

Burchoil to celebrate 90 years

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Hollywood, MD - It was in May of 1928 that a middle-age St. Mary's County farmer, who also operated a sawmill, made a significant career decision. According to an account compiled 40 years ago by local historian Regina Combs Hammett, Samuel Bernard Burch was 49 years-old when his company was founded. Hammett described Burch as "a highly respected citizen of Mechanicsville." While he worked on two different farms, Hammett's account indicated Burch "also owned a steam-powered wheat-threshing machine and traveled from farm to farm each summer to thresh his neighbors' crops of wheat. According to Hammett's 1978 chronicling of the local business that Samuel Bernard Burch founded, the impetus for starting an oil company came from the low cash yields from tobacco and lumber, plus the influence and affluence of his cousin from Baltimore, Thad Burch. Cousin Thad, according to Hammett's account, was chauffeured in a Studebaker limo. He was the owner of the Burch Oil Company of Baltimore. Samuel Bernard Burch, Thad Burch and Thad's son, Joe; began a partnership that became Burch Oil Company of Southern Maryland. After acquiring a franchise from the Gulf Refining Company, Burchoil began its service to the Southern Maryland region.

From a warehouse and two 12,000-gallon storage tanks in Charlotte Hall the company began to grow. Three months after it was founded, Samuel Bernard Burch's son, F. Elliott, age 19, joined the company as a truck driver. Gasoline and kerosene were delivered by railroad tank car. A year after the establishment of the Southern Maryland company, Samuel Bernard Burch became its sole owner and manager. Two years after that, Burch's daughter Margaret joined the company as a secretary. From there Burchoil truly became a family-run business.

About nine years after Samuel Bernard Burch passed away, F. Elliott "Sonny" Burch Jr. joined the company and two years later his brother, Donald "Buddy" Burch came on board. Both Sonny and Buddy became extremely active within the Southern Maryland community. The addition of more Burchoil employees had begun in the 1940s due to the rationing of products the company distributed. The bigger staff kept tabs on ration stamps and forms. In 1956 Burchoil's plant was moved to a two-and-a-half acre site at Clarke's Landing. Three years later the company was incorporated.

In the 1960s Elliott Burch Sr. got involved in St. Mary's County politics, winning election to the board of county commissioners and serving two terms. In 1977 he was named "St. Mary's County Citizen of the Year."

Recently, TheBayNet.com met with three members of Burchoil's fourth generation—Joe Burch, Donnie Burch and Sheri Burch Norris—about the amazing growth and diversity of the family business. The company's headquarters is on Route 235 in Hollywood. Burchoil began operating its own service station locations in 1977. Then, in 1979, the company opened the first of three car washes. "Our industry [retail gasoline] was heading that way," said Joe. "Kind of like a sign of the time," Sheri added, explaining that during the late 1970s and early 1980s margins on gasoline were so low that the company needed to establish an additional revenue source.

In 1986 the company established convenience store locations. Burchmart is the name of four of the convenience store locations—Mechanicsville, Leonardtown, Hollywood and Waldorf. Four of the stores—in addition to being Shell stations—include Subway franchises.

In expanding, Burchoil officials bought four other oil companies in the region. The acquisitions were Thrift Oil of Leonardtown, St. Mary's Ice and Fuel, Budget Oil and C.L. Pitcher. Donnie that the first acquisition—Thrift Oil in 1982, during a congenial conversation among friends. "We were friends of the family and asked if they were interested in selling their business," he recalled.

Three years ago, Burchoil generated much excitement in the community when they brought Dairy Queen to the Route 5 corridor. The local DQ is located on company-owned property in Charlotte Hall. "You don't make money on gasoline and we needed to do something with the property," said Joe. "We looked at some other franchises." The Burch family members managing the company traveled to Minnesota to get the approval for a franchise by DQ officials. The DQ in Charlotte Hall is a sit-down operation, seating nearly 50 customers. "It's been very successful for us," said Joe. "We have a great manager," Sheri added. "When you have great employees it makes your job easier."

Burchoil also has businesses specializing in water softening and lubricants. The latter serves customers throughout the Mid-Atlantic region. "We sell oils, lubricants, hydraulics to different companies and fleets," said Joe. The company has a bulk facility in Leonardtown that distributes regionally.

Of course, Burchoil is best known for heating oil. The Burches said the product was once "their baby," but explained the propane distribution and water softener services are just as popular. Still, heating oil remains a key component. "There's a need for it," said Sheri. "We have a heating and air conditioning division. We do heat pumps, gas, furnaces—anything to do with energy."

Burchoil is now a company that employs 325 people. Sheri said that number rises slightly during the summer when Dairy Queen adds employees. While propane is often most associated with backyard grilling, Donnie stated that "most people are building [homes] with propane [as an energy source]. They see it as a cleaner burning fuel." Donnie added that Burchoil has good relationships with several area home builders. They also provide service for the home propane appliances.

Of the company's future, Donnie stated "we are always looking to expand."

"We'll continue to grow the propane and water softener business," Sheri added. "You have to continue to 'grow or go.' "

Burchoil has already got its fifth generation involved. "All of us have had kids who have worked in the business," said Sheri, who added the average lifespan for a family-owned business is three generations. It apparently doesn't matter if your name isn't Burch either. "We treat our employees like they are family," Sheri said, adding that they currently have employees who have been with the company over years. Two recent company retirees had nearly 50 years of service with Burchoil. "We don't have turnover."

Joe said the customers also get first-class treatment. "We treat our customers fairly. They are our neighbors."

"If it wasn't for them we wouldn't be here," Donnie added.

"We talk to our customers," said Sheri.

"We try to stay involved in the community," said Joe, noting that family members have served on various board for service organizations and the company is always making corporate donations to local charities.

As to how Burch will be celebrating 90 years of existence, Sheri described the pending observance as "low key. The big one will be in 10 years."

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