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**Bush Construction** on Thursday, Dec. 4.  
*Katelyn Metzger*

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# Where does the labor market go from here?



**MARK GRYWACHESKI**

Economy

Mark Grywacheski is an expert in financial markets and economic analysis and is an investment adviser with Quad-Cities Investment Group, Davenport.

**F**or the past few years, the U.S. labor market has been in a state of gradual decline. In 2023, the U.S. economy added a robust 4.6 million net new jobs. In 2024, the number of new jobs added fell to 4 million. Last year, just 584,000 new jobs were added, or roughly 49,000 per month. This was the lowest monthly average gain since 2020. Last year, the national unemployment rate also jumped from 3.7% in January to 4.4% in December.

Despite the anemic pace of job growth and a rising unemployment rate, it isn't a doom-and-gloom landscape for the labor market. Even at 4.4%, the current unemployment rate is well below the 25-year average of 6.4%. However, a closer look at the data does raise some cautionary flags.

Of the 11 economic sectors tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor, less than half (5 of 11) posted job gains in 2025. The biggest producer of those gains was the Education & Health Services sector, which added 709,000 new

jobs last year. That means the other 10 sectors of the economy produced a combined net loss of 125,000 jobs.

According to consulting firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas, employers announced more than 1.2 million job cuts in 2025. That was 58% higher than 2024 and the highest number of reported cuts since 2020 (2.3 million).

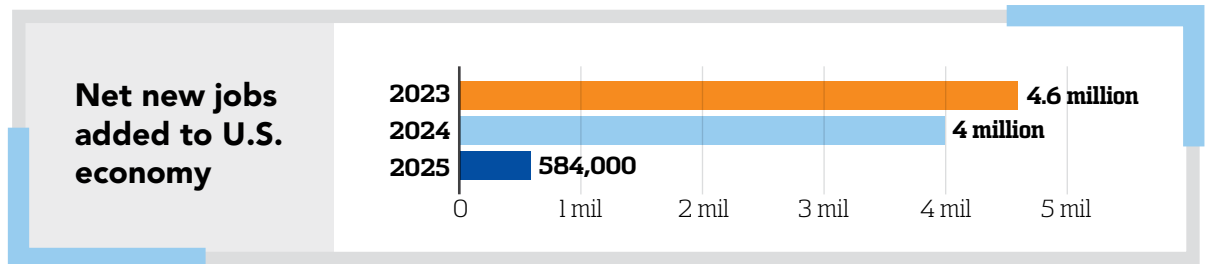
The sector with the most job cuts last year was Government. In 2025, government agencies announced 308,167 job cuts, primarily at the federal level. This represents more than 25% of all job cuts reported last year. At the start of his second term, President Donald Trump quickly established the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE. Its primary task was to reduce the size of the federal government while addressing waste, fraud and inefficiencies within federal government operations.

Likewise, employers also cut back on their hiring. Last year, employers announced just 507,647 planned

hires. This was down 34% from the 769,953 reported in 2024 and is the lowest annual total since 2010.

It's understandable that employers have expressed both uncertainty and anxiety over the state of their workforce. They currently face rising labor costs, high interest rates, global trade and tariff disputes and the evolving transition toward AI, among many others. But what's the forecast for the labor market in 2026?

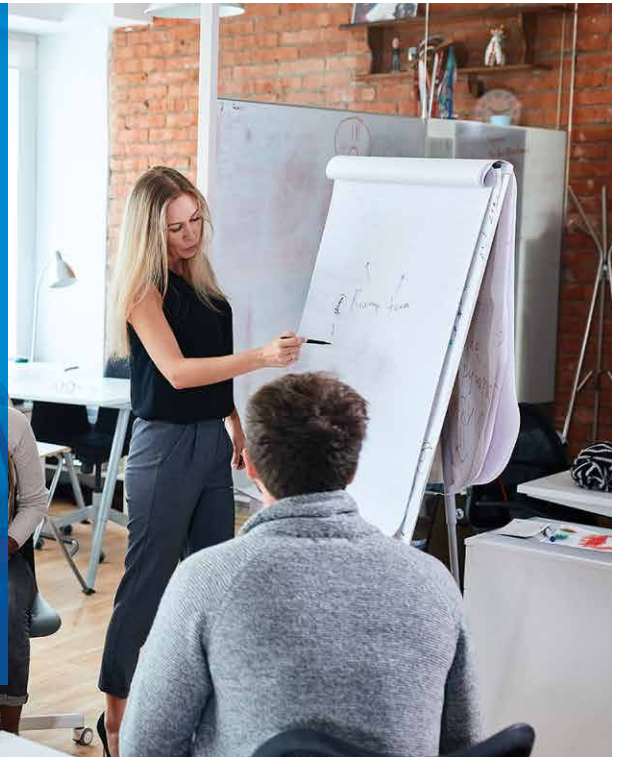
At his press conference on Wednesday, Jan. 28, Fed Chair Jerome Powell provided a more upbeat tone on the labor market than some of his previous comments. Powell admits job gains have remained slow but suggests the labor market should show signs of "stabilizing". This is due, in large part, on the back of an economy he described as "expanding at a solid pace." This year, the Federal Reserve sees the unemployment rate remaining steady at 4.4% before gradually falling to 4.2% in 2027. For now, at least, the Fed believes the worst is behind us.



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**Joseph T. McCarthy**  
2<sup>nd</sup> Generation



**John L. "Jack" Bush**  
3<sup>rd</sup> Generation



**Gregory J. Bush**  
4<sup>th</sup> Generation



**Michael J. Bush**  
5<sup>th</sup> Generation

## *The Legacy Continues*

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Congratulations to **Greg Bush** on a remarkable career and his transition to **Chairman of the Board**, and to **Mike Bush** as he steps into the role of **Chief Executive Officer**.

# When rules overtake results

**M**ost organizations love policies. They make us feel organized, controlled, protected. A neat little rule for every possible scenario. A safety net for when things go wrong. Nothing says “we’re serious about this” like a brand-new procedure wrapped in a 12-step flowchart. But every policy you create is a policy you must police. And policing policies is work — often far more work than the thing the policy was trying to prevent.

Organizations rarely think about this. We focus on risk reduction, compliance, and consistency, but we ignore the operational drag that comes with maintaining a universe of rules. Suddenly, managers are spending more time checking boxes than making progress. Employees navigate a maze of constraints instead of solving problems. And leaders mistake oversight for impact.

## THE HIDDEN COST OF “PROTECTION”

We default to more rules for a few common reasons. Maybe we fear inconsistency and think rules guarantee fairness. Maybe a single incident — one bad hire, one data leak, one customer complaint — prompts a wave of precaution. Maybe we crave the illusion of control — a policy feels like action. But those justifications obscure our real motive. A lack of trust. The less we trust people’s judgment, the more rules we build. And the more rules we build, the more we effectively shy away from real leadership.

Because rules don’t just sit on paper. They shape daily behavior. With each new policy are more approvals, more monitoring and

more administrative burden. Those become the tasks that take up time. Not solving real problems, not serving customers, and not building value. Instead, employees find themselves navigating a maze of constraints — and creativity, autonomy, and responsiveness get smothered in the process.

## WHEN POLICIES BECOME THE PROBLEM

Those companies trying to be ‘safe’ through extensive policy making ends up slow, bureaucratic, reactive. Ideas that could move the business forward get lost beneath compliance-check boxes. True accountability, ownership, initiative and judgment becomes a rarity. Teams shift into ‘just tell me what the policy says’ mode.

And that’s not some dystopian fantasy. It’s the everyday reality of too many organizations.

## WHAT TO DO INSTEAD

This isn’t an argument for zero policies. Some structure is necessary to create a baseline of values, safety, and boundaries. But before drafting “just one more rule”, there are four essential questions to ask:

- Is this solving a systemic problem or reacting to a one-off incident?
- Will adding this rule change behavior, or just create another checkbox?
- What will it cost us — in time, attention, mental energy?
- Might there be a simpler, behavioral way to achieve the same goal?

If the cost of enforcing a rule is higher than the cost of the problem itself, you’re not solving anything. You’re just shifting the burden.

And the moment you cross that line — when policies outnumber purpose — leadership becomes about enforcement and risk aversion. Culture is driven by compliance. And when compliance becomes the center of gravity, innovation all but disappears.

## LEANER STRUCTURE, STRONGER CULTURE, BETTER WORK

Leaders who understand this don’t fear ambiguity. Instead, they manage for clarity. They focus on the purpose, not the process. They set expectations around behaviors and values, not ‘rules for every case’. They reward judgment, not box-ticking. And when teams are trusted, empowered and aligned around a bigger purpose and not simply paperwork, great work becomes possible. People start solving real problems and making smarter decisions. The organization can then move forward with speed, agility, and ownership. That’s the difference between compliance and commitment.

Policies and procedures should be tools, not weapons. Used sparingly and thoughtfully, they can protect and guide. Used recklessly, they weigh organizations down. Too many, and you create structure for structure’s sake. You build an internal policing system where every motion becomes a procedure, every decision a review, and every action consumed by oversight.

The best companies aren’t the ones with the most rules. They’re the ones who set a clear direction and give people the freedom to act on it. Not because compliance demands it, but because purpose inspires it.



**ANDREA BELK OLSON**

### Business

Andrea Belk Olson is the CEO of Pragmadik, a strategic change agency, serving multi-billion-dollar companies. She is a 3x published author, contributor to Harvard Business Review, INC magazine, Entrepreneur Magazine, World Economic Forum, a TEDx Speaker, and a SCORE Subject Matter Expert. She is also an instructor/coach for the University of Iowa’s Entrepreneurial programs.

# Building a legacy:

**McCarthy-Bush Corporation** keeps building on five generations of family leadership

**GRETCHEN TESKE**

gteske@qctimes.com

**M**cCarthy Improvement started in Davenport 129 years ago and never stopped. It only grew.

It began in 1897 when 17-year-old Patrick F. McCarthy immigrated to the United States from Ireland. He worked his way up in the construction world and eventually founded the McCarthy Stone Company.

In 1903, the company was incorporated and became the McCarthy Improvement Corporation. The improvements started the following year with the paving of Main Street in Davenport.

By 1915, the company was commissioned to help build Hotel Blackhawk in downtown Davenport, which still stands today. By the 1930s, the company moved into the lock and dam business, and at the end of

the decade, completed the foundation for the Centennial Bridge that still connects Davenport to Rock Island.

The projects for McCarthy never stopped.

Today, the company is on its fourth generation of leadership, with the fifth generation waiting in the wings. Greg Bush is the current CEO of the McCarthy-Bush Corporation, but is ready to turn in his hard hat.

After more than 40 years in business, Greg will hand the reins to his son, Mike Bush, in April. Mike will represent the fifth generation of family ownership.

**JOINING THE FAMILY BUSINESS WASN'T THE PLAN**

For Greg, staying in the family business was never the original plan.

"Previous to this, I was a pilot in the Air Force, and then I started working at Linwood. I was above the ground and below the ground, and never put my feet

on the ground," he said. "I was in the Air Force when my dad acquired control, and he made us all offers we couldn't refuse. So we all ended up here. I have six siblings, five brothers and two brothers-in-law. We all worked together for a long time."

After leaving the Air Force, Greg was stationed at the Linwood Mining and Minerals Corporation in Buffalo, Iowa. The mine was purchased for \$32,000 in 1944, the equivalent of nearly \$600,000 today, when it went up for auction.

"The reason they bought Linwood was it was a quarry then that had gone bankrupt, and all they wanted it for was the construction equipment," Greg said, explaining that because of World War II, it was difficult to buy equipment new.

Ultimately, the McCarthy family started running the quarry and realized it was a profitable revenue stream. The kilns were rebuilt over the next few decades, Greg said and eventually went underground in the late '50s.



After more than 40 years in business, **Greg Bush** will hand the reins to his son, **Mike Bush**, in April. Mike will represent the fifth generation of family ownership.

*Katelyn Metzger*



Linwood Mining and Mineral Corporation mines limestone, calcium carbonate, which is used for making shingles, livestock feed, cement, glass and more. *Katelyn Metzger*

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By the time Greg arrived in 1985, he held a variety of positions in the mine, learning the family business from the ground up — literally.

"My dad made up a title: vice president of development," he said with a chuckle, noting he was the first and last to hold that job title. "It was a case of just learning the business, because I had worked there in the summer a little, but I had to learn."

### **LIMESTONE USES INCLUDE STEEL MANUFACTURING, CALCIUM SUPPLEMENT**

At Linwood, workers do almost everything with the chemical grade limestone that there is to do, Greg said. It gets burned to create calcium oxide, which is used in steel manufacturing and water treatment. They make a finely ground limestone used as a calcium supplement in the agriculture industry and for roofing shingles — one of Linwood's biggest markets, considering roofing shingles are 67% limestone by weight.

Linwood owns about 1,500 acres of mineable land, but so far has mined about 800 acres, all underground.

"You hardly know we're there," he said. "The less you hear of us, the better."

After working in the mine for a while, Greg climbed the ladder all the way to the president's office and ran the mine himself for about seven years. In 1998, he was chosen to become the next CEO of the McCarthy-Bush Corporation.

But, it wasn't really a job he wanted at the start. In fact, coming back to the Quad-Cities was never his plan at all.

"I was going to stay in the Air Force and fly jets," he said. "I loved being in the Air Force. I loved it, so it was a tough decision. It was a 50/50 decision."

At the time, Greg was a father of three and eventually became a father of six. The Quad-Cities was the perfect place to raise his family, he said, and he was able to come to an agreement with his father on a few things, too.

### **BECOMING CEO WAS A SURPRISE**

The company would get an airplane so Greg could pursue his passion, and he still wanted to travel. That was doable, his father said. Still, a chance to become the CEO was never in the cards, Greg insisted. He never knew it was an opportunity at all.

"It was a surprise. The opportunity really didn't exist. I went to the Air Force Academy, and I was planning on a career in the Air Force, but the opportunity came

**"The way I view it, none of us here started this. It was given to us, so it's our responsibility to build on it and then give it to the next generation."**

**– Mike Bush**

while I was actually stationed in England," he said. "And I always say, my dad made me an offer I couldn't refuse, and it's been a great, great decision 41 years later."

In April, Greg is stepping down from his role as CEO to assume the title of president of the overall corporation and chairman of the board. The decision wasn't easy, he said, but he's following a gut feeling that now is the right time.

"It's time to let the next generation have their opportunities to do with the company what they can do, make their own decisions," he said. "It's been a great career, I've loved it. I still enjoy it."

Greg will stay involved with the family business through the board of directors, but he also serves on several family boards around the country, he said. It will allow him to continue engaging in family business, he said, which ignites his true passion: helping others.

### **THE NEXT GENERATION WILL TAKE OVER**

It's a trait recognized in his son, Mike, who will be taking over as CEO of the company after his father retires. But the decision to pass the business on to a fifth generation, Greg said, was not automatic.

"Candidly, I was tough on my kids about coming back to the company because there are a lot of good things, but there are tough things, too. Especially in my position, when you have to tell your brothers, or brothers-in-law, that things aren't going well," Greg said. "I didn't want any of my children coming back here unless they really wanted to be here. ... Michael was very insistent. I questioned him a lot, but I could see the passion for the business, and here he is today."

That passion, Mike said, is something he recognized in his father. It was clear he loved his job and whenever Mike asked questions, his father lit up.

"When I was growing up, through high school and college, I would come back during the summers and I would shovel rock at Linwood or set dowel baskets in the southeast for McCarthy," Mike said. "I always thought that this was a place I wanted to end up, and the more I did those things the more I really considered it learning the business from the ground up."

Now a father himself, Mike said that experience reflects the advice he gives to parents now: If you love what you do, share it with your children. But before Mike could join the family business, there was one more rule he had to follow.

"We did institute a rule where anybody in the fifth generation coming back first had to work outside the business for at least three years, just to let them establish who they are as a worker without being a family member with the name in the business," Greg said. "And I think that was very important."

Mike followed the rules. After college, he ended up at Wells Fargo in Chicago when he and his wife learned they were about to become parents.

.....  
Bush Construction on Thursday, Dec. 4.

*Katelyn Metzger*



With her wanting to stay home with their newborn, Mike knew they would need to move somewhere more affordable and started the conversation with his dad about moving to Minnesota, where the company owned a satellite crushing facility, and where he and his wife went to school.

He was in no hurry to return to Iowa, he said.

### RETURNING TO THE FAMILY BUSINESS IN IOWA

The Twin Cities seemed like a go until Greg spoke with leadership, and they reported Mike was needed at the mine. Iowa was not only back on the table — it was the only option.

"I always knew, ultimately, if I wanted to work (in the family business), I would end up back here," Mike said. "Coming back here was a great decision. My boss was absolutely right that this was the right place. It just wasn't what I thought at the time."

When he started at Linwood in 2011, he was given the title of management trainee and tried out a variety of roles to get to know the business.

"I started in the lab and I worked as a night supervisor at the plant. I went with the sales staff. I went underground. I kind of spent time in every department and was able to learn the business that way," he said.

The process was worth it, but not always fun, he said.

"It was very frustrating at the time, because you're young in an organization and you want to show value, and people kept telling me, 'Your job is to learn,'" he said. "Having said that, it was the best thing that could have happened to me, because by the time I was ready to contribute, I just had such a familiarity with every aspect of the business."

But there's another key element that Greg implemented to help both his son, and his business.

### FINDING A MENTOR IS A KEY STEP

"When Michael was coming back, I found him a mentor," Greg said. "I went to Jonathan (Wilmshurst), who was running Linwood at the time, and I said ... 'I'm staying out of it. You do whatever you need to do to get him ready.' And that really worked well, too, just keeping our distance and

letting Mike have a guy — not a family member — show him the way."

Greg said the mentorship worked well, and Mike was pushed in a way that helped him grow faster.

"The whole concept of keeping the family (out of it was) when you're here to learn, get somebody that is comfortable teaching and isn't afraid to tell a family member that you're going to work on a Friday night even though there's football," Greg said.

In 2021, some family members were bought out of the company due to not being interested in the family business. This got Greg thinking about the future, his own impending retirement and marking the end of the fourth generation of leadership.

At the time, he spoke with his CFO, Mike Daniel, about possibly being a bridge between the fourth and fifth generation until someone from the family was ready to take over. But, Daniel decided to retire before that could happen.

And Greg was retiring, too. That meant the board of directors, mainly men from the Bush family, had to think fast.

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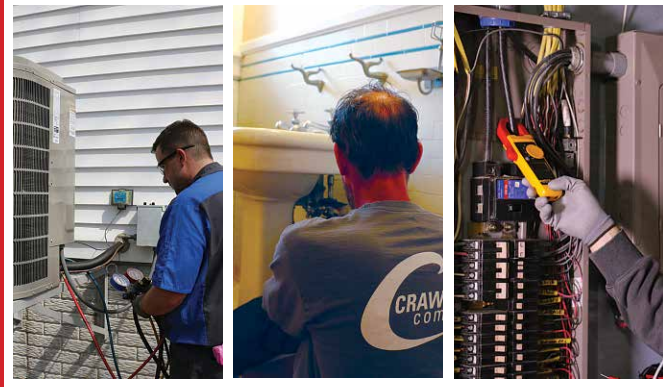


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A front loader truck moves shot rock from the Linwood Mining and Mineral Corporation mine on Tuesday, Jan. 13, in Buffalo.

*Katelyn Metzger*

"The two choices were, do we look for an outside guy for a couple of years, which is a risky hire, or do we just hand it right to a family member?" Greg said. "Once we decided that was probably the better option, it was, who's the most qualified to be that? And I'll say it, if you looked at

family members or non-family members, Mike's the guy."

At the time, Mike had very recently graduated to the role of president at Linwood, which is undergoing the largest capital expenditure in the history of the company and the board wanted someone

with experience to keep an eye on things. The idea was to allow Mike to get a little more experience and Linwood get its new plant built before he graduated up the company ladder.

Ultimately, he climbed up faster than anticipated.

"(Mike has) shown through his leadership and his abilities that he is up to the task. It's a big task, and he knows it, he'll tell you that himself," Greg said.

Mike said when the opportunity came his way to represent the fifth generation, he had to do a lot of thinking. In the end, he told the board he didn't feel he was the best man for the job today, but his commitment to hard work would show he would become the best man for the job in the years to come.

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It was an answer the board approved of. "I tell people within the organization, you guys are all competing for second on who cares the most because I know I'm always going to care the most, and it's always going to be the most important to me, and everyone else is going to be competing for seconds," Mike said.

Once reality set in of what was to come, Mike said, part of him was thrilled to lead, while the other part of him was nervous. It's a big responsibility, he said, but the pride of continuing on in the business and being part of the growing legacy is what keeps him coming to work every day.

"You can call yourself the owner, but really it's like you're a steward," Mike said. "The way I view it, none of us here started this. It was given to us, so it's our responsibility to build on it and then give it to the next generation."

He said the metaphor his dad always used was that the business was like a relay race: it's your turn with the baton and when you've done all you can do, you pass it off.



Greg Bush and his son, Mike Bush pose for a portrait at Bush Construction on Thursday, Dec. 4 in Davenport. *Katelyn Metzger*

"The truth is, I came to work here because I'm very close to my dad. I wanted to spend time with him and so getting into the role of my dad and my grandpa before him, who was very influential to me, was very important

to me," Mike said. "There's a lot of, I would say, internalized pressure of making sure you do the right things for the business moving forward so that somebody else can sit in this chair eventually."

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**Jim von Maur** represents the fourth-generation of family leadership in Von Maur, a department store chain with a 154-year old history that began in Davenport.

*Courtesy of Von Maur*

# 'Here to stay:'

Davenport staple **Von Maur** is rooted in retail and community

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## **GRETCHEN TESKE**

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**W**hile many department stores are closing their doors, Von Maur is opening more.

The 154-year-old Davenport-based company has been led by generations of the von Maur family, with current CEO, Jim von Maur, representing the fourth generation of leadership in his family's company.

"I grew up with it," Jim von Maur said of the family business. "It was just a part of my life and when it was time to graduate, I needed a job and I could see that there was a lot of opportunity at the company."

That was in 1993, he said, and the department store was on the verge of branching out in a more aggressive way. Excited about the potential and the future coming its way, he joined the executive training program.

Branching out was not necessarily a new concept for the store, however. During its history, the store went through multiple expansions in the Quad-Cities, including in downtown Davenport, Duck Creek Plaza in Bettendorf and SouthPark Mall in Moline.

"They slowly started to branch out, but it wasn't in a real aggressive way until the early '80s, when they bought a few chains," von Maur said.

Existing stores were going out of business and Von Maur was able to capitalize. One of the biggest was in West Des Moines, he said.

"Initially, it did not do well and almost put the company out of business but after (nursing) it along for a few years, it started to perform," he said. "People started to move out near there and to this day it's still a very good store for us.

"I would say expansion was always in our DNA, before and after I arrived."

### EARLY ORIGINS IN THE QUAD-CITIES

The store started in 1872 with the Petersen family, when JHC Petersen opened a store with his three sons called JHC Petersen's Sons Co.

Von Maur's story started a few years later with CJ von Maur, a retail clerk from Pennsylvania.

"From a very young age, he felt like had the aptitude to run his own store, so he moved west and went to Peoria," Jim von Maur said.

CJ von Maur had two partners there before eventually leaving the business and moving to the Quad-Cities, where he opened the Boston Store in 1887 with partners Rolland Harned and Edward Pursel.

The dry goods store slowly expanded over time, von Maur said, until it was a full department store. At the time, Petersen's store was the major competition in town.

"Legend has it that Petersen's was tired of competing with CJ and said, 'Do you want to buy my store?'" von Maur said.

**"I would say expansion was always in our DNA, before and after I arrived."**

**– Jim von Maur**



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Jim von Maur has been in the family business for decades, representing the fourth generation of family members to take over.

*Courtesy of Von Maur*

The transaction took place in 1916, and by 1928, operations moved to the Petersen building, the larger of the two, and the store was renamed Petersen Harned Von Maur. "From there it ran as just one store for a number of years," von Maur said, noting CJ's children took over the store shortly after and attempted to start a furniture branch in Moline. But with the Great Depression raging on, it closed quickly.

### ADAPTING TO THE TIMES

By 1970, the von Maurs were ready to expand their downtown Davenport footprint to another building, the former Parker's Department store on the corner of Brady and Second streets. It was most recently a downtown branch for Wells Fargo.

The store closed just four years later as a new concept for retail came to town: the shopping center.

"Every family had a car and they could live further and further away from the center of town," von Maur said. "My dad and uncle saw that they had to be a part of that."

Clinton, Iowa, became the first site of expansion, with Duck Creek Plaza in

Bettendorf and SouthPark Mall in Moline following.

"From there, when a new mall came along, they tried to get a footprint within the shopping center. They could see that was going to be the future of shopping," he said.

It turned out, they were spot on. Von Maur is still expanding, with its 40th store expected to open next year. For the most part, von Maur said, the company has stuck to the original plan: pay attention to demographics and to the customers.

The company is looking for highly populated areas that are easily accessible. Being on a major interstate is crucial, and being in a strong shopping center where retail is already thriving is also high on the list.

"When I was just getting started with expansion, it was all about new malls developing, so you really had to be careful you were part of a project that was on the up," he said. "We used to do projects that were on the edge of town, but through a best guess. You were hoping that town was going to move out to where you were."



**Von Maur is still expanding, with its 40th store expected to open next year.**

"The reason people keep coming back to us is because we offer an experience. A lot of what we sell is a commodity that you can get anywhere but we're going to create an environment that's enjoyable to be in."

– Jim von Maur

### THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF TODAY

But times have changed, von Maur said, and opportunities are now mostly about taking over former retail locations to expand the Von Maur reach. That requires research of its own to understand how the store at the location previously performed financially, as well as finer details like the terms of the lease.

Brand recognition is also high on the list of priorities, he said. But instead of

trying to go into an unknown market, Von Maur goes where their customers are, in hopes of bringing them into a store near them.

"What we found is if we can go into a market where we are relatively known, initially it has better results," von Maur said. "We have found that if we go to the southern part of the country, there are a lot of transplants."

And for those who are not familiar with Von Maur, he said, there is a learning

curve to getting people in the store. But the store's staples, like an interest-free charge card and free gift wrapping, help drive home that Von Maur isn't a standard department store.

"The reason people keep coming back to us is because we offer an experience," von Maur said. "A lot of what we sell is a commodity that you can get anywhere but we're going to create an environment that's enjoyable to be in."

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and inviting, while creating an experience where the guest feels pampered, he said. A staple of Von Maur stores is live piano music that can be heard throughout, elevating the experience for guests.

"It's more than just going out to buy a new shirt or a new pair of shoes," he said. "You're coming to us to feel good."

Part of that includes having the latest fashions and new products, he said. Creating a rotation of brands, and new products from the brands the store already carries, he said, helps drive customers back in after visiting. The customer service, too, drives that point home.

"Certainly part of our philosophy is to always have new, fresh goods in the store. When you're in the fashion business, you can't get stale," he said. "(But) the values have always been that if you take care of the customer, they will take care of you."

In 2010, Von Maur set out to find a new way to take care of customers with a smaller store concept called Dry Goods. Inspired by company's origins as a dry

goods store, the smaller, boutique-style store offers an ever-changing selection of women's fashions, including jewelry and accessories.

The first one opened in Naperville, Illinois, and has since grown to nearly 90 locations. The idea behind the smaller store, von Maur said, was about speed and access.

Finding room for another department store is difficult, and takes a lot of time. A smaller store allowed Von Maur to branch into other markets faster and propel company growth.

With 2026 marking the company's 154th year in business, it's safe to say the philosophy of customer care has worked,

**"There's a certain amount of pride that we're still thriving and still growing, but at the same time, there's a lot of pressure, too."**

**– Jim von Maur**

Von Maur has a 154-year history in Davenport and is now being led by its fourth-generation of family leadership, CEO Jim von Maur. *Courtesy of Von Maur*



The Von Maur department store chain has grown to include 40 stores in more than a dozen states.

*Courtesy of Von Maur*

and continues to as Von Maur continues to grow. Leading the company to success while operating in an industry in flux emits a sense of pride, von Maur said, but also a sense of responsibility.

"There's a certain amount of pride that we're still thriving and still growing, but at the same time, there's a lot of pressure, too," he said. "It's every day. You can never rest and you can never rest on your laurels.

"It's fun. There's a lot of pride, but it's also a lot of pressure to make sure we continue to run a great store."

Part of that pride is the company's roots in Davenport. Not only is the area a great place to live and raise a family, the people



bring heart and hard work, cementing Von Maur's legacy in the Quad-Cities.

"You cannot beat a good Midwest work ethic," von Maur said. "We are able to attract and keep a great workforce; we

would see no need to have to go anywhere else. The philosophy is bloom where you are planted, and we have been very successful out of the Quad-Cities and in Davenport. We're here to stay."

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# APRIL IS COMMUNITY COLLEGE MONTH

# Community College Month: An Open Invitation to Explore, Learn, and Connect



**Eastern Iowa  
Community  
Colleges**

**T**his April, Eastern Iowa Community Colleges (EICC) is celebrating Community College Month with a simple but powerful idea: open the doors wide.

Throughout the month, EICC will host more than 40 free classes and community events across its campuses and centers. No tuition. No admission application. No long-term commitment. Just opportunities to step inside, learn something practical, and experience firsthand what today's community college looks like.

"This is our opportunity to give back," said Ashlee Spannagel, EdD, vice chancellor of workforce development. "Community colleges are built by and for their communities. Community College Month allows us to showcase our programs, our people, and the impact we make every day."

## Hands-On Learning — For Free

The April lineup features short, engaging sessions designed to be useful, interactive, and approachable.

### Offerings include:

- ▶ Home fire safety
- ▶ Pet CPR and first aid
- ▶ Basic automotive maintenance
- ▶ Floral design
- ▶ Sweet and savory scones
- ▶ Running effective meetings
- ▶ Gaming Con and other community-focused events
- ▶ Plus more!

Each session is led by EICC faculty and staff and held in the same labs, kitchens, and classrooms where students build career-ready skills year-round.

For some participants, these classes are simply enjoyable learning experiences. For others, they serve as a first introduction to programs, facilities, and instructors they may not have previously considered.

"There's no pressure," Spannagel said. "You can attend one class, gain a skill, meet our faculty, and leave with a better understanding of what's possible."

## Supporting Workforce and Lifelong Learning

While Community College Month is celebratory, it also highlights a deeper purpose. Community colleges play a critical role in regional economic development by preparing skilled workers, supporting business and industry, and creating accessible pathways to advancement.

At EICC, that mission reaches learners at every stage of life. The college serves high school students earning dual credit, recent graduates completing transferable degrees, adults preparing for new careers, incumbent workers building new credentials, and community members pursuing personal enrichment. Its flexibility and affordability make it especially important during times of economic transition.

Whether preparing welders, healthcare professionals, advanced manufacturing technicians, or transfer students, the focus remains on expanding access to high-quality, affordable education that strengthens both individuals and the regional economy.

"EICC meets people where they are," Spannagel said. "Community College Month is a reminder that education can be practical, accessible, and directly connected to real-life opportunity."

## About Community College Month

Community College Month is coordinated nationally by the Association of Community College Trustees and celebrated by more than 1,000 institutions across the United States. The initiative highlights the economic, academic, and equity advantages community colleges provide.

### Community colleges:

- ▶ Deliver affordable, high-quality postsecondary education.
- ▶ Educate and certify in-demand healthcare and technical professionals.
- ▶ Maintain open-access admissions.
- ▶ Serve the most diverse student populations.
- ▶ Provide stability and opportunity during economic shifts.
- ▶ Respond to community needs in times of crisis.


EICC is proud to join institutions nationwide in celebrating the essential role community colleges play in building stronger communities and stronger economies.


Community College Month runs April 1–30. Class offerings vary by campus, and space is limited.


Registration and event details are available at [eicc.edu/ccmonth](http://eicc.edu/ccmonth).




## Across Eastern Iowa, EICC:


 Operates 3 campuses and 10+ centers throughout 7 counties

 Provides free college credit to 5,000 high school students

 Supports 18,000 continuing education learners each year

 Enrolls 7,000+ credit students annually

 Trains employees from 200+ companies

 Employs 700+ faculty and staff



1

# Lagomarcino's Confectionary

**KATELYN METZGER**  
kmetzger@qctimes.com

Lagomarcino's Confectionary opened in 1908 in downtown Moline by Angelo Lagomarcino and his wife, Luigia. By 1925, their children, Charlie, Mary and Tom, were working on the store along with them. Now, while

the fourth generation is running the two stores, several members of the fifth generation are learning about the art of chocolate production while working part-time in the shops.



2

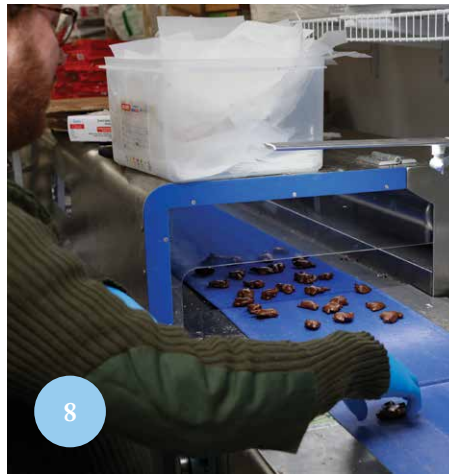


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**1.** Manager Daniel Otten points to a photo featuring his great-grandfather and founder, Angelo Lagomarcino, in front of the original Lagomarcino's on Thursday, Feb. 5, at the Davenport location. Otten is part of the fourth generation helping run the local family-owned business. **2.** A Lagomarcino's employee shaves off extra chocolate from a bunny molded from chocolate in the Village of East Davenport. The Davenport Lagomarcino's location focuses on molding chocolate and coating candies in chocolate. The Moline location focuses on producing the centers such as toffees, caramels and sponges. **3.** Lagomarcino's employee Jenny Crowley packs chocolate molded Easter eggs with an assortment of candies on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport. **4.** A tray of pecan dainties wait to be covered in either milk or dark chocolate at Lagomarcino's on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport.



**5.** Daniel Otten places pecan dainties onto the enrober belt, which will cover the candies in tempered chocolate. **6.** Lagomarcino's manager Daniel Otten shows off the enrober, which melts and tempers up to 400 pounds of chocolate at once, on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport. **7.** The enrober melts and tempers large amounts of chocolate, keeping it at about 83 degrees, which gives the chocolate a shiny sheen. **8.** Daniel Otten picks up freshly made pecan dainties off of the conveyor belt on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport. It takes about 15 minutes for chocolates to get through the cooling portion of the enrobing machine. **9.** An old Lagomarcino's metal sign hangs in the Village of East Davenport on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport. **10.** Daniel Otten cuts a tray of caramels at Lagomarcino's on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport.



11



12

**11.** A sheet of freshly chocolate covered Oreos at Lagomarcino's in the Village of East Davenport on Thursday, Feb. 5, in Davenport. **12.** A look at the storefront at the Davenport Lagomarcino's before Valentine's Day. The Davenport location in the East Village opened in 1997. Both storefronts also have a diner that offers ice creams, sandwiches and more. It closes in the winter to make space to produce enough chocolates for Christmas, Valentine's and Easter.

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# Wendt Funeral Home still prospering after 160 years of end-of-life care

**NINA BAKER**

nbaker@qctimes.com

**I**n 1866, German cabinetmaker J. Robert Earler opened a funeral parlor in Port Byron. The American Civil War had ended the year prior. More American men died than ever before, in battlefields rather than homes, and medical professionals began embalming bodies to return them to their families for end-of-life services. Embalming soon became standard practice in the funeral industry.

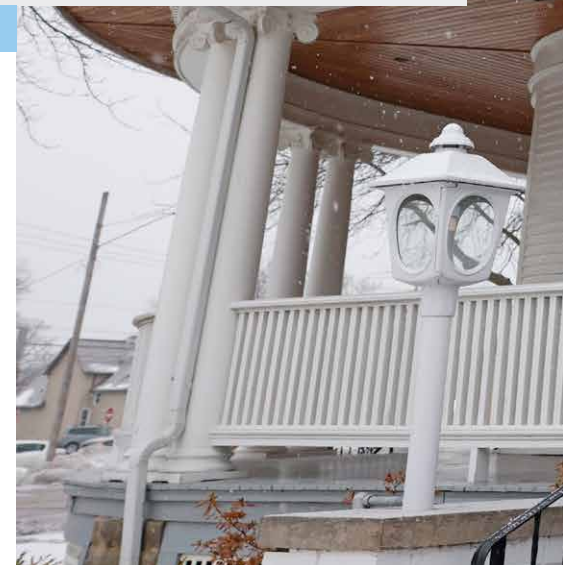
Today, 160 years later, Earler's great-great-great-grandson Earl "Boo" Wendt IV operates that same funeral parlor. Wendt Funeral Home, now in Moline, continues to provide the steady, settling services of undertakers, even as the funeral industry adapts to social, political and economic transformation.

Wendt Funeral Home is the oldest funeral home west of the Ohio River and fifth oldest in the United States. Through six generations, Wendt Funeral Home has stayed in the family.

Earler came to Rock Island County in 1833. He spent 13 years building wooden caskets for local farmers before he opened his Port Byron funeral business. For 15 years he operated the business before he passed it to his son-in-law August H. Wendt in 1881.

In 1920, August Wendt's sons, Robert and Earl Wendt, took over operations. In 1929, the brothers purchased the large Queen Anne Victorian house Wendt Funeral Home still operates in today. That house, built in 1902, features a vast first floor for funeral services, a second floor for offices and an apartment, and a seven-car underground garage. The business is located at 1811 15th Street Place, Moline.

Robert and Earl Wendt ran Wendt Funeral Home until 1945. That's when Earl Wendt's sons, Earl Wendt II and his brother Richard Wendt, took over. It was during this time the business temporarily changed its name to Wendt Brothers Funeral Home. Multiple brothers helped the business, including operating a second location in East Moline that the business closed in the 1970s.



Earl Wendt II died in 1967. His son, Earl "Buck" Wendt III, continued running the home with Richard. At the time, funeral homes offered services like ambulance transport to hospitals. At night, Wendt Funeral Home staff received ambulance calls and staff transported individuals to Quad-Cities medical centers. The city needed their help: when Wendt Funeral Home stopped operating their three emergency vehicles in 1981, Moline had to buy two more ambulances to replenish the supply.

Earl "Buck" Wendt III raised Earl "Boo" Wendt IV, today's director of Wendt Funeral Home. In 1977, at age 16, Wendt IV joined



Wendt Funeral Home as an apprentice. In 1983, at age 22, he became a licensed Funeral Director after graduating from Worsham School of Mortuary Science in Wheeling, Illinois.

Richard Wendt retired in 1985. Earl “Buck” Wendt III acquired the home, which he operated until he died in 2020. That’s when Earl “Boo” Wendt IV took over Wendt Funeral Home.

From left, **Patrick Wendt**, **Tamara “Tami” Wendt** and current funeral director **Earl L. “Boo” Wendt IV** pose in front of Wendt Funeral Home on Thursday, Dec. 11, in Moline. The funeral home has been run by 6 generations of the Wendt family.

*Katelyn Metzger*

**Wendt Funeral Home is the oldest funeral home west of the Ohio River and fifth oldest in the United States.**

Though the transition appears direct, Wendt Funeral Home has faced turmoil and neared closure. Like any longstanding, family-owned business, Wendt Funeral Home has had highs and lows.

“We made it through the Spanish Flu, World War I, World War II, Vietnam, Korea,” Wendt IV, 64, said. “You think about in the 160 years what my family’s made it through to keep going.”

In 2024, the Illinois House of Representatives passed a resolution congratulating Wendt Funeral Home on its longstanding operation and crediting the success to their “values of compassion, professionalism and attention to detail.”

In the lot outside Wendt Funeral Home, the business has set up a case displaying a horse-drawn hearse from the early 1900s, paying homage to their early

roots. The family loaned a second hearse to the Rock Island County History Society.

Wendt Funeral Home staff work consistently to keep the exterior and interior of the Moline home tranquil and suitable for end-of-life services. Staff constantly upgrade or renovate fixtures to keep the space calm and modern.

After a century in the building, the Wendt family has accumulated ephemera, photographs and memorabilia that hang in the first and second floors. In the attic, years ago, Wendt IV found a display of the famous Mark Twain quote that reads “Let us endeavor so to live so that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry.” The framed image hangs upstairs.



Trinkets collected throughout the years are displayed on an office fireplace at the Wendt Funeral Home on Thursday, Dec. 11, in Moline.

*Katelyn Metzger*

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"We have 98 years of stuff in the attic," Wendt IV said. "I got blessed with everything from my family upstairs, boxes of checks from the '30s."

Many members of the Wendt family lived on the second floor of Wendt Funeral Home. Wendt IV spent the first six years of his life, and later his high school years, living there. Before cell phones, funeral homes required somebody to be in the building at all times to take after-hours calls, which is why the building was often occupied, he said.

During his career, Wendt IV has watched the funeral industry shift. When Wendt IV began working as a licensed funeral director in 1983, the cremation rate was 1 to 2%, he said. Now, more than 60% of clients opt for cremation.

Cremation's explosion is the most significant challenge facing the funeral industry today, Wendt IV said. By 2045, cremation will outpace burials by more than six to one, according to a 2025 projection by the National Funeral Directors Association. That cuts into funeral homes' revenue.

A single funeral, casket, vault, cemetery lot and headstone costs \$15,000 or more. Wendt IV said he thinks this expense pushes clients, especially young adults, toward cremation. And, at a time when more children live in states away from their aging parents and grandparents, cremation offers more flexibility for planning end-of-life ceremonies.

Decades ago, clients chose Wendt Funeral Home or other funeral homes based on loyalty. At one point, six Wendt family members worked for Wendt Funeral Home, and Quad-Cities residents often chose the home through their connections with Wendts. Now, customers price-shop, leading some would-be customers to select cremation due to its lower cost.



The Wendt Funeral Home on Thursday, December 11, in Moline.

*Katelyn Metzger*

**"The rising cremation rate will change the face of a lot of funeral homes going forward. In actuality and in how they survive."**

**- Tami Wendt**

Tami Wendt, who works in marketing for Wendt Funeral Home and is married to Wendt IV, said the industry is changing by "leaps and bounds," far faster than people realize.

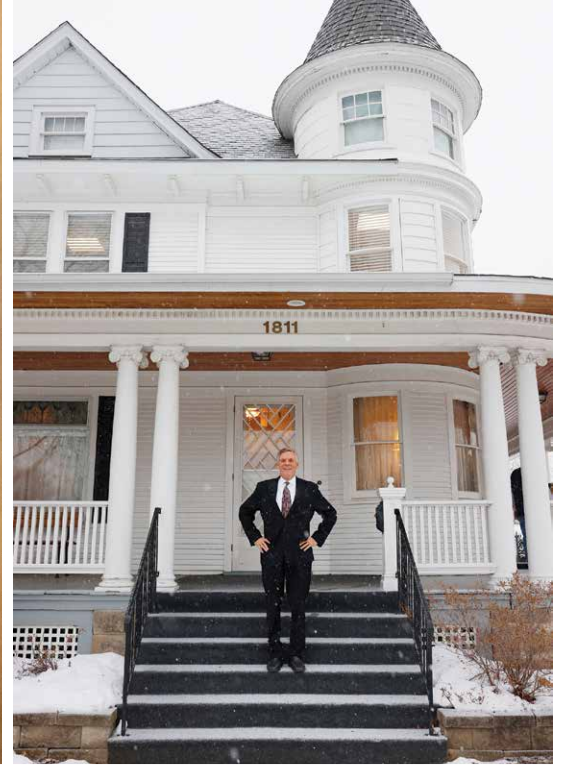
"The rising cremation rate will change the face of a lot of funeral homes going forward," Tami Wendt said. "In actuality and in how they survive."

Tami Wendt helps keep Wendt Funeral Home at the top of the search engine results for recommended funeral homes. She said even if funeral homes lack experience in digital marketing, they must pivot to search engine optimization and other strategies to move forward in the changing market.

In the future, some funeral homes will fail or be consolidated, Tami Wendt said.

"There are two ways of doing the funeral business nowadays. It's either go big, or go small," Wendt IV said. "Either you have to be a small funeral home and be very efficient in what you do, which is what we do. We keep our costs down. Or you have to be a big funeral home, and do lots of funerals, and charge people more money. We try to keep our costs down here."

Wendt IV said the family has discussed expanding to other cities. But, building or buying large funeral homes incurs high overhead costs.



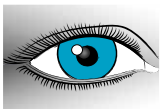
(Left) In this vintage photo, A.H. Wendt poses in front of the first Wendt Funeral Home in Port Byron. (Right) Current owner and funeral director Earl L. "Boo" Wendt poses in front of the Wendt Funeral Home mimicking his great-great grandfather's portrait in front of the first Wendt funeral home. *Katelyn Metzger*

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Posters featuring Earl Wendt II and Earl Wendt hang from an office at Wendt Funeral Home on Thursday, Dec. 11, in Moline. *Katelyn Metzger*

“The best way to expand is to work out of one building and increase your value. That’s the best way to do it,” he said.

Wendt Funeral Home also rents the building to a cremation service and to another funeral home. Wendt IV said he’s also open to renting the building to other funeral directors who need a space to conduct services.

Patrick Wendt, uncle to Wendt IV,

formerly served as a funeral director in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Patrick Wendt, 81, said being in a family-owned business is like being raised on a farm. As a child, his parents would make him shovel the parking area or help with other similar tasks. His father paid him the going wage for the labor.

Later, as a funeral director, he worked overnight many days, alternating between

calls and ambulance rides. That schedule just comes with the job, he said.

“Not one time in my whole life, when I was a funeral director, did I regret that schedule,” he said.

He left to pursue real estate, but after retiring in 2008 he returned to Wendt Funeral Home as a part-time employee. He wanted to go back to his roots.

The on-call schedule has made outgoing funeral directors struggle to draw people to the field. Many are unwilling to make the sacrifices needed to be in the industry.

In the 1970s, even Wendt IV himself nearly pursued construction after receiving a job offer in New York. His father, Wendt III, told him he would pay for classes at Black Hawk College and later mortuary school if Wendt IV stayed. Wendt IV agreed.

Wendt IV is now searching for a family member to take over the business. Wendt IV is a step-father to two sons who have gone to other ventures, but he never had children himself. He did host a 17-year-old cousin who may one day seek to take over the family business.

“We got to keep it in the family,” Tami Wendt said.

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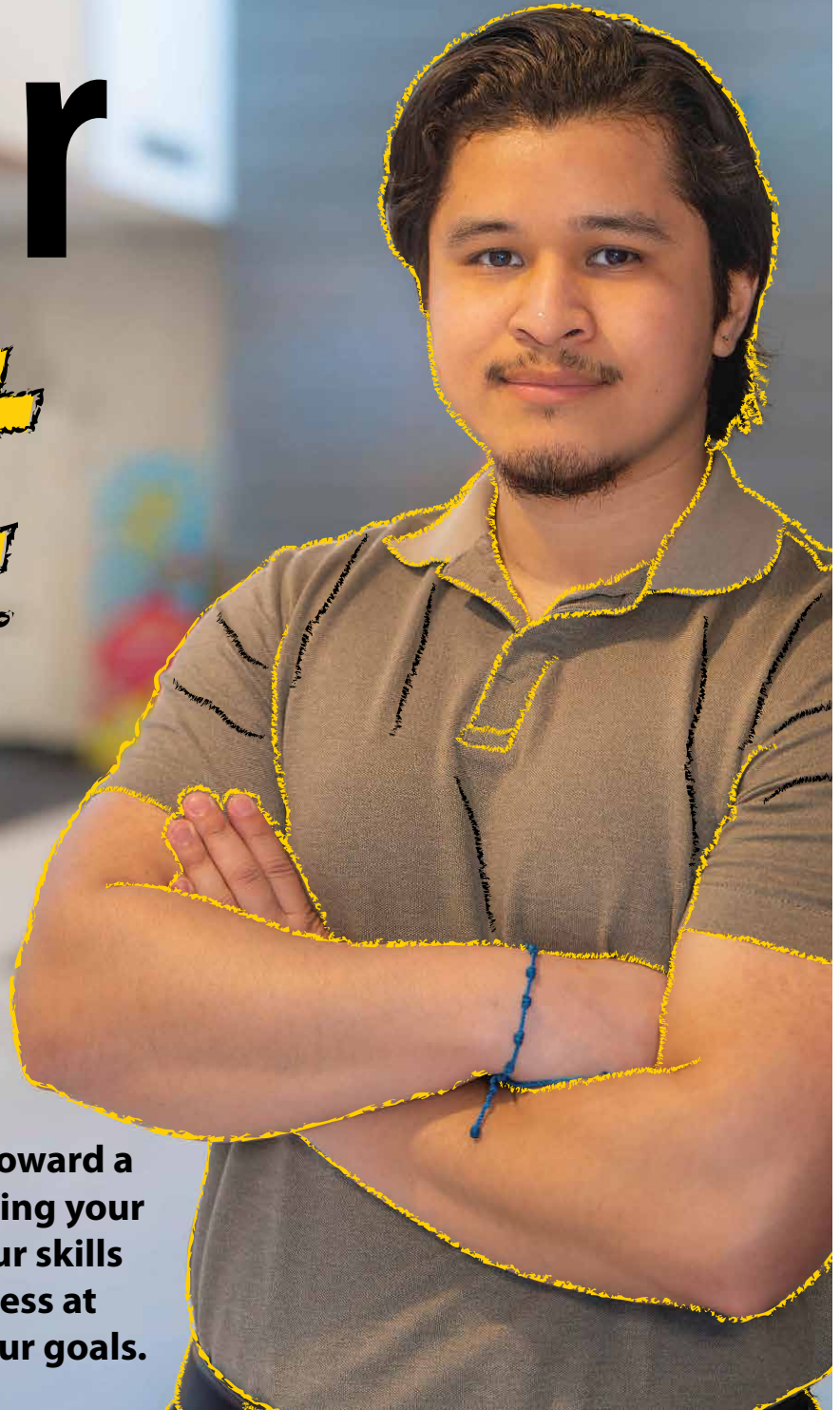
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# Community Colleges and the Courage to Build What Comes Next

By Dr. Jeremy L. Thomas, President, Black Hawk College

As a new year and legislative session begin, conversations naturally turn to budgets, policy decisions and priorities for the State of Illinois. Those conversations matter. But beyond Springfield, an equally important discussion is taking place — the future of workforce readiness in our communities.

That future is strengthened by higher education. And in communities like ours, it is especially strong because of community colleges.

At Black Hawk College, we see the impact of higher education not just in theory, but in real-life outcomes. We serve recent high school graduates finding their right fit. We serve working adults gaining new skills. We serve parents determined to build a better future for their families. We serve veterans transitioning to civilian careers. Each student represents potential and possibility.

Because our work is grounded in real people and real needs, Black Hawk College plays a central role in workforce development. When local manufacturers need skilled welders, industrial maintenance technicians or CNC operators, we prepare them. When health care providers need nurses, occupational therapy assistants and EMS professionals, we help meet that demand. And when businesses evolve, technology advances or industries shift, we adapt alongside them.

In December, Black Hawk College was awarded a \$202,000 workforce grant to launch a new GED® and ESL welding program — an integrated model that allows individuals to earn a high school equivalency credential or strengthen English language skills while receiving hands-on training aligned with local employer demand. It is a practical example of how community colleges respond when opportunity and workforce need converge.

The strength of a community college lies in its proximity. Our faculty meet with local employers. Our staff visit local school districts. Our trustees live in the communities we serve. We understand the realities facing families and businesses every day.

The impact is tangible. A credential can raise earning potential. A degree can open doors. A skilled workforce attracts employers, and strong employers support strong communities. It becomes a cycle of opportunity.

But cycles of opportunity do not sustain themselves. They require commitment and partnership. And sometimes, they require courage.

At Black Hawk College, we challenge ourselves — and our students — to Be Brave on Purpose. For our students, courage means returning to school after many years, stepping into a classroom for the first time or reaching out for help when they need it. For communities, it means investing in education not as an expense line, but as infrastructure essential to economic mobility and workforce growth.

Community colleges remain the most accessible entry point into higher education. We open doors for first-generation students, provide second chances and create pathways to four-year degrees, technical credentials and family-sustaining careers.

When community colleges thrive, local communities thrive.

The future of Illinois will not be shaped only in legislative chambers. It will be built in classrooms and training facilities, strengthened by regional partnerships and carried forward by students whose communities stand behind them.

That future does not build itself. It is built intentionally, collaboratively and bravely by people who believe in opportunity. And it is a future worth building together.

Advertorial



Brothers and owners **DJ** and **Dave Necker** pose for a photo at Necker's Jewelers on Tuesday, Dec. 16, in Davenport.

*Katelyn Metzger*

# How Necker's Jewelers grew to be among the top independent jewelry stores in the country

**SARAH WATSON**  
swatson@qctimes.com

**T**he history of one Quad-Cities family-owned jewelry store involves moldy money, the farm crisis and two brothers with a drive to become among the top independently owned jewelers in the country.

Necker's Jewelers' story starts in 1893. That's when German immigrant U.S. Brumer opened Brumer's Jewelry in

DeWitt, Iowa. He owned and operated the store, the predecessor to Necker's Jewelers, for nearly 60 years.

Enter Don Necker.

At age 17, Don enlisted in the U.S. military and fought in World War II. After the war, with the help of the G.I. Bill, Don attended watch-making school at Bradley University in Peoria. He then worked for jewelers in Maquoketa and Dubuque before opportunity struck.

Brumer's Jewelry went up for sale in the early 1950s, and Don and his wife Dorothy decided to buy it.

In 1952, Don was 25 years old with no assets. Local banks refused to loan him the money to buy the jewelry store.

So, Don and Dorothy turned to family members, who loaned them enough cash to buy the jewelry store for about \$7,000. That cash came from underground.

To help Don and Dorothy, their family members literally dug up money they'd buried in their backyards out of a mistrust of banks after the Great Depression.

As the story goes, the banker counting Don and Dorothy's money to purchase the store put more and more distance between

himself and the bills, some of which were moldy from years underground.

“My mother talked about digging underneath the chicken coop to pull out the jars,” said Dave Necker, one of Don and Dorothy’s five children.

The storefront in downtown DeWitt sat along what at the time was Highway 61 and kept up steady traffic.

Don and Dorothy changed the store’s name to Necker’s and started raising a family in a two-bedroom apartment above the store. They had five children — Dan, Dee, Doug, Dave and DJ.

Dave and DJ would later take over ownership of the store.

It might have been cramped in the 1960s, but Dave, who was 4 years old by the time the family moved out of the apartment, has fond memories of his early years above the store.

“Our dad would often come running up the stairs to let us know we’re a little too loud or there would be water draining through the ceiling,” Dave recalled.

“We pulled the drawers out of this built-in and then dove off that into the tub,” Dave said. “The water went over the edge and of course, showered down into the jewelry store.”

Don would work during the day in the jewelry store, and every night after dinner, he would go back downstairs and do the jewelry repair and bookwork.

Don and Dorothy eventually put in an intercom so they could communicate between the apartment upstairs and the store downstairs.

Dave remembers having a little bit of grass behind the building with a sandbox to play in.

“I remember the tub, I remember the dining area, I remember hiding places in the apartment, I remember riding



A photo of the old Necker's Jewelers in DeWitt is shown on a screen behind a jewelry display on Tuesday, Dec. 16, in Davenport. *Katelyn Metzger*

cardboard boxes down the steps, and I remember getting my mouth washed out with soap because I was spitting corn,” Dave said with a smile.

### **GROWING UP, THE KIDS HELPED IN THE SHOP**

DJ tried his hand at soldering charm bracelets as a teenager.

“Dad fired me,” DJ recalled with a laugh. DJ had alternated the charms instead of aligning them all on the bottom, making the bracelets lopsided, he said.

Dave learned engraving and worked part-time in high school. He also learned to resize rings, re-tip prongs and make a ring in a week-long jewelry school.

Dave decided that wasn’t for him.

“I came back, and I was in the basement with no windows, no humans, and I decided I did not want to be a bench jeweler,” Dave said. “That was a good experience for me.”

Years later, he would resurrect those skills to resize rings or set stones for rush jobs.

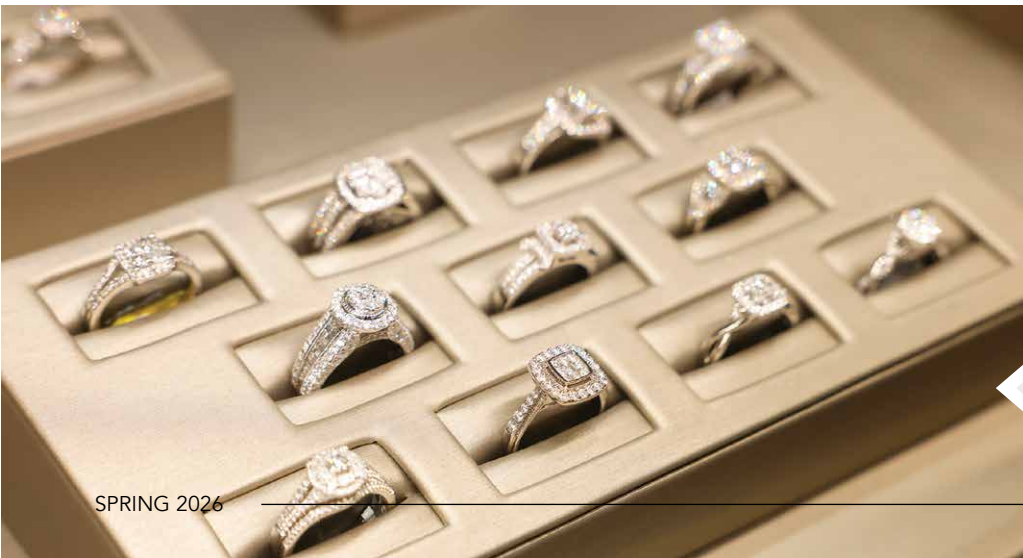
### **THE FARM CRISIS HITS**

After attending some college, Dave tried his hand working on oil rigs in California. It was there that he got a call from his dad, wondering if he had any interest in the jewelry business.

It was the early ‘80s, a hard time for the agriculture-centered town of DeWitt.

“We were in the middle of a farm crisis back here,” Dave said. “Which, I really didn’t know or understand. But I asked him how he’s doing. He said, ‘It’s not very good.’”

At the time, Dave and DJ recalled, there were just a few storefronts in DeWitt still open — Necker’s, Dot’s Hallmark (which was run by Dorothy Necker), Scott Drug pharmacy, banks and bars.



Rings on display at Necker's Jewelers on Tuesday, Dec. 16, in Davenport.

*Katelyn Metzger*



Bracelets on display at Necker's Jewelers on Tuesday, Dec. 16, in Davenport.

*Katelyn Metzger*

"He said, as sales were, he had to find a new career, unless I had interest in the business," Dave said. "I asked him if he had a plan. He said he had a plan. And I said, well, then, I'll come home, and I'll take room and board as part of my income and we'll dig out of this hole. "And we did."

They started with a big liquidation sale. They hired a company to liquidate assets so they could get rid of aging inventory and invest the money into new items and advertising Necker's outside of DeWitt.

At the time, Necker's had few Quad-Cities customers driving to DeWitt. But they started to change that. Now, the Necker brothers estimate 90% of business at their DeWitt store is from out of town.

### THE TRANSITION

Then came a diagnosis. Don Necker learned he had prostate cancer.

DJ, affectionately referred to as the baby of the family, graduated from the University of Iowa with a degree in finance and went to work for a different jewelry store in Kansas City.

When their father's cancer worsened, DJ moved back home and started working for the family business in 1989.

That same year, Don Necker died after owning Necker's Jewelers for 37 years.

In 1990, Dave and DJ bought Necker's Jewelers from their mother, Dorothy.

Dave, at 28 years old, ran the marketing,

while DJ, at 25, managed the books.

They were young, but they were confident. Perhaps overconfident, the pair like to say. The goal was to open 10 new stores, be in every local mall and become the largest jeweler in the Quad-Cities.

"We just thought we'd work our way through the process and figure it out," DJ said. "That was about our business plan — work a hundred hours and pay off our mother and make the business successful. We had confidence that we could do that."

"We had a belief system that we could do just about anything if we had to figure it out," Dave added.

The brothers opened a store in Southpark Mall in Moline in 1990 and another in the Duck Creek Mall in Bettendorf in 1997.

In 1999, the brothers moved from the store's decades-long storefront to a larger, standalone building down the street in DeWitt.

Within a few years, nationally, malls started to fade and the Necker brothers decided to move toward a standalone store in the Quad-Cities. They closed their Moline and Bettendorf mall stores

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and opened a Necker's Jewelers location in Davenport in 2002.

The most recent move came in February 2024, when Necker's Jewelers moved one door down from its 53rd Street store to a remodeled, larger building at 4009 E. 53rd St., Davenport. The striking geometric designs on the new store are meant to evoke diamond facets, the flat surfaces cut into a gemstone.

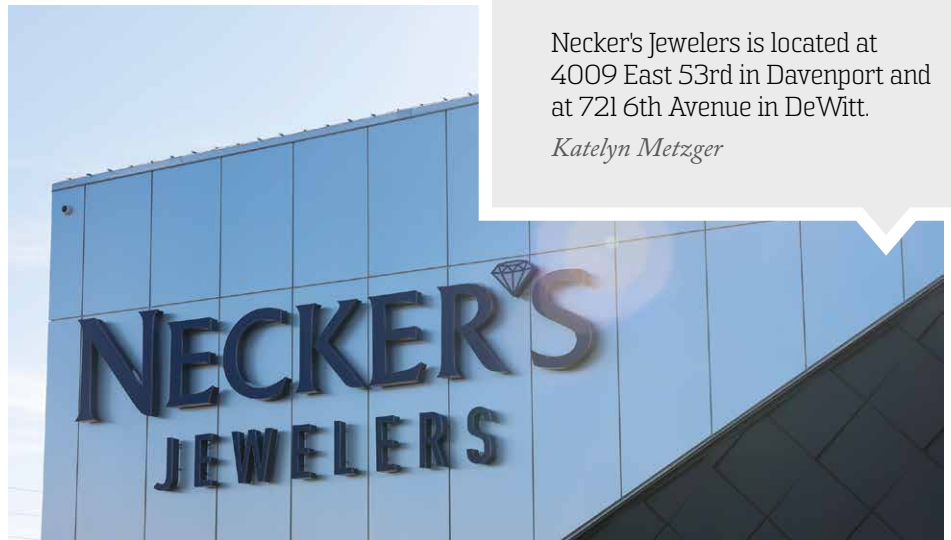
The move doubled the jewelry store's square-footage from about 4,000 to about 8,000 square feet, making the Davenport shop the largest jewelry store in the state of Iowa by square footage, according to Necker's.

The Necker's business is in the top 1% of independent jewelers in the country, according to the company.

### CHANGES IN THE JEWELRY BUSINESS

Like anything, the jewelry business has changed in the last 133 years. Photographs from the early days show the jewelry store selling canes and eyewear.

In fact, Necker's still repairs eyeglasses, now using a laser welder.



Necker's Jewelers is located at 4009 East 53rd in Davenport and at 721 6th Avenue in DeWitt.

*Katelyn Metzger*

In the 1960s, Necker's sold binoculars, wallets and leather goods. The store had a full bridal registry with flatware, stoneware, fine china, wood products and crystal pieces.

Ending that registry in 1999 after the move of the DeWitt store was a difficult decision, Dave said.

Costs for wrapping paper, boxes, cleaning, loss from breakage and shipping added

up. Although their mom and many employees wanted them to keep the registry, the brothers decided to switch to exclusively selling jewelry.

"We struggled with making a decision to get rid of that because it was traffic," Dave said. "People are still coming into your store, but you weren't as efficient as the big box stores."



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(Left) Jewelry on display at Necker's Jewelers on Tuesday, Dec. 16, in Davenport. (Right) Necker's Jewelers appraises and sells jewelry and accessories from estate sales. *Katelyn Metzger*

Competition for jewelry is coming from more places than it did when Don Necker got into the business, when jewelry was more often bought in local stores. Chain operations, home shopping clubs, catalog showrooms, the internet and even cruise lines have eroded some business from the local stores.

But trust is still a major driver for jewelry customers.

"But I think we're lucky to have a product people still don't feel comfortable buying online," DJ said. "There's still a trust issue when you're buying jewelry."

Over the past 35 years, the gross profit per jewelry item has dropped, DJ said, causing jewelry stores to need a higher volume of sales to stay afloat. The market supports fewer jewelry stores per capita

than when their father got into the business.

"We have to turn our inventory more often, we have lower profit, but there's less competition now," DJ said. "It's been good for us over the years."

A competitive advantage for Necker's is being a full-service store with expert staff who can identify jewelry, give appraisals, and make repairs. But, it also makes it

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**James Hardie**

hard to have multiple stores with that level of staff knowledge.

"It does allow the independent jeweler to be usually very strong in their marketplace, but it's also very hard to duplicate," DJ said.

Custom jewelry is a big part of the business.

"If you can think of it, we can make it," Dave said.

In fact, Dave has a hard time saying no to customers, he admits.

For example, Necker's receives requests to put loved ones' ashes into jewelry or engrave a family member's fingerprint into a custom piece. The ashes require a jeweler to don a mask to keep out any dust and sift the customer's loved one's ashes into a piece of jewelry.

And, the demand for bigger diamonds has grown, DJ said.

Necker's hosts events, too, such as holiday parties and whiskey tastings in its store, one section of which is a lounge area. A fully stocked bar lines one wall, which Dave says is a big hit and can help people, especially men, feel more comfortable shopping in a jewelry store.

The family also runs a jewelry consulting business, DN Promotions, for liquidations.

## THE LESSONS OF RUNNING A SMALL BUSINESS

The Necker brothers banter easily and often. They say humor is part of the business model.

Asked what it means to be the third generation running the jewelry store, Dave joked, "I just wonder how intelligent we are. And whether we should work for someone else."

Weathering the challenges of running a small business is helped by trusted partners who balance each other's strengths, the brothers say.

**The Necker's business is in the top 1% of independent jewelers in the country, according to the company.**

"Working for yourself, I believe the biggest threat of a small business is being good at wearing all the hats," Dave said. "Because you have to be good at everything. I was fortunate to have a brother who had an interest in the financial side of things, so we could divide our duties, which allowed us to wear more hats."

It wasn't always smooth sailing. But, for good or for bad, the brothers always could make decisions and change the direction of the business. Working for a big company, you don't have that kind of say, the brothers say.

"It was a challenge. There's a couple times in the last 35 years that we almost lost everything," Dave said. "It's the ups and downs of business. And there's challenges that you don't recognize right away that can take you out of the game. And you just have to fight through it — gotta hustle a little bit faster and work a little bit harder. It's important that you have a belief system in yourself that you can figure things out. But it's also important to jump before you have all the answers to figure it out. If you wait for all the answers, you're never going to get started."

One unusual challenge came in 2020, during a night of civil unrest in Davenport.

Nationally, protests and riots broke out after a Minneapolis police officer killed George Floyd. Dave said people he knew offered to stand guard, armed, on the roof to protect Necker's from looters. But Dave told them no. More than 80% of merchandise is locked up every night in a vault, anyways, as required by the store's insurance to deter thieves, and Dave didn't want to put anyone in harm's way over property.

That night, surveillance video showed people approaching the store, one carrying a brick, before other cars arrived and a shootout started in the parking lot. More than 30 shell casings were found in the parking lot, but nothing on the building was damaged.

Looking back, Dave is glad no one posted up at the store. They were lucky, or maybe it was karma, that the building was left unscathed.

## FAMILY AND SUPPORTING SMALL BUSINESS ARE IMPORTANT TO NECKER'S

As it goes with family-owned businesses, everyone pitches in. Wives come up for big sales and holiday parties, kids pick up trash in the parking lots, mow the lawn and, once old enough, serve drinks at the bar.

Now, Dave's daughter, Savannah Necker-Levesque, handles marketing and website development.

"When you need extra help, you rely on your family," DJ said.

Dave said the business must always keep evolving.

DJ Necker looks over the estate display at Necker's Jewelers on Tuesday, Dec. 16, in Davenport.

*Katelyn Metzger*



"We just can't, because it got hard, we can't quit and start a new job," Dave said. "This is a living, breathing organism that has to keep evolving," he said. "One of our favorite sayings is, 'if it's not broke, break it anyway, figure out how can we do it better.' We're constantly trying to evolve and become better at what we do."

Supporting local businesses is important to the Necker brothers.

Dave said he will run his car to empty to get to a locally owned gas station, he tries to shop at the local grocery store in

DeWitt and he orders his prescriptions through Scott Drug Pharmacy.

"It's important to support local as best you can because those are the ones that are really woven into your community," Dave said.

### NEXT TRANSITION ON THE MINDS OF THE NECKER BROTHERS

Retirement, someday, is on the minds of Dave, 64, and DJ, 61.

The key word being "someday." But being a family-owned business, it requires

extra planning. Should they sell the business? Or keep it in the family?

It's something the brothers struggle with. For now, though, both love what they do and want to keep doing it, they said.

"If you work for Deere, you just retire and get your cardboard box and walk to the door and thank you very much," DJ said. "Here, you always kind of keep your eye on the store and your business, and as long as your name's on it, it's still attached."

"And more importantly, part of our retirement is the success of the business," Dave added. "So, transition planning is really important because the next generation's got to figure it out. They have to take you out of the game. We can't just leave and gift it. We have to make sure to help it, make sure it's successful."

Dave thinks often about what his father told him about the jewelry business.

"My dad told me jewelry is a happy business," he said. "You get to celebrate with people, see their smiles. I thought, if you can go to work and be happy, that's worth it. I feel blessed to be part of celebrations in so many people's lives."

**"It's important to support local as best you can because those are the ones that are really woven into your community."**

**– Dave Necker**

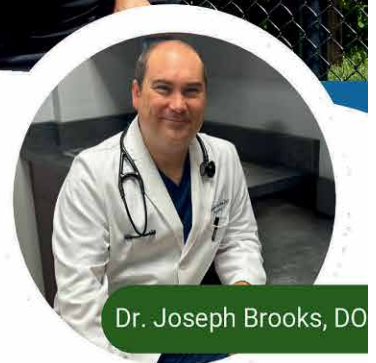


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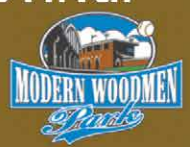
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