

Propane to Water: Boonie's Water Conditioning from the Ground Up

James Boone started a propane business in 1957 and needed something in the summer season to keep his staff busy. In 1963, he was introduced to tank exchange water softening, then purchased and installed a regeneration plant and tanks. The cost was over \$30,000, a significant investment in the early 60s, and he had no customers. Boone (Boonie—thus the name, Boonie's Water Conditioning) left the propane business in the early 80s, continuing as a water treatment company only.

Boonie's son Joe (CWS-V) started working in both water and propane at age 15 and continued (off and on) until he was 22. He made life decisions that took him away from the family business, including marriage, children and pursuit of

By Denise M. Roberts

Boonie's Water Conditioning

412 E 2nd Street
Madison IN 47250
Tel: (812) 265-3493
www.boonieswater.com and
bwcindustrial.com
joe@boonieswater.com
Employees: Seven full-time,
two part-time
Vehicles: Eight

was able to use my engineering background to work in heavy industry, specifically steel and aluminum." The large commercial and industrial side of the business is now known as BWC, Inc.

"We live in a very hard-water area here in southeastern Indiana," Boone noted. "We do business in three states but to be fair it's all within a 100-mile radius. Our residential clients are mostly within 30 miles. This area is fairly rural and we have to travel to make a living. One-third of my business is salt distribution and bottled water, one third is residential and one third is commercial/industrial. The smallest softening system we service will fit under the kitchen sink and the largest provides a maximum flowrate of 2,400 gpm (they are all the same, just bigger).

Which is better? A smart guy told me once: "The industrial market is like a good-looking woman in a red convertible, sexy but hard to catch. Day in and day out, it's the residential that pays the bills."

To meet the demands of his customers, both large and small, Boone has several valued and long-term employees. Al DeVore (almost 30 years) handles residential and light commercial. Shawn Copeland (15 years) is responsible for heavy commercial/industrial. Nicole Jackson (10 years) is the Office Manager. Dennis Niese (12 years) is responsible for industrial/commercial sales. Scott Lutes (eight years) is Route Manager for salt/water. And finally, Susie Auxier has handled residential sales for more than eight years. "We handle a wide variety of problems.



Photos courtesy of Laura J Gardner Photography

higher education. Boone holds a Bachelor's Degree in business from Mary College (Bismarck, ND) as well as a Bachelor's Degree in mechanical engineering from Montana State University (Bozeman MT), went through ROTC and was commissioned in the US Army. He served 10 years in the army reserve and resigned his commission with the rank of Captain. Boone and his wife Nadja have been married for 35 years and have three boys.

While working as a project engineer for Caterpillar Inc. in the summer of 1994, Boone had the opportunity to take over the business. "I didn't want to look myself in the mirror years later and think I didn't have the courage to try it on my own," Boone said. "I quit my job, packed up my wife and three boys and moved back to southeastern Indiana. My starting salary was \$200 a week—quite a change. I came in the front door and my dad went out the back; he was tired of it. We incorporated in 1998. My official title is President but like all other small business people, I do whatever needs to be done. I'm the only family member working in the business and have been since I returned. Looking back, it was the best decision I ever made. We grew, opened new markets and took on new products. I



On the residential side, it is primarily hard water. There is city water almost everywhere. You can drive up some road where a goat couldn't go and find a house trailer and city water. That being said, the water is extremely hard: in the 20- to 30-grain range. On the industrial side, we service/sell RO, DI, UV, filtration, custom controls, softeners and dealkalizers, etc., standard products. We distribute Hague residential products and have for 35 years. They are great people and like us, are family owned. Our bottled water is RO and private labeled. We also started coffee as a sideline and have enjoyed learning the industry. We're not getting rich but it gives us another reason to stop in and say hello (translation: canvas for business.) For the larger commercial/industrial side of the business, we use Ecowater Industrial, Lakeside and Watts and we get great support. We are also a Cargill Salt distributor."

Maintaining top-level service requires knowledge and training. As a result, all of the technical staff is or has been WQA certified. "We try to use vendor training when available," said Boone, "but it seems like that has dropped off substantially since 2008, which I think is a mistake. The Internet has certainly been a game changer, education-wise. I would like to see the WQA put more training on audio. I travel a lot and would use them. I've had some WQA audio materials that are good and some that are not. We are ISNetWorld-certified, which is a national safety program. We do safety training regularly."

Boone outlined some of the problems and opportunities the company has encountered. "I think the worst situations are your best opportunities," he said. "Those are the chances you have to help somebody. Unusual problems add value to your company and have good profit potential. Most of our toughest situations have been engineering applications on the industrial side. Our residential is pretty straightforward. Market changes after 2008 have been the biggest challenge. It seems we're working harder for less margins and a lot less fun. I believe the government is going out of its way to ensure those of us working a small business have as many roadblocks as possible. For example, healthcare cost has doubled! Also, it's hard to find people that want to work.



Young people go to college, major in nothing or play video games. Our current culture encourages people not to work. They preach if the job doesn't pay \$20/hour, the job isn't worth having. We need to stop that and get young kids (15, 16, 17) in the workforce, learning how to do and appreciate the opportunity to earn a paycheck."

There is always optimism in Boone's world and his future plans are solid. "My five-year plan is first to stay in business (don't laugh, it gets harder and harder.) Second is to add residential sales staff and push out from my small hometown. Our market is growing around us. If we are going to survive we need a presence in communities that are thriving. My ten-year plan is to look for a legacy. Don't know where it

will come from but would like to see my business carry on. My boys haven't really worked much with me; they have their own passions. I think it would take five years to teach someone what I've learned."

Boone continued with his thoughts on how things would work out in the future. "The future of our business is interesting. There is enough technical on the residential side that we've survived the Internet invasion. My dad said: 'One-third of people will do business with someone else, one-third will do nothing and one-third will do business with you. Concentrate on your third and don't worry about the rest.' That's been our philosophy. We still believe in the in-house demo, good service and high-quality products. Price belongs to the big-box stores and the Internet. The industrial side is similar. Our customers have access to as much information as us, via the Internet. Our biggest assets are service and experience. The bottom-line customer whether residential, commercial or industrial, will wear you out! Leave him be and concentrate on people who appreciate what you do. We engineer our industrial projects to completion but the complex jobs seldom go as planned. We stay on task until the customer gets the results for which he pays us. My customers know that and it's why they call. One last note of wisdom from my dad: 'Your customers should become your friends, if not you're doing something wrong.' I believe in that completely and those words are as true now as they were 50 years ago!" ♦

*Reprinted with permission of Water Conditioning & Purification International ©2015.
Any reuse or republication, in part or whole, must be with the written consent of the Publisher.*