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Blue Rock Management (L-R) Randy Olson, Vice President-Administration; Karen Olson-Beenken, Executive Vice President, and John Olson, President and CEO

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John Olson, 1971



Karen Olson-Beenken  
1998



Tim Feeley, 1980



Eric Beenken, 2007



Tracy Hagen, 1991

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of Commerce and Agriculture

# John Olson, President and CEO

By Dianne Swanson

John Olson's story is a classic American tale, from a not-so-perfect childhood, to owning one of the most successful businesses in the country. With a lot of hard work and exceptional management skills, and probably a bit of luck along the way, Olson grew Blue Rock Products from a single building facility in Sidney, to a multi-location business also serving Williston, Plentywood, Glasgow, Miles City and the surrounding areas.

Olson was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Born in 1939 in Great Falls, his single mother could not afford to take care of him, so he spent 5 1/2 years in an orphanage. "They treated me well," he said. His most vivid memory of that time is of the day World War II ended. The dining area of the orphanage featured long tables with benches. The rule was that you couldn't leave until your plate was clean. Six year old John had 2 asparagus spears on his plate. He did not, and still doesn't, like asparagus. "The sisters were all gathered around the radio and all of a sudden they were whooping and hollering "The War Is Over". One sister came over to me and asked what I was still doing at the table. She said that it was a beautiful day and I should be outside playing. I ran. And I didn't have to eat that asparagus."

When Olson was in the third grade, things got better and he

was able to go home and live with his Mom. He graduated from Great Falls High School and then joined the Marine Corps. After the service, he attended the University of Montana and became a lifelong Grizzly.



John Olson, President and CEO

As a child of only 9 or 10, Olson started spending summers in Fairview at his uncle C.O. Johnson's bottling plant. Back then, the Chase family of Fairview would carve ice out of the Yellowstone River in the winter and store it for summer use. In the back of the bottling plant there was a pit where the ice was kept, covered with sawdust. One of little John's jobs was to go into that pit and chop up ice. He would use a small push cart, load it with ice, and then put a chunk on each beer barrel. He also sorted bottles and did other chores as needed.

Olson graduated from U of M with a teaching degree. His first, and only, teaching job was in Hysham. As a young single teacher, he not only taught history and political science, but was also the assistant coach for football and basketball, created two school plays per year and was in charge of the school newspaper. After the first year, he knew that teaching was not what he wanted to do. He stayed one more year and then resigned.

He was still spending the summers in Fairview and enjoyed the business. At the end of that summer, he had no teaching job, and his uncle Brub Johnson didn't have enough work to keep him on with Blue Rock. Pepsi Cola called. There was a bottler in Casper, WY who needed a temporary manager while they went on vacation to Europe. Would John take the job?

He said he had no experience but was willing to try. After a 48 hour management crash course, the family boarded the plane for Europe. One month extended to three, with the owner calling at the end of each month checking up on the business and asking if he could stay another month. Upon the owner's return, Olson was asked to stay as sales manager. He turned down the offer, knowing that his philosophy and business ideas were far different than that of the owner.

Olson went to Denver to apply with Pepsi Cola, but they had nothing so he headed home to Great Falls. He got a call from Jeff Powell with Pepsi, who asked to meet him at the airport the next day for an interview. When they met, Powell asked if he was the fat little fellow who used to sort bottles in Fairview. Olson said he was and Powell hired him on the spot to be a salesman in the Franchise Development Group. Olson covered eleven western states, including Alaska and Hawaii. He didn't make it to Hawaii, but he introduced Diet Pepsi in Alaska in February – a sign of a true salesman. Then he was off to New York as part of a new Sales Development department, covering 3 areas including the military, grocery and mobile markets.

In April of 1965, Olson's uncle C.O. "Brub" Johnson, who had taken over Blue Rock from his father, called Olson to ask if he wanted the Sidney franchise. After 33 years in the business, Johnson needed to back out. Olson came to Sidney and took over and one year later bought the business.

Olson has a knack of surrounding himself with great people. Immediately after he purchased Blue Rock he married Marilyn. On April 12, 1966, they applied for their marriage license in the morning and he bought Blue Rock that afternoon. Five days later, he and Marilyn were married by her dad, O.C. Johnson, who was a Lutheran pastor. Olson has also always believed in his product. At the rehearsal, when Johnson asked if he would 'take this woman...' Olson replied yes – if he would switch to Pepsi. John and Marilyn had met on a blind date on December 7, 1965. By January 4, 1966 they were engaged and married in April. "The only reason we had to wait for the wedding was that Marilyn's dad couldn't marry us before Easter," Olson said. Marilyn was in Sidney as part of a pilot study looking at merging the County Health Department with the Public Health Department. She worked closely with Mary Alice Rehbein. After that, she trained retired nurses to get them back in the profession. "She's a smart lady," Olson said proudly.

F.W. Murphy from Bismarck started the bottling plant in Fairview as well as Glendive and Williston. The bottling plant did not do well and was sold several times until J.C. Johnson bought it in 1918 and made it a success. They bottled sodas at the time as well as beer. During prohibition, Johnson and Mr. Creighton of Williston had a still in Bainville where they made and bottled illegal hooch to sell, thereby thriving until prohibition was lifted. Johnson's granddaughter was doing research on Blue Rock and wanted artifacts from the business. Olson met her in San Diego and learned that J.C. had been fined \$50,000 by the IRS, assumably for not reporting the income from his bootlegging operation. Olson has a bottle of that hooch, given to him by Glade Yoder not long before he died.

The Fairview operation was located in the lot across the alley behind the Hotel Albert. Johnson moved the business to Sidney in 1959 to the corner of 2<sup>nd</sup> St. and 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. When Olson bought the business, the old bottling plant building in Fairview still existed. It was decrepit and had become a place for the neighborhood boys to visit. It all had to be cleaned out and demolished. Lance Averett loaded and hauled all the bottles and debris to the landfill by the pickup load. "One of my biggest mistakes was taking a whole railroad car of 12 oz. Pepsi bottles to the landfill," Olson said. Both the monetary and nostalgia value of those bottles would be huge now. Olson especially appreciates the vintage beverage memorabilia. His museum at Blue Rock rivals any in the nation.

When Olson purchased the business in 1966, there were just five fulltime employees: Jo Maltese, Lois McClusky, Eugene Gagner, Skee Berndt and DeeAnn Messmer. Olson did a lot of route sales, loading and unloading of trucks and

## Congratulations John & Marilyn, Karen & Eric, Randy & Jane And The Staff At Blue Rock!

**J.C. Johnson is Elected Mayor**  
*Fairview News,*  
**April 5, 1923**

The city election last Monday passed quietly. J.C. Johnson was the only candidate who filed and he was elected mayor without active opposition. A few dissenting votes were cast for as many unannounced and unwilling candidates. Mayor Geo. Brennan, retiring, has filled the office with credit. His administration was necessarily frugal in expenditure of money for city improvements, as funds there were none. The new mayor enters upon his duties with the city treasury in the same depleted state. His will be the task to see that some provision is made to place the affairs of Fairview on a business basis. Mayor-elect J.C. Johnson is an awake, enterprising citizen. He is first, last and all the time for his home town. The News predicts that the next two years will see progress in city affairs.

*Fairview News,*  
**July 26, 1923**

The Blue Rock Products Co. will do the biggest business in its history this year, based on the business done up to this time. J.C. Johnson, the proprietor, has had to increase the number of employees at the plant and the production of bottled soft drinks is growing to keep up with the growing demand for Blue Rock Products. The importance of the bottling works to Fairview is not fairly estimated by the people of the town. The limits of the territory over which Blue Rock products are sold extends to points on all the lines of railroad as distant from Fairview as the farther points from older established bottling works to which the latter ship. The soft drink manufacturers of the larger cities have come to realize that the Blue Rock Products Co. of Fairview is a competitive factor in the trade. Of greater importance to Fairview than

this is the advertising we get wherever Blue Rock products are retailed. Every drinker of these beverages ascertains to satisfy his curiosity by what company they are manufactured and where. The increasing demand is evidence that they are of excellent quality, refreshing and pleasant to imbibe and the repeated demand familiarizes the purchaser with the place of manufacture. Thus Fairview comes into the limelight. Mr. Johnson took over the business when it was in a bad way. He has improved on its products until now they are in a class unexcelled. He has branched out with a line of fountain supplies and novelties and the business has grown surprisingly. He is experimenting with a malt formula and may begin manufacturing a Blue Rock malt in a short time..

**J.C. Johnson to Build Addition to Blue Rock Plant**  
*Fairview News,*  
**July 2, 1925**

J.C. Johnson has begun excavating for a 30x30 foot addition to the Blue Rock Bottling Works building on the rear. Shorty Kottke is doing the work with his outfit.

Erection of the building will be let to local contractors, Mr. Johnson says.

The enlargement of this plant's housing is significant. Mr. Johnson took the Blue Rock plant over some years ago when it was in a run-down condition and considered a failure in a business sense. He improved on the products manufactured and with an enterprise and foresight defied the vicissitudes of the times, he preserved in building the business up until it is now on a sound basis and growing by leaps and bounds. The products manufactured have a wide market. Mr. Johnson has been steadily improving the plant, discarding the old and installing new machines of the latest designs. He has equipment that insures the purity of Blue Rock products. The beverages made are superior in their deliciousness, to other manufacturers of the kind.

The Blue Rock Bottling works is one of the industries that has made it impossible to erase Fairview from the map. The new addition will be a sanitary bottling room in part. The present floor space will be used for storage for manufactured products and supplies

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whatever was necessary to keep his company going. There were no forklifts back then. Olson remembers he and Averett, in a snowstorm on June 6, unloading a beer semi, 2200 cases, one at a time. It took 5 1/2 hours. Today it takes 17 minutes with no manual labor involved. He also remembers Skee Berndt loading a 1962 Chevy route truck three high on the roof to make a run to Circle. The empties were always thrown on the roof to come home. One of the biggest changes in the business is that modern equipment makes everything much easier. The trucks are better these days but one disadvantage is that Blue Rock now has to go to Billings to purchase and repair trucks. "We used to be able to buy locally. It was good to be able to deal with your neighbors," Olson lamented.

Blue Rock Distributing has won the President's Award from Miller Coors, a prestigious award in the beer business. In 2007, they were named as the Business of the Year by the Montana Ambassadors. For the past 3 years, Blue Rock Products has been the Top Pepsi-Cola plant in the nation for sales increases as percentage of sales.

Blue Rock obtained the Pepsi franchise in 1939. Olson was very active in the National Pepsi Cola Bottling Association for many years, including serving as chair from 1978 until early 1980. At that time independent bottlers made up 85% of the business in the U.S. Now that number is reversed. Most of the independent bottlers are in the Rocky Mountain Region and part of the reason they were able to survive and thrive was the creation in 1969 of the Admiral Beverage Company. The company was formed as a way for the small bottlers to control the items necessary to make their product. "We created one heck of a company," Olson said. "It kept us alive. It gave us the buying power and ensured consistency in production, security and source of cans. None of us were large enough to do our own canning facility. We had to pool our resources to survive." The company has bottling facilities in Worland, WY and Ogden, UT. They have 40 locations throughout the Rocky Mountain area and recently added Pepsi Bottling for Salt Lake and a beer distributor for the entire state of New Mexico.

Olson has been chairman of Admiral since its inception, which as he says, has to be a record in corporate history. As the original members age, Olson has invited the sons and daughters, including his own, into the board room. "It makes the transition a lot smoother when a director passes on," he said.

Olson believes in giving back to the community. He served on the MDU Resources board for almost 25

years, was on the Blue Cross/Blue Shield board for 10 years and was chairman of the Montana Bottlers Association for several years. He was the first of 5 Sidney Chamber of Commerce presidents to come out of Blue Rock, serving in 1971, when he hired Cal Oraw as executive director. Olson was also a co-founder of the Foundation for Community Care.

Olson says he has surrounded himself with smart, hard working people. He is proud of his employees and what they have accomplished in the community as well. "Lance Averett has been active in Demolay for many years and was voted Advisor of the Year twice in the 1990s. He's also active with the golf club and served on the hospital board for 6 years. Lance has been a mentor for my children and has kept me on the straight and narrow. I have been a beneficiary of Lance's experience." Another employee Olson talked about was Tim Feeley who retired after 38 years with Blue Rock. "I've had good top management. We've benefited from each other and stayed together."

Since Olson's daughter Karen and his son Randy have joined the family business, continuation of the firm seems assured going forward. Even Karen's son Luke is now working at the plant.

## Blue Rock Test Site for Mountain Dew

One of the most successful soft drinks ever to hit the beverage industry was Mountain Dew, a product of The Tip Corporation of America. This southern-based corporation franchised Blue Rock on December 22, 1965. On December 30, 1965, PepsiCo, Inc. became the owner of the Mountain Dew trademark when PepsiCo, Inc. purchased the Tip Corporation with Frederick C. Sorenson as its president and chief executive officer.

Mountain Dew was a highly successful product for Blue Rock. So much so, that the Sidney franchise was soon awarded the only 100 Per Cap Plaque found west of the Mississippi. Only five other 100 Per Cap Plaques are found hanging in the entire United States and they are located in the Carolinas.

Due in part to its success with Mountain Dew, Blue Rock Products Company was chosen by PepsiCo, Inc. to become a national test market for its new product, Diet Mountain Dew in July, 1983. Two other test markets were established in Birmingham, Alabama and Fargo, North Dakota. Following a rather successful test of the new brand, Diet Mountain Dew was later rolled out nationwide and continues to this day as one of the premier soft drink brands ever introduced.

John Olson still has the first bottle of Mountain Dew produced at the Sidney plant.

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# Lance Averett

By Dianne Swanson

Lance Averett has come a long way with Blue Rock, from mowing lawns to Vice President and general sales manager. He started in 1967, working part-time through high school mowing, trimming trees and loading trucks. After graduating from college in 1975, he became assistant manager at the sales center in Plentywood for a few months, then manager for 4 1/2 years. He relocated to Sidney in 1979 as sales manager.

"I can't imagine working for better people than John and his family," Averett said. "It's a lot of fun. John has made it fun." He recalled that when he first started, John spent most of his time selling and delivering cases of product, sometimes until 9:30 at night. Averett would help load and deliver around town. "We had a lot of fun throwing cases to each other," he said, laughing. "John could throw them faster than I could catch them. When I would finally miss one, we'd clean up the mess and go back to work. It was a lot of fun!"

Averett has seen Blue Rock grow from seven full-time employees to over 100; and from one building in Sidney to sales centers in Williston, Plentywood, Glasgow and Miles City. "There's been a lot of building and a lot of growth. The current building has been added onto three times since it was built in 1978."

Averett has had the pleasure of dealing with a lot of good people over the years. "There have been a lot of good customers, associates and employees," he said. One particular associate that Averett misses is Tim Feeley. "Tim was a big part of working here until he retired. We had a good relationship. It's a credit to John's leadership and training, allowing us to make decisions and backing us up."

Blue Rock started as a soft drink company, producing flavors such as strawberry and cream soda in small bottles. They also produced 32 ounce bottles of Teem, ginger ale, club soda and a couple more. Everything was in returnable glass bottles. When Averett started with Blue Rock, single cans were just getting started. Most beverages were still in 10 or 16 ounce bottles. Driven by consumer demand, all beverages now come in cans or plastic resealable bottles.

Although Blue Rock has had the current portfolio for quite some time, Averett has seen many brands come and

go. Schmidt's, Hamms, Lucky Draft and Grain Belt are a few beers that are no longer available through Blue Rock. And the soft drinks? "Too many to mention," Averett said.

Averett has seen an increase in wine sales over the past few years. He credits the Foundation for Community Care's Wine & Food Festival for increasing awareness in this area. "People are more receptive to wines now and willing to sample them. We're glad to be a sponsor. It's terrific for the community and the health care system. It's well managed and well promoted. I was on the hospital board for six years and know how important support from the Foundation is to the hospital." Averett also commended Reese & Ray's IGA, Reynolds Market and Millers' Corner for doing a nice job of increasing their wine displays.

Averett is proud of Blue Rock and his career with them. "Blue Rock was in pretty tough condition when John purchased it," Averett said. "He worked hard and invested heavily in the communities we serve to build the business. There is a sense of pride in everything we do, and we learned that from John."



Lance Averett, Vice President and General Sales Manager

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# Tracy Hagen

By Dianne Swanson

When Tracy Hagen talks about Blue Rock, she is as enthusiastic today as she was in 1981 when she joined the company. She truly loves her job, and the people she works with.

Hagen started in the office, just when Blue Rock was beginning to computerize and do their own data entry in house. "It was wonderful," she said. "It was my introduction to the computer world and I loved it. We would do data entry for hours every day. It was a good education on the computer and the company itself." The Sidney native had returned home as a new bride after spending the previous few years in the oilfield in Williston.

"It's a great job," Hagen said, smiling. "I know it sounds like a cliché, but there is beauty in working for a family owned business. There's family ownership and family pride and I have had the opportunity to be a part of that. First John and now Karen and Randy are a continuation that. I have a lot of respect for them."

Along the way, there were promotions and opportunities. Hagen is now the general manager, operations. Along with managing the wine aspect of Blue Rock, Hagen also oversees information systems, personnel, and many other duties as needed. "I enjoy what I do and the people I work with. It's a lot of fun," she said.

There have been lots of changes within the company since Hagen started 32 years ago. "Our first computer was

an Apple Lisa with a DOT Matrix printer," she said. The company is now fully computerized with the latest technology. "We've had to keep up with technology," Hagen added.

"We're in the business of selling refreshing beverages and we try to be as diverse as possible." The company is always adding new items according to customers' tastes. Teas, soft drinks, wines from all over the world, and beers including micros and imports are all part of Blue Rock's portfolio.

Hagen appreciates the opportunities that Blue Rock provides and the people she has had the privilege to work with over the years. "I've worked with some great people like retirees Tim Feeley, Bob Averett and Lois Frank. I have enjoyed them all," she said. "When people retire, you can fill the position, but you still miss the individual personality and what they brought to the company."

"Blue Rock is a company you can retire from," Hagen said. "It provides long term employment and there are benefits to that. It also provides for personal growth and advancement." Hagen also had the support of the Olsons when it came to family. "Family comes first. It's important to the Olsons. It was never an issue if I needed to do something for my family. It's been a real benefit, to have the flexibility to do what we need to do."

Because of Blue Rock, Hagen has been involved in the Sidney community for many years. She was one of five Sidney Chamber of Commerce presidents that Blue Rock has

produced, the others being John Olson, Tim Feeley, Karen Olson Beenken and Eric Beenken. She has also been involved in Dollars for Scholars, and heavily involved in both the Sidney School system, particularly athletics and the Foundation for Community Care Wine and Food Festival. "The company encourages you to make those commitments and lets you have the time to carry them out," Hagen said.

At the end of the day, Hagen is happy with her career. "I enjoy the people I work with and for. I would do it again," she said with a big smile.



Tracy Hagen, General Manager, Operations.

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# Ron Messmer

By Dianne Swanson

Ron Messmer has worked for two companies in his life – Mon-Kota Fertilizer in the summers during high school, then Blue Rock beginning December 7, 1979. The Fairview native started as a warehouse worker. After about a year, he started doing routes part-time and then full time as a route salesman, delivering soft drinks and beer.

In 1985, he was promoted to sales center manager in Glasgow, a position he held for six years. 1992 saw him back in Sidney taking over Les Pierce's job as a sales center manager. Pierce had been promoted to area marketing manager. Positions have shifted over the years as Blue Rock has grown. Today, Messmer has three jobs: Senior Sales Manager — Director of Purchasing – (Beer) and Head of the Print Shop. He oversees primarily the beer salesmen, orders all the beer for the whole company and produces many advertising items. All the banners for the entire company are printed in Sidney and are shipped to the outlying sales centers.

Messmer's favorite part of working at Blue Rock is the people, both past and current, and the relationships he has formed over the years with co-workers and customers. "As a route salesman, you meet a lot of people," he said. "I would be in their business every week and got to know a lot of them pretty well, and now I know people all over eastern Montana. And the work is good. It's something that has been very enjoyable over the years. A lot has changed in thirty years. When I started we sold only a handful of different items, now we sell hundreds!"

Messmer's fondest memories come from working with people like Eugene Gagner, Skee Berndt & Les Pierce. Berndt oversaw the salesmen when Messmer was a route salesman. It was sometimes challenging when Messmer had 20 accounts to take care of in a day and Berndt would decide to come along and do a store reset which could take three hours. "I broke into the business when they were around. They were fun to work with." Harry Sorenson was another name who came to mind. Sorenson came with the purchase of Fox Coors in Glasgow. He was transferred to Sidney and Messmer became manager in Glasgow. Messmer laughed about meeting each other on the highway many times as each one headed home for the weekend. Sorenson was a warehouse worker, and Messmer could always count on him.



Ron Messmer, Senior Sales Center Manager

"If we needed anything, he'd do it."

Messmer soaked up all the knowledge that was available. "It was fun to work with these guys who had so much experience and so much knowledge, guys like Tim Feeley, Lance Averett and Les Pierce. Lance has been pretty important over the years. If I ever needed to know something, he had the answer. He is always good to fall back on since he's been around longer than anyone."

Messmer has enjoyed working for the Olson family. "I couldn't ask for a better family to work for," he said. "John is awesome, Marilyn, Karen, Randy & Eric are all terrific to work for. They definitely have provided very well for me and my family and have made it a great place to come to work each day".

Messmer recalled only one occasion when he was summoned to John's office for disciplinary reasons. It was 30 years ago. "John said my hair was too long and he would like to have it cut. John wants his employees to look good. They represent the company and the brand Pepsi."

Messmer has been on call it seems 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for over 30 years. If a customer is short of product, he'll go take care of them. If there is an event taking place, Messmer will make sure they have everything they need. "John has always stressed that customer service is number one. We've always tried to do our best. Cheers to the next 100 years!"



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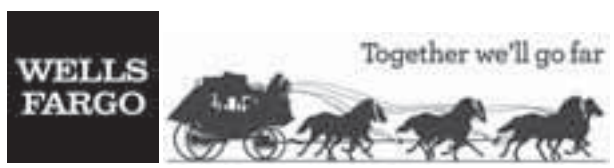


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# A History of Blue Rock

Blue Rock Products Company, also known as Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company, was established in 1913 at Fairview, Montana. At that time, the town of Fairview was a trading center for area farmers in the Yellowstone Valley and the dry land hill country. During the first years of its existence, the company was primarily a beer distributorship with soft drink sales accounting for a much smaller portion of the total business. Both beer and soft drinks were shipped by rail to customers in outlying areas as far as Plentywood and Glasgow.

As years passed, soft drinks began to play a more predominant role and the need for a new and larger facility was realized. In 1959, Blue Rock Products Company began to expand. It was in that year the company boldly made its move to Sidney and into a new bottling plant. The business soon spread across Southeastern Montana resulting in, in 1968, a building expansion program. A second building expansion program occurred in 1972 as the business continued its rapid growth.

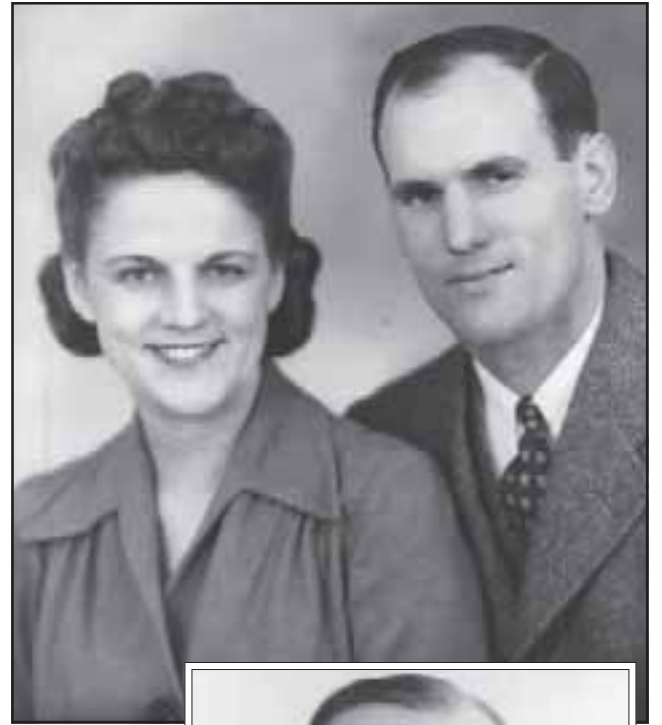
In 1970, Blue Rock Products Company joined six other Pepsi-Cola Bottlers to create Admiral Beverage Corporation, a co-op canning production center at Worland, Wyoming and Ogden, Utah. Canned soft drinks are produced and shipped to Utah, Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, Colorado, Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada, as well as Montana. Several other Admiral distribution centers are also located in the above states.

In November 1972, the corporation purchased the Wildwood Beverage Company in Plentywood, Montana. This sale concluded fifty years of soft drink sales and service by Wildwood Beverage Company in Northeastern Montana and Northwestern North Dakota. The Sidney-based firm, then employing twenty-six people and operating a fleet of fifteen trucks, was now licensed by eight national franchisers and authorized to bottle and distribute national brand soft drinks in fifteen Montana counties and in four North Dakota counties. Sales distribution centers continued to be maintained in Plentywood and Williston. In January, 1976, the Williston sales branch moved into new warehouse facilities to increase operating efficiency.

In November 1978, and coincidentally, its 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, Blue Rock Products Company moved its entire central production center and general offices to a new location in Sidney. Today, the facility features a modern and up-to-date production, warehouse and office complex.

In October 1978, Blue Rock Beverage Company was organized as a result of purchasing the Chuck Wagon Wholesale and Fox-Coors Distributing Companies of Glasgow, Montana. Blue Rock Beverage Company is authorized to distribute beer throughout Northeastern Montana and the Hi-Line area. The general offices and main warehouse is located in Sidney. Another branch distribution warehouse is maintained in Glasgow. This branch also sells soft drinks in addition to its beer distributing responsibilities.

Blue Rock Distributing Company was created to complete the acquisition of Miles City's United Beverage Company and Anco Beverage Company. The takeover of the wine and beer distributing companies occurred June 4, 1990.



Above: C.O. 'Brub' Johnson, CEO 1948-1966, with his wife June



Right: Blue Rock's founder, J.C. Johnson

The beverage industry is highly competitive and the acquisition of the United Beverage Company and Anco Beverage Company complemented and strengthened the growing family of Blue Rock Companies by creating jobs, employment opportunities and the stimulation of the economy in Eastern Montana and Western North Dakota areas.

In September 2006, Blue Rock Beverage Company and Blue Rock Distributing Company were combined into one company called Blue Rock Distributing Company.

Today, Blue Rock is the largest soft drink, wholesale beer and wine distributing organization in Eastern Montana and Western North Dakota area. The Blue Rock family employs over 125 persons at five locations.

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Right: Fred Lake, Sales Center Manager



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The Olson Family - Randy, Karen, Marilyn and John

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*J.C. Johnson Gets First Sack of Sugar from Valley Factory  
Fairview News, October 15, 1925*

J.C. Johnson has on exhibition at Blue Rock Bottling Works, the first sack of sugar made by the Holly factory at Sidney. Mr. Johnson spoke for the first sack of production while the factory was yet in the building and Mr. Drummond, the traffic man for the Holly people, assured him that his request would be granted. When the wheels at the big plant began to turn and the sugar product was taken from the first beets, the first sack was set aside for Mr. Johnson.

It may seem insignificant, the fact that Mr. Johnson obtained the first sack of the factory's production, but it marks an era at its beginning for this territory and particularly for the valley. Mr. Johnson with his usual enterprise saw this and knew that an honor accompanied the sack of sugar in being the possessor of it. Hundreds of sacks would soon be piled in the large store room and the identity of the first sack would be merged in the pile unless it was kept apart and marked for its significance.

Mr. Johnson loaned the sack of sugar to the Interstate Corn and Potato Show and it will be exhibited at the show room Friday and Saturday. He will recover it then and after a short time, during which it will be conspicuous at the Blue Rock plant, he will use it in the manufacture of pop which will bear a special label and be retailed by the Sidney customers of the factory.



## Thanks for the Throwback sodas!

# Tim Feeley

By Dianne Swanson

Tim Feeley worked for Blue Rock in Sidney from 1973 until his retirement in December of 2011. He started as sales manager when the company had three facilities - Sidney, Plentywood and Williston and since added two more facilities - Glasgow and Miles City. He was promoted to general sales manager and then general manager as the company grew.

Feeley knew John Olson from way, way back, when Feeley was a student and Olson his teacher in Hysham. "My family had a high regard for John," Feeley stated. "When he left teaching, my mother said 'We have lost the finest teacher this community ever had!'"

Feeley joined the military after high school. When he returned, he was working on a degree from Eastern Montana College in Billings, married his wife Sandy, and needed a job to help with college and living expenses. A friend of his worked at Pepsi in Billings, so Feeley applied and started working nights and weekends. "That's how I started working for Pepsi. I worked for the Dimich family. They were almost as awesome as the Olson family, old time good business people, very involved in the Billings community as the Olson's are in Eastern Montana. And I was in the business for over 40 years."

After working for Pepsi Cola Bottling in Billings for 3 or 4 years, and starting a family, the Feeley's decided they needed to do something with their growing brood. Since Sandy is from Culbertson, they decided to move "up north". Feeley contacted Olson, who was getting a good start in his business. "I never looked back," Feeley said. "I had respect for John and him for me, then the same with Karen and Randy. We had a mutual admiration society," he laughed. "And I got to live in the best area in the world and raise my kids there."

"We had a lot of fun as the business was growing," Feeley said. "I worked with wonderful people over the years." Those people included Eugene Gagner who was deaf, could not speak and worked for 35 years for John. "He lived in Fairview and his wife Opal was also hearing impaired. They had 2 daughters. He was just an interesting fellow for a young person like me." Another was Jo Maltese who was the office manager at the time. "She was just so fun to work with. She had a zinger every day." Skee Berndt, who formed a strong loyalty with Olson, was always interesting to work with. "John



Tim and Sandy Feeley with their granddaughter Devin Feeley.

has the ability to hire people who are able to make things work. He puts his teaching background to good use - people such as Tracy Hagen and Lance Averett and many, many more. He finds talent and is able to instill a sense of loyalty so they stay. It's amazing to me."

Feeley loved living in Sidney and being involved in the community. "The community and education in a small town are important, and we were involved in all of them," he said. Feeley would have stayed in Sidney (and might still be working at Blue Rock) but his son in Billings developed health issues and they made the decision to retire and move there to be closer - plus the bonus of seeing grandchildren grow up. "I've gone through a lot of soul searching since retirement and I know we made the right decision," he said. "It's the people in the business that I miss the most, Lance, Tracy, Les Pierce. You can't just shut that off. We are doing well in retirement. We're not regretting the move, but it certainly is a change."

Feeley has such admiration for the Olson family. "It's difficult to be in business right now. It's challenging and they are handling it really well. The transfer from generation to generation is succeeding. That's a real tribute to John and his legacy."

## Fairview News, 1945

Cpl. C.O. Johnson is expected to arrive in Fairview this weekend from Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where he has been discharged from the army after two years and seven months of service.

"Brub" as he is known by most Fairview people began his hitch in the army at Camp Beale, California. After the initial phases of army training he was transferred to ASTP and was given special courses at the university in Salt Lake City, Utah. Later, Corporal Johnson was placed in the artillery and subsequently trained at Little Rock, Arkansas, and Camp Gordon, Georgia. Prior to discharge he has been sta-

tioned at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, as a radar technician in the artillery.

Corporal Johnson is a son of Mr. and Mrs. J.C. Johnson of Fairview. His wife, June and small son Brent have remained in Fairview during most of the war. Upon returning here, "Brub" will immediately take over the active management of the Blue Rock Products Company from which work he left to enter the service. During the war "J.C." drafted himself for this responsibility but is now looking forward to an extended furlough from the company which he has guided since before the first world war.

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# Lois Frank

By Dianne Swanson

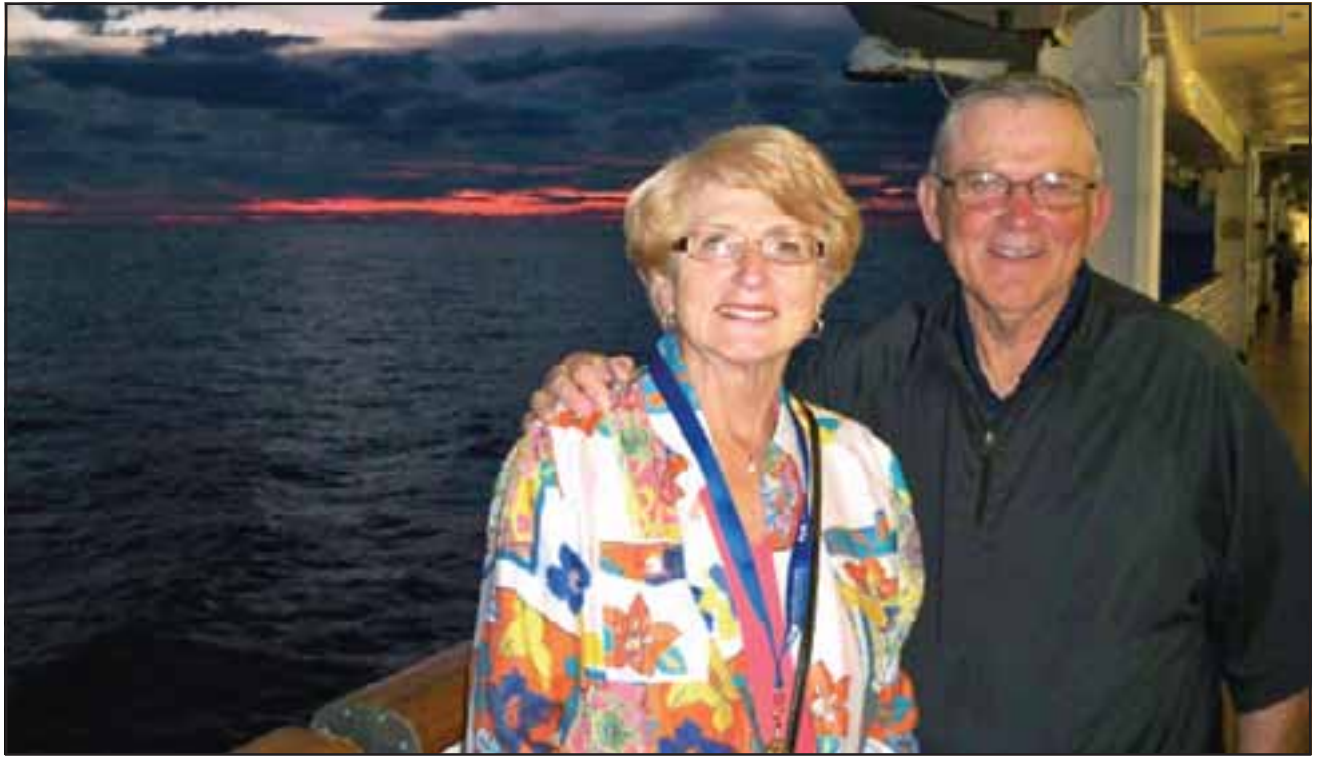
Lois Frank came to Sidney in 1963 from Ennis, MT to join her fiancé Bob who was teaching school. She worked at Sidney National Bank which was located where the Cheerio is now. "There were no computers back then," she laughed.

She then joined Blue Rock as an administrative assistant and stayed for 20 years, retiring in 2004. "Each gal in the office is responsible for the book work for each plant," she explained. Frank took care of Sidney Blue Rock Products (pop), then Blue Rock Beverages (beer) and finally the Miles City branch which included wine sales.

When she started, Blue Rock was on the old computer system with Sidney Data Processing. The route salesmen brought back hand written slips which all had to be keyed in. Inventory was closely monitored as well with all incoming and outgoing being accounted for. And everything had to balance. The new in house computer system, which includes hand helds for the salesmen, is much more efficient. "Tracy Hagen was our main boss and she would have us go on the truck so we knew what they did," Frank said. "It was a learning curve but it's much more user friendly." She was responsible for reports to the beverage companies such as Pepsi cola, and the breweries. She also had contact with a lot of great customers over the years.

In her 20 years with Blue Rock, Frank worked mainly with only 4 ladies: Jill Hill, Loretta Berry, Lynette Herman and later, Jackie Elmore. "We got along so well, it made it fun to go to work," she said. She was trained by Jo Maltese. The ladies made an annual weekend trek to Regina for fun and to reinforce the personal aspect of their relationship. They had a ball every time. It was an unwritten rule that if someone was gone for a day, or a vacation, they had to bring treats the first day back. "We always had lots of treats," she said. There was a piggy bank next to the treats and each lady paid .25 whenever they took a treat. The treat money then became gas money for the trip to Canada. "It was a great group. We worked hard and we really enjoyed each other." Loretta Berry now works part time at John Stockhill Jewelers with Lois. They enjoy each other as much now as ever. "Loretta was the receptionist. She was great on the phone and had a way with people."

When Frank started with Blue Rock, they sold beer and pop. The purchase of the Miles City branch brought in wine. Now there are what Frank calls the "new age" drinks – waters, energy drinks, etc. "There are way more now. It's a re-



Lois and Bob Frank on one of their excursions. (Lois was an Administrative Assistant)

volving industry, trying to serve the public's wants. The office staff has a huge responsibility and it's very busy."

"John was wonderful to work for," Frank enthused. "He treats his help very well. We needed to respect him and the product we sold. I was always conscious of the product no matter where I was." Blue Rock offers a great retirement plan. In a group, Frank would always say "Have a Pepsi, you're helping my retirement plan!" "At state PEO functions, I would make sure they were drinking Pepsi. I'd just tell them they were helping my retirement fund," she laughed. "When Karen and Randy came on board, I couldn't ask for anyone better," she said. "There's not many family owned businesses like this that deal with a national product. It's a great aspect of the company."

Blue Rock also awards scholarships to employees' children. "Over the years, between Jay, Kelly and Jeff, it totaled about \$25,000 in scholarships for my kids," she said. Applicants need to apply and be enrolled in an accredited institution. Employees at all 5 centers are eligible. "Last year, with all the employees coming and going, there was only 1 schol-

arship given," Frank said sadly. She feels that young people need to be aware of the benefits of working for a company like Blue Rock. "They think the grass is always greener. But the stability, insurance, retirement and scholarships add up to a lot more than the higher bucks," she said.

As evidenced by many long time employees and retirees, Blue Rock is a company that offers promotion within. "They're very good about hiring high school students. They start out loading trucks and that can work into more," Frank explained. "They learn the business in the back and move up."

Blue Rock always hosts wonderful Christmas parties and as a retiree, Frank is still invited every year. The company also hosts a golf tournament every fall in Sidney. All branches are invited to enjoy golf, a great meal and prizes. "It's wonderful camaraderie, and a great way to get to know the people in the other branches," Frank said.

Frank thoroughly enjoyed her career with Blue Rock but is now is very active in retirement and credits Blue Rock's retirement plan with helping her enjoy it.

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# Jill Hill

By Dianne Swanson

Jill Hill knew when she walked in the door that Blue Rock was where she wanted to work. "It was the feeling and the people," she said. That was over 20 years ago, after Hill moved to Sidney from Billings. She started as an office bookkeeper and administrative assistant to John Olson. In January of 2011, she was promoted to Controller for the company.

"It's been a great ride," she said. "I've been treated so wonderfully. It's like a big family. To be part of this team is fantastic, especially to see the growth and change." Hill loves what technology has brought to the business and her job. "When I started here we didn't have hand-helds for the salesmen, all the entries were completed by the office staff. It used to take a week to close the end of the month, now it's done in a day. There were no fax machines or internet. Technology has made a huge difference, definitely for the better."



Jill Hill, Controller

Before her employment at Blue Rock, Hill worked for D.A. Davidson in Billings where she met O.C. Johnson, Marilyn Olson's father. "He was the sweetest man and we would always chat when he come in the office to check stock prices. I did not make the connection after I started at Blue Rock, but one day when Mr. Johnson came in to visit John, we both looked at each other and asked, "What are you doing here?" "It really is a small world," she said.

Hill appreciates the fact that Blue Rock supports the activities their employees are involved in. "They're very supportive of the Northeastern Arts Network and many other non-profits. She also loves sampling the new products Blue Rock has to offer!"

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## How Blue Rock Got its Name

One of the most interesting stories about John Olson's soft drink, beer, wine and juice distributorships is the story of how the company got its name – Blue Rock.

Company founder J.C. Johnson was often asked where Blue Rock got the water for its bottling operations because in the 1920s there was no city water in Fairview, where the company was then located.

In response to people's questions of where he got water for bottling, J.C. Johnson would respond "Why you scalawag, haven't you ever heard of the famous Blue Rock Springs northwest of Fairview?"

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# Attitude, Leadership Keys To Success

Karen Olson Beenken, Executive Vice President of Blue Rock, delivered the key note address to the 2013 Leadership Class at their graduation in April.

As a former graduate who also was Sidney Chamber President, Karen praised the efforts of the program and encouraged the graduates to get out and make a difference in the community.

Karen also gave a brief history of Blue Rock Companies and spoke of some of the keys to their success. Following is an edited version of her address that day.

How does a company get to be 100 years old?  
Corporate identity through management of culture; protect core strength by maintaining tradition and continuous improvement and innovation; strong relationships with business partners, customers and suppliers; make investments in people especially when it comes to leadership succession and form strong relationships with the local community.

Some trivia facts about us are:  
We are 1 of 57 independent bottlers left in the country. My dad, John Olson, was the youngest president of the Pepsi-Cola Bottler's Association and was instrumental in getting laws passed through President Jimmy Carter that would protect the independent franchise system. And I've always thought that was a pretty good proof of how a Republican and a Democrat can work together. We're proud of the fact that Sidney, Montana was one of two test markets in the country back in 1984 for a product called Diet Mountain Dew. Because of the success we experienced here in Sidney, the Pepsi-Cola company decided to roll out nationally. Today it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> best selling diet soft drink on the market. My brother, Randy, had the idea a couple of years ago of celebrating the oil industry and our area by developing a beer that would reflect those two things. The beer had to be dark and had to be Bakken. With the help of Bayern Brewing they were able to develop Bakken Bock and it has been a wildly successful beer that helps capture the spirit of our area.

So we're talking about leadership today. My leadership mentor has always been my dad, John Olson. He has a tendency to talk in bumper sticker; and I do too. I've grown to love some of his one-liners over the years, and I'd like to share a few of them with you, because it helps give a look at some core leadership values we have in our business. 5 key sayings of his are at the root of who we are.

- 1) A fish stinks from the head first.
- 2) Nothing ever happens without people and people are our greatest assets.

We've been the number one Pepsi bottler in the nation for two years in a row. We've received the President's Award from the Miller Coors company for our business growth and customer service. That kind of recognition is nice and all but none of those opportunities would exist if it weren't for the people we work with and the communities we serve. It's important to us to develop our employees professionally. We've

enrolled 11 people in this program over the years. Our company is passionate about supporting a lot of things, but some key areas are our youth, healthcare and education. My dad had the foresight years ago to recognize the importance of a quality education and developed a scholarship program for our company.

- 3) If you owe a nickel, you pay it.
- 4) Surround yourself with people who are smarter than you are. What I love about this statement is that you embrace people's strengths and talents and encourage them. Don't be intimidated by them.

5) If you derive a profit from a community, do business in a community, you have a moral obligation to give something back financially, and with your time and talents.

Blue Rock Products has produced 5 chamber presidents and we support over 500 nonprofit organizations. Celebrating our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a fun time, but we wanted it to mean something. We are partnering with the Department of Health and Human Services to combat cell phone use while driving. We are providing texting rings to people, particularly youth, to remind them not to text while driving. And we always promote drinking responsibly.

We are passionate about our business and about the communities we serve. We love doing business in Eastern Montana and Western North Dakota. People are hard-working, go getters who want to make this place better for future generations. We can't lose sight of that as leaders in this community.

That brings me to looking ahead as a community, certainly as a business. What is the future going to bring?

I'm taken aback every now and then when I hear people get caught up in negativity. My dad used to say negativity breeds negativity. Or as the more common saying goes, misery loves company. We have to be very careful as leaders in our community to balance this. I have no problem if someone wants to be negative but has a positive solution for whatever problem they're complaining about. The easiest solution is to quit. That will always be the easiest way out of any tough situation. But as leaders in this community we can't quit. We have to embrace the change that's around us without losing sight of the traditions that have made our community such a great place to live. Regardless of what you think of Jack Welch, I do love one of his quotes on leadership. "Leaders are people who think and talk about solutions, Followers are people who think and talk about problems." Isn't that true? How many times do you go to a meeting of whatever sort and you hear an Eeyore in the room who is complaining about what isn't. The easy thing to do is to join Eeyore and say, Oh yeah, it's really bad. The more challenging step is to say, "Wait a minute, Eeyore, the good thing in this is..."

I challenge all of us as leaders in the community to make a positive difference. To be examples for our children in making this a place to want to live not a place you want to leave.

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It is up to all of us to have a vision and to represent positively what possibilities there are. The easiest thing to do in life is to quit. The easiest thing to do is give in to negativity. I'd like to see us challenge each other in possibilities and solutions

rather than pointing our problems. Our company would like to thank you for 100 years of the privilege of serving this community. Thank you.



Above: Karen Olson Beenken, Executive Vice President



Left: Eric Beenken, General Manager

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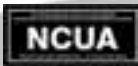

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## Connie Tabbert

By Dianne Swanson

Connie Tabbert of Fairview joined Blue Rock August 18, 1981. "There were four of us. We worked in the warehouse, sorted bottles and helped with the bottling," she explained. She worked part-time at Blue Rock until 1993. After moving

full-time into the production department, Connie currently makes syrup, runs the RO system and other tasks as needed. "I like the people," she said of her years at Blue Rock. "Especially the ones who have been here as long as I have." Connie is justifiably proud of the recognition the plant received in 1994 with the #1 Production Award in the U.S.



Production Dept: Connie Tabbert, Aram Garcia, Ken Swenson and Larry Larson

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# Mark Hauge

By Dianne Swanson

Mark Hauge began his career with Blue Rock in 1981 in Williston loading trucks and then becoming a service tech. Blue Rock had purchased Wildwood Beverage in Plentywood in the early 1970s. "In 1982, John and Tim (Feeley) asked me to relocate there. They had a new manager and needed a dedicated service guy." Wildwood was an old established soft drink manufacturer and distributor. The building was old and decrepit, but nine or ten months after Hauge's move there, Blue Rock built a new facility. The move came near the end of that oil boom. "It was tough to find a place. I lived in a fifth-wheel and finally rented a house." Hauge spent 1 1/2 to 2 years in Plentywood, then moved to Glasgow for about six months. In 1985, he moved back to Williston for six years. Along with being service tech, he filled in on the routes. "Everyone is sales staff."

Hauge moved to Sidney in 1991. He found a place to stay and went to work. He was promoted to his current position of Facility and Equipment Manager. He has been temporarily responsible for forecasting the production needs and purchasing product for all the Sales centers, but is in transition with training staff for the position. "There's lots of number crunching," he said. With all the seasonal changes, it



Mark Hauge, Facilities and Equipment Manager



takes about a year to get a handle on product needs and determine forecasts for different events. "You get an intuitive feel for things. A lot of it is common sense."

There are many more packages than 30 years ago. "Just look in a convenience store cooler. The packages change. The only constant in the Beverage industry is change. If we don't try something, we won't know if it sells. The tastes of consumers are different than they were 2 or even 5 years ago. The influx of people from around the country has changed the product needs as well. There are different tastes around the country. It's a challenge. That makes it exciting." Working with all the people at Blue Rock is also exciting and rewarding. "Challenging, yet rewarding," he said.

Hauge said his first day of work, he was sweeping the floor. "Today, I was sweeping the floor. Things change and things stay the same."

Judd Nathe, Inventory Analyst



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The sale of soft drinks has increased tremendously all over the world in recent years and the reason for it is that when properly made and properly handled, these products are unexcelled for flavor and for their thirst quenching qualities. No outing is complete without its carton of

soft drinks and no refrigerator is fully stocked unless it contains Pepsi-Cola, Orange Crush, Hires Root Beer and Blue Rock flavors.

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The Pepsi-Cola Bottling Co. makes regular deliveries to the retailers of this part of the country, so when you make out your shopping list make sure that you include Pepsi-Cola, Orange Crush, Hires Root Beer and one or more of the famous Blue Rock flavors.

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# The Roundup



Above: Kevin Schmitz - Route Salesperson  
(32 years with Blue Rock)

Left: Lonnie Swigart - Area Marketing Manager

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