



***“Quality Service, Quality People”***

# Lowe Mechanical Services Ltd.

## 30 years young and growing with the times

BY GLORIA TAYLOR

**S**tarted in 1977 as a home-based family business, Winnipeg's Lowe Mechanical Services Ltd. grew quickly to where it now provides heating, ventilating, air conditioning and refrigeration services to some of Canada's leading companies. These include two of northern Canada's largest store and service chains: The North West Company and Arctic Co-operatives Ltd.

The company celebrates 30 successful years of business this year with even more plans for expansion. A new plumbing division and new energy management services promise to take the company to a whole new level.

Given today's well-publicized labour shortages, Jennifer Lowe, the company's vice president of two years, is also aiming to make Lowe Mechanical "the employer of choice" in the industry. She is well on her way, given the many long-term employees supporting her.

### Brisk start

Murray Lowe, Jennifer's father, was an experienced refrigeration mechanic when he lost his job with a Winnipeg air conditioning firm. He looked forward to starting his own business. Jan Lowe took over the office duties, and the pair immersed themselves in the daily routine of running their new enterprise.

Right from the start, business was

brisk. Jan admits to a bit of nervousness, but Murray was excited by the prospects of a good marketplace and worked very hard. "In the beginning, he called upon small mom and pop grocery stores and other small commercial and residential customers," says Jan, Jennifer's mother.

"Being the only technical person, he was on call 24-7. It didn't matter if it was Christmas Eve or the middle of a dinner party, or 2 o'clock in the morning. If somebody called, he had to be there," recalls Jan. The company focused on providing refrigeration and HVAC services to the commercial sector and delivered the kind of service that had customers calling back.

"Our business grew rapidly by word



The Lowe Mechanical Services team (from left): Jennifer Lowe, vice president; Pierre Ducharme, service manager; John Warnica, general manager; Rick Cycon, project manager and Jan Lowe, owner.

## A new plumbing division, new energy management services and plans for a brand new electrical services division promise to take the company to a whole new level.

of mouth,” she says. “People in different industries talk to each other and support each other. We got a lot of calls that way.”

Three years of rapid growth and the firm was ready to buy the company that had laid Murray off. Whereas juggling life and business concerns had been challenging before, the stress went into overdrive once the company acquired McConnell Air Conditioning.

“The temperature went to 100 degrees Fahrenheit that April, and it was probably one of the more trying times, because we now had an extensive customer list and we needed several additional employees to handle that work,” says Jan. The good news was that business thrived.

Although they struggled to keep pace, Jan says those were also exciting days. “We may have struggled but not realizing we were struggling,” she says. Clients came and stayed, to where today some of the firms have been with Lowe Mechanical for 30 years. Examples are the Bank of Montreal, ADP Systems, a computer payroll company, and Denny’s Meats. “ADP Systems and Denny’s always argue over who was first,” says Jan with a smile.

The company attracted larger commercial and industrial clients, and today, 30 busy years later, Lowe Mechanical services a variety of customers from Gourmet Bakers to Assiniboia Downs, Winnipeg’s race track and entertainment centre. Their present customers include Manitoba Hydro, all levels of government, the Bank of Montreal, Canada Safeway, Manitoba Public Insurance, Canadian Blood Services, Red River College and several of Winnipeg’s largest property management companies.

### Services explode

Predictably, the list of services has also exploded, accounting for the fact the company changed its name from Lowe Refrigeration Services Ltd. (at inception) to today’s Lowe Mechanical Services Ltd. The name better reflects the company’s comprehensive services in its core areas of heating, ventilating,

air conditioning and refrigeration.

Its areas of expertise include energy management, air quality systems, boilers, computer room systems, chillers, design build, exhaust systems, gas fitting, gas/vapour detection, heat reclamation, make-up air units, mechanical packages, remote computerized monitoring, rooftop equipment, self-contained reach-ins, walk-in coolers and freezers, and store engineering and design.

The range of services is second to none. One example is the company’s design build service. Although the term is generally associated with the construction industry, Lowe Mechanical can design and build a company’s entire heating and cooling system. It can also design and install a complete refrigeration system, which it refers to simply as store planning.

“We can also modify equipment to make it more reliable and diagnose and repair problems through the Internet,”

says Rick Cycon, a 30-year veteran refrigeration technician and Project Manager.

Today, the company has over 55 employees with specialized and complementary skills. They include four project managers, sales staff, service manager, an office support team and 40 service technicians, both apprentices and journeymen.

Lowe Mechanical has also provided its support to promising apprentices, often with excellent results. Sean Anderson is a refrigeration technician who got his professional credentials working with the company. Anderson started as a helper, then five years later was named Journeyman of the Year in his graduating class for his high marks and technical ability, says Lowe with satisfaction.

### Northern challenges

If there is one working relationship that exemplifies Lowe Mechanical’s ability to handle challenges and adapt to special circumstances, it would be

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 congratulations to  
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 success and good fortune!

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the company's decades-long ties with its two northern chains.

The North West Company has stores in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut and provides everything from food to cheque cashing services. Arctic Co-operatives Ltd. meanwhile is a federation formed from about 30 independently-owned member co-operatives in the same northern regions. Member co-ops operate a wide variety of businesses from food stores to hotels.

While different in structure, the two organizations share many of the same challenges that add up to the high cost of doing business in the north.

Goods must be trucked to the communities over winter roads, cleared over frozen lakes, or sent by barge when the routes permit. The cost of energy is about 10 times what Manitobans pay in the south. Transportation and shipping can add extensive costs to providing goods and services to remote northern communities, says Bruce Lindsay, Lowe Mechanical's Purchasing and Traffic Co-ordinator,

Lowe Mechanical has developed special skills in planning and logistics in maintaining, repairing and sourcing the most suitable refrigeration and HVAC equipment for northern clients.

Lindsay says planning is critical given that winter roads are only open for months and travel by barge is also restricted by time and geography.

One way Lowe Mechanical has adapted is by purchasing equipment such as refrigeration units from top manufacturers such as Kysor//Warren, says General Manager John Warnica. "The company manufactures leading quality and heavy duty equipment built to withstand all kinds of conditions and provides excellent support," says Warnica. Kysor//Warren is also working through Lowe Mechanical with northern clients to develop the best products for their special needs.

Another key is the specialized skills of staff. "For the northern work, because we've worked with The North West Company for over 20 years, we've developed our mechanics and our company to support them," adds Warnica. "Our mechanics have to be trained to be very adaptive. They could be up there with a service issue and may not have all the parts available, so


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the guys have to be very adaptive and innovative.”

**Two new services**

By the 1990s, Lowe Mechanical was already involved in all areas of heating, ventilating, air conditioning and refrigeration, but it recently added two exciting and promising new areas: plumbing and energy management.

“All of our customers have plumbing requirements, and if we can provide more one-stop shopping, one number to call, it will provide the full service customers require and expect,” says Lowe.

The energy management services promise to be a big part of the company’s future given the critical need for all organizations to lower their energy

costs. Lowe Mechanical can help new and existing customers design a comprehensive, company-wide energy-reduction strategy that involves everything from lighting to upgrading refrigeration equipment and HVAC equipment.

**Energy management entrepreneurs**

Lowe Mechanical has long been a participant in the energy management field. The family based company is integrating basic HVAC service activities with new energy management initiatives.

The mystery of energy management in commercial buildings is comparatively easy when a service company such as Lowe has the detailed understanding and site history of heating, cooling, and elec-



Bob Steel, dispatcher at Lowe Mechanical Services.

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The Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) has presented Lowe Mechanical with the Pinnacle Award Certificate of Merit for good customer service.

trical systems, says a company statement.

“The approach to energy management is simplicity itself. The goal is to eliminate complicated and proprietary control systems, to keep energy management controls visible and serviceable to maintenance staff, and to provide the ability to monitor and communicate with HVAC systems.”

Lowe has not forgotten the key to energy management work is to enhance the environment for building occupants, and at the same time achieve cost savings.

An energy management system can begin with several low cost controllers for basic temperature and fresh air functions, and then expand as the energy management features are proven successful. A key ingredient to the company’s systems are the use of “industry

standard” measurement and communication devices and the ability to remotely communicate via telephone or Internet.

“Lowe recognizes the value of long term customer relationships and is in energy management for the long term,” according to the company. It is a participant in Power Smart Programs and as a result, project pay back periods can often be reduced to one or two years with Manitoba Hydro incentives.

**Energy management services**

Lowe Mechanical’s new energy management services will soon begin to pay dividends for Assiniboia Downs, Winnipeg’s racetrack and entertainment venue. The track had reached the end of its lifespan with its current boiler heating system and contracted with Lowe Mechanical and Manitoba Hydro, part-



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ner in the project, to upgrade its heating and hot water systems.

The \$100,000 project, phase one of a potential three phases, is to include putting in new high efficiency gas water heaters and furnaces. In its preliminary stages this fall, the project has the potential to reduce energy use by as much as 30 per cent.

“In our peak electrical demand, the system would convert back to gas rather than electric heat,” says Russ Passey, director of property services for the track.

Having Manitoba Hydro on board made sense given Hydro’s raft of Power Smart programs, financial incentives that help business and residential customers save on energy and costs. The Downs was able to get some financial help for its project.

Lowe Mechanical came up with an innovative and creative solution for The North West Company. It developed the Arctic Machine house, a prefabricated refrigeration unit complete with compressor that was placed outside, rather than inside, the stores. The Arctic Machine house contained all the pre-assembled refrigeration equipment that the store required for its cooling needs.

The energy-reduction goal was the same but the task quite different this summer when Lowe Mechanical worked with Arctic Co-op. The occasion was a pilot project at one of the chain’s northern stores.

Jim Huggard, Division Manager, Merchandising for Arctic Co-op, describes the project as an exercise aimed at improving the quality of the power that the store receives and assessing and recommending equipment that is efficient and easy to maintain and repair. “Savings could amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars,” says Huggard.

**Recognition**

Over the years, the company’s skills have been recognized by more than grateful customers. The Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA) has presented Lowe Mechanical with the Pinnacle Award Certificate of Merit for good customer service.

Following Manitoba’s Flood of the Century in 1997, Jan Lowe was named Entrepreneur of the Year by the



Lowe Mechanical Services has developed a compact rack with the same features as a standard refrigeration rack (for cooling) but this rack fits into small spaces such as a ceiling cavity above walk-in coolers or freezers.

Women Business Owners of Manitoba for her professional and personal volunteer work.

Lowe is a former president of the Refrigeration and Air Conditioning Contractors’ Association of Manitoba and has worked with various organizations including both business and community groups and a holding facility for men charged with court offences, where she taught reading.


During the famous Manitoba flood, Jan and Jennifer Lowe set up an emergency dog shelter when residents were hard pressed to find accommodations

for their dogs. “The city was under siege,” Jan recalls, adding they cared for 30 dogs in the company’s parking lot for almost two months.

**Family led**

With Jennifer Lowe, the second generation of the family at the helm, the company is poised for even more growth. With energy concerns at the forefront of many companies today, Lowe is convinced the firm’s energy management services can only continue to grow along with the other new services.

The vice president, who started working in the family business at the age of 13, is proud of the company’s two-year-old profit sharing plan, which dovetails nicely with her goal of creating “the employer of choice” in an age of universal labour shortages. “We think it’s a pretty unique idea in our industry,” she says.

She looks forward to the growth of the plumbing division and the company’s energy management services to further enhance the company’s comprehensive services. 

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