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Cap Heberle's Legacy: The Building Center Family

by Barbara Buls Boudreau

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FOREWORD

A compelling family success story lives in our midst on Duncan Street. This year, 2023, the Building Center of Gloucester is celebrating its 120th year of continuous family ownership and service to Cape Ann. Enjoy this story—the intersection of how ambition, flexibility, good-old-fashioned hard work, and a measure of risk-taking led Cap Heberle and four generations of family to success, not just financially but as community leaders with a history of caring for their employees.

ABOUT THE COVER PHOTO

“Cap” Heberle and his son Charles at Cap’s 90th birthday party at the Tavern in Gloucester. Circa early 1950s.

Cap Heberle's Legacy: The Building Center Family

BY BARBARA BULS BOUDREAU

Charles Tracy Heberle's arrived in Gloucester on a load of hay in 1881. He had endured indentured service as a 13-year-old "bound boy" at the Essex Tannery, laboring daily with stinking hides. When he fulfilled this term, he sought work for three years milking cows and farming at Caleb Cogswell's dairy in Essex. Cogswell later said he never saw a boy who worked harder or longer than Charlie.

Charlie tried and failed to find work in Boston, so Cogswell happily rehired him for a short time. Charlie saved some money and, this time, headed for Gloucester. On the waterfront, the now 18-year-old found menial labor jobs on tugboats and eventually worked his way up to tugboat engineer. Years of hard work and saving money allowed him to purchase his first beat-up tugboat, *Little Charlie*, in 1893. This grew into a small fleet of four tugboats by the early 1900s and earned him his lifelong nickname of "Cap." Though Cap was ambitious in building his fleet, he sensed the end of the tugboat assistance era as engines became standard equipment in boats. He began to look for other business opportunities. His chance came in the form of a burning, abandoned Standard Oil barge off the coast of Cape Ann in 1903.

A crew member of the towing vessel had gone below in the barge with a lighted candle, causing an explosion that set the barge afire. With few options and fearing a further explosion, the towing vessel cut the burning barge loose, setting it adrift four miles off Eastern Point light. Cap heard about the incident and steamed out of Gloucester Harbor on his tug *Priscilla*. Risking life and limb, he towed the floating inferno stern first into the outer harbor with a crew member stationed at the tow line with a hatchet to sever the line in case of another explosion. They extinguished the fire, and the salvage rights became Cap's. With approximately \$4,000 in salvage funds plus the proceeds of the sale of his tugboat fleet, Cap purchased the bankrupt Bennett Coal Company at the site of the current Building Center in October of 1903. He named it the Gloucester Coal Company, and his legacy at that site had begun.

Cap was hardworking and innovative. He was also dedicated to his employees. After experiencing the painful effects of the Great Depression, Cap recognized the need for economic

security for his employees. An insurance plan was set up in 1945 for employee life insurance plus monthly retirement benefits. In 1953, the company initiated a Company Benefit Fund (akin to what is now a 401k plan) with the firm matching the investment of participating employees.

Second Generation

During World War II, Cap's only son, Charles T. Heberle Jr (Charlie), rose to Captain in the then Army Air Corps. Stationed in Tucson, Arizona, training pilots, he considered staying out West after the war. However, Cap journeyed to Arizona to convince his son to return to the family business, which had now included lumber sales. Fortunately for both the business and Gloucester, Charlie relented. He turned out to be just as innovative as his father. Under their joint leadership, the now "Building Center, Inc." grew and expanded.

Cap passed away in 1956, leaving Charlie firmly in command. He made further innovations, including the construction of a cottage on Merry Meeting Lake solely for the use and enjoyment of the employees. Additional refinements were made to employee benefits. Charlie was instrumental in the Building Center joining the Lumberman's Merchandising Corporation (LMC), a collective of family-owned lumber yards. His participation and leadership in the Corporation was instrumental in its growth. LMC's combined billion-dollar purchasing power empowered small family-owned building materials businesses to compete with the "Big Boxes," supplying its members with both product availability and lower pricing of materials.

In the early 1960s, a failing lumber yard in Essex was available for purchase. Charlie agonized over whether to purchase the property. It was a risky venture, but with the encouragement of his devoted wife, Bertha, he threw the dice and opened the Essex branch of the Building Center. As Bertha stated, if this risky business venture failed, they would ride out of Gloucester together on the same hay wagon Cap rode in on so many years before. Far from failing, the Essex business flourished as one of the first cash-



Charles T. and Bertha Heberle, circa 1980s.

and-carry lumberyards. The legacy of Cap Heberle had come full circle—the Essex property was the former Caleb Cogswell farm where Cap had worked so many years before. The Essex Building Center remains a vibrant lumber and building materials yard principally serving contractors.

Third Generation

Charles Heberle passed away in 1993, leaving the business to his four children, Chas, Nancy, Harriet, and Peggy—the third generation of ownership. Chas eventually chose to pursue his military career. The three sisters continued in ownership until the passing of Nancy in 2005. Currently, the business continues to flourish under the ownership of Harriet and Peggy with the unwavering support of Gloucester and the Cape Ann community.

Peggy's son, Tim Huff, is the current CFO of the Building Center and constitutes the fourth generation of family leadership. Tim has been with the business since 2009 and plans to continue the family ownership well into the future.



Harriet and Peggy, 2003.

Businesses can only succeed in the long term with the support and assistance of their employees. The Building Center has been fortunate to have the best of the best! Most families in Gloucester can attest to having at least one family member or close relative who worked within the Building Center family. With the continuing support of the Gloucester community, the Cap Heberle legacy of 120 years of hard work and positive community involvement will live on for years to come.

The Building Center boasts several long-term, happy, dedicated employees who love working for the family business. For instance, Debbie Mione has served as head cashier for 20+

years; Mike Davis, 20 years as yard manager; Sherry Vicari just retired after 45 years but still working periodically; Bryan Nigro had previously left the Building Center but returned when they invited him back. He has now worked there for over eight years. We've collected some employee thoughts to celebrate 120 years in business and honor Gloucester's 400+ years of history...



The Building Center, Gloucester location, 2023.
Photo credit: Terry Weber Mangos

Elmer Davis

LUMBERYARD MANAGER, TEN+ YEARS

The Building Center is truly a company built on family values. I have worked at many companies, but I have never worked at a company where the owners care so much for their employees. They know everyone's name and ask how you are doing. I realized that they were special people when I was ill. I ended up in the hospital. I was sleeping, and I woke up to find the owners standing at the foot of my bed. They asked me if I needed anything at all. They stuck around to make sure I was OK.

They are always ready to help the community, giving donations and never expecting a pat on the back. When I started here 20 years ago, it was supposed to be a summer job. I didn't know anything about the lumber industry. Working here gave me the knowledge and the skills to be a manager. I am glad I stayed because I got to help so many others find their footing. Some school kids want to learn the business, so we keep employment doors open for them and work around their schedules. Some kids we had working here from working permit age to high school graduation to college. Now they've become firemen, teachers, nurses, police officers, ocean scientists, doctors, truck drivers, and countless young contractors.

Ken Monroe

INSIDE SALES MANAGER, THREE YEARS

I've been in the building material industry for 28 years. When coming to work here, you quickly notice the difference from other places. It's a terrific family-run company with a full team effort in all departments on all aspects of the business. It's truly a partnership between Building Center and the customers.

Bryan Nigro

STORE MANAGER, TEN YEARS

I started at the Building Center in 2013. Having worked for a family-run business in the past, I always leaned toward working at another "Mom and Pop shop." The Huffs welcomed me with open arms. I was here for two years, and after leaving for a quick hiatus at another job, but I realized the grass is not always greener. The Huffs welcomed me back, and the rest is history. I have been the store manager in Gloucester since 2017 and have enjoyed my time here very much. We have a great team full of great people. This is a testament to how the company treats its people... like family. "Family first" is an unwritten motto for our company, and we all treat everyone as such. We are celebrating 120 years in business this year. With a little luck and a lot of hard work, we will be here for another 120!

Michael Nicastro

DELIVERY SYSTEM MANAGER, THIRTY+ YEARS

I am currently in my 32nd year of working at the Building Center. I started at the BC in 1992, working part-time in the lumber yard check-out booth in Gloucester before there was any point of sale or computer system. After less than a year, they brought me on full-time, and I started driving the trucks and making deliveries. Around 2003, we moved the delivery system to the Essex location, and I have been there ever since. I am now managing the delivery system with the help of an A-1 team of truck drivers, load builders, hardware experts, and salespeople. We've grown tremendously, and it's all been possible because of the family atmosphere inspired by the Heberle family. I'm proud to be associated with one of my hometown's oldest and best businesses. Cheers to 120 years of the Building Center!

Debra Mione

HEAD CASHIER, NINETEEN YEARS

I was hired in 2000 while my daughter was also employed at the BC. She taught me where everything was and how to use the computer. As I became more experienced, I became the teacher. Many young people and students have come to the BC for work; for some it is their first job. It's a great place for them to experience working in the community before they move on. Most have gone on to do great things. Over the years the BC in Gloucester has traded employees with their sister store in Essex. All in all, the BC has been great for Gloucester's community – supplying work for many and accessibility. To find a good job with good leadership, there's no need to go over the bridge.

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