for the volume of work, and we have a policy that calls get returned to customers so they can get the answers they need."

Thibodeau, with 34 years of industry know-how, has built a company with a fine reputation. He keeps his finger on the pulse of fire protection, attending quarterly meetings of the American Fire Sprinkler Association, a non-profit, international association promoting the use of automatic fire systems. He holds multiple board positions—treasurer and chair of legislative committee, chair of budget committee, and vice chair of insurance and safety committee—and travels frequently to attend meetings and work with other associations involved in fire safety. Thibodeau remains modest, setting aside his leadership skills to recognize the employees of Hampshire Fire Protection.

"I didn't do this myself, trust me, I can't take the credit," he says. "The people who work here deserve the credit. They do a great job and that's how we get the jobs. It is so important to have good people."