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# Living Legends

Some of Maine's firms pre-date the founding of the United States.  
How do these businesses keep their edge?

BY OLIVIA GUNN KOTSISHEVSKAYA

SOME OF US CRINGE at the thought of being handed charge of our grandmother's Siamese cat, let alone the family business, one that carries history, culture, and memories—not just for the family but a community. Call it fate, luck, or a burden, the owners of these treasured Maine companies seem predestined to carry on a family tradition.

## WELCOME HOME

"My wife didn't want to do it," Ken Mason says of managing the **Seaside Inn**, a gorgeous oceanside resort on Gooch's Beach in Kennebunk, and family heirloom if you've ever seen one. Trish is a ninth generation innkeeper, a role she never coveted. "She grew up on the property," Ken says. "At the time, their house was right next to this inn. She saw her parents work all day every

day. There was no privacy. Guests would just come walking through!"

When the Seaside Inn torch was offered to them, neither Ken nor Trish could let go of the pang of guilt at the thought of passing on it. Imagine dropping a 360-year-old piece of rare cut crystal. Negotiations saved the day. "The agreement was if we were going to do it, we were not living on the property," Ken says. "Trish wanted to have our own home for our family." So, under that accord, Seaside Inn is still invigorated by

the family that's run it for 362 years.

Purchased in 1756 by Trish's great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Jedidiah Gooch, this inn has welcomed visitors to this property since 1660. At least.

Trish's family roots run so deep here, they almost seem to pre-date Kennebunk's gulls and barnacles, though Native Americans can claim the earlier presence, since the Eastern Abenaki thrived in a village on the north side of Gooch's Creek. Jedidiah

arrived in 1637 as one of the first European immigrants to settle Maine as a colony under King Charles II. The family name is even in Kenneth Roberts's 1930 classic, *Arundel*. Trish recalls an "eerie" feeling coming over her as she read the



In 2009, Trish Mason published an extensive history on the Gooch family and the inn. *The Seaside House* follows the family from pre-colonial Maine through the 21st century.



novel in high school.

For generation after generation, the inn was passed on to the first-born son. In 1925, Helen Bell Twombly, Trish's great-grandmother, was the first daughter to inherit the inn—the first time the name would change from Gooch. The second was when Trish's grandmother, Virginia Twombly, later Virginia Severance, took over in 1950. "We're not putting any pressure on the kids," Ken says. "If they go off for a career and want to come back later on, I'd be fine. But I want them to go out and experience things on their own." That is, a choice is a choice only when you choose it. "We don't push the family history on them."

Today, Ken, who served in the U.S. Coast Guard as a chief petty officer, is the man behind the curtain at the inn. Though he married into the family, he's never been shy to implement new ideas. "The first year we took over, I installed central air-conditioning, computers—everything was still done on typewriters—we didn't even have an automatic coffee machine," he says. The earlier generation did, however, see the value of the world-wide web and treated viewers with photo updates of the beach every few minutes. Today it's a livestream broadcast. "We at least brought it up to the 20th century, but we still try to keep everything as homey as possible. That's why we have the 'Welcome Home' sign above the front desk. We have 82-percent return guests. That's what they like." Having a committed

"We've had a bunch of Canadian guests who've been coming for years and years. They called us up and said, 'We're not coming this year.' They were blunt about why."

staff helps. "Our breakfast cook, Holly, has been here since my wife was a little girl. Up until this year, we had Holly's mother here and her two sisters, her brother, and her nephew. It was kind of like a second family running the business."

While Seaside Inn maintains its familiar comforts, finding enough people to keep the wheels turning is always a challenge. Not as many people feel the calling "to do this kind of work anymore; be it housekeeping,

laundry, or even maintenance," Ken says. "It's not a pay-scale issue, because we pay well. Trying to fill these positions now is much harder than it used to be."

An even more surprising matter has been navigating the uncontrollable. Take the riff over tariffs, for example. "I'm not going to get into politics," Ken says. "We've had a bunch of Canadian guests who've been coming for years and years. They called us up and said, 'We're not coming this year.' They were blunt about why. I tried to explain that we don't represent the government and that we're just plain old people like they are up there. But a lot of them made a stand this year. They said they weren't coming."

A hallway at Seaside Inn is lined with family photos of those who've overseen the grounds long before Ken and Trish. Knowing so many before them have dealt with their fair share of change—as often as the tides that sweeten this retreat, nestled between the past and the future, between the Kennebunk River and the beach—must pro-



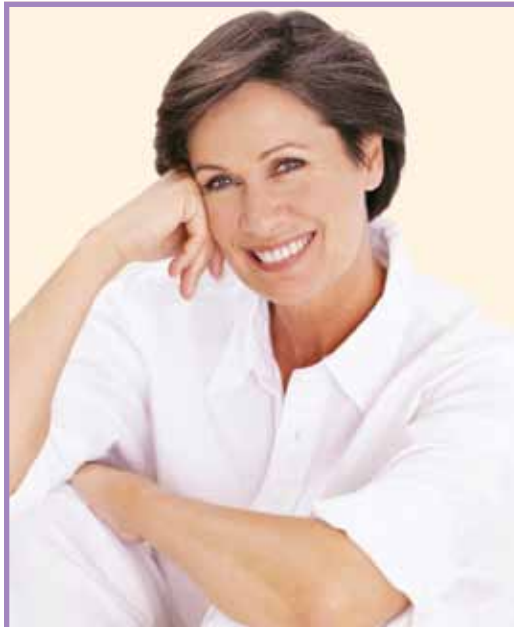
vide terms of endearment that only nine generations could know.

**STEADY AS THE PINES**

In 2010, **Kevin Hancock**, 52, was diagnosed with spasmodic dysphonia, a disorder that causes spasms in the vocal cords, impairing his ability to speak. The diagnosis, along with inspiring two books, forever changed the way he would look at leading his family's 170-year-old company, **Hancock Lumber**. "I don't like to compare leadership styles from one generation to the next," Kevin says. "Times change, and what works best changes [what we do]. I think the key is that each leader is authentic to who he or she is and changes the company for the better in his or her own way."

"He couldn't really talk when he wanted to or run meetings and lead the company in the traditional way he was used to. He had to stop and listen," Erin Plummer, spokesperson for the company, says of Kevin.

Kevin considers this a blessing. In a sense, it gives more of a voice to his employees. This has become one of the most prominent values in a company named



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## INSIGHTS

"Best Place in Maine to Work" four years in a row.

Kevin took over the lumber business from his father, David, who died in 1997. But he wasn't alone. His mother Carol is the "unsung hero" of the company and "hasn't missed a board meeting in 20 years." Still, at just 30, he'd become president of the company he'd seen his parents run and grandparents run before them. "My dad was a very well-respected and successful business leader," Kevin says. "So was my grandfather. They both had a great way with people. Growing up watching them helped me see that a company is really all about the people who work here." Today he oversees 540 employees and the production of over 85,000,000 board feet annually between three sawmills in Bethel, Casco, and Pittsfield.

Considered the 71st oldest business in the United States by *Family Business Magazine*, Hancock Lumber is a Maine staple. "Growing up," Kevin says, "I remember the company as an integral part of our community. Our corporate office in Casco was called 'the office' by most everybody who lived in the village."

### CREAM OF THE CROP

While many of us were playing with action figures and dolls, **Lindsay Gifford** was playing "office," filing papers, organizing her desk. She couldn't wait for "take your daughter to work day," when she'd strut through the doors of the family business by



From left: Siblings Lindsay Skilling, John Gifford, and Samantha Gifford.

her father's side. "That was my favorite time of the year."

Lindsay's early start clearly paid off, as she's worked her way up from miniature assistant to CEO of **Gifford's Ice Cream**. As part of the company's fifth generation (along with siblings Samantha and John, and her cousin, Ryan), she's kept a sweet heritage intact.

"Our parents tried to kind of push us away from the business," she says. "They dealt with the stress of growing the business, and they didn't want us to feel like it was something we had to do. I knew I always wanted to work here, but when thinking about colleges, I needed to experience something other than Maine." That took her to Bryant University in Rhode Island, which admittedly still felt a lot like Maine. But even there, she found herself coming home every chance she had.

Though her grandmother, Audrey Gifford, brought the company to Skowhegan with her husband Randall in the 1970s, Lindsay is technically the first woman to lead the company as CEO. "I don't think of it that way," she says. "Yes, I am a female who is a CEO. However, I'm doing whatever it takes to work alongside my family members to carry on our family's tradition of making award-winning, quality ice cream." Way cool. But is there pressure? "Quite a bit, to be honest. And it's not pressure anyone is putting on us other than ourselves. We want to carry on this family business. We don't want to let our father, our uncle, and grandparents down."

She's not on track to do that anytime soon. As the new generation "came aboard" the firm still owned by her father, John, and uncle, Roger, they implemented a few fresh ideas of their own to a business legendary for its freshness, including a consultant and more perspectives across the company. "It's helped open the lines of communication from every employee and was something that both Roger and John remarked upon as being something they wished they'd done." With yearly sales of over two million gallons of ice cream, recent expansion to their manufacturing plant, and a three-year partnership with the Boston Bruins, it's safe to guess that great-great grandfather Nathaniel Main and his "horse-drawn wagon" would agree these newbies have really got the scoop. ■

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