

# The end of an era at Hiawatha Chef Supply



Courtesy photo

Lois J. Thompson counted herself among the first female business owners in the Escanaba area, when she started Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc. in 1955. The company's product line was limited to commercial foodservice equipment and supplies, at the time she was photographed taking orders in her office about 20 years later. She soon expanded it to include janitorial equipment and supplies, chemicals, paper and disposables.

Lois J. Thompson, founder of Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc., has died at age 85. She succumbed to emphysema Tuesday, November 27, at Lakeview Assisted Living in Gladstone, Michigan, where she had lived for the past few years. Services were held at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Escanaba, Michigan, the city in which she made her home and built her business. She was entombed at Gardens of Rest Memorial Park and Mausoleum in nearby Wells.

"Lois was a very hard-working businesswoman, at a time when there were not many female-owned businesses in our area," said Phil Wolf, CPA, a part-

ner in Anderson, Tackman & Company, PLC at Kincheloe, Michigan. "I grew to know her as a diligent and competent owner whose work ethic and determination led her business through many difficult economic times."

The former Lois Murker started Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc. in 1955, in partnership with Doug Wescott, a schoolmate and co-worker at a foodservice equipment dealership in Green Bay, Wisconsin. In a speech given 30 years later, Lois said she had just \$1,200 in capital when the company opened its doors March 11 in the Sherman Hotel building at 708 Ludington Street. She said the invest-

ment represented everything she'd saved in six years of working first as a flight attendant, then in air travel sales and charters, as a high school English teacher, and finally a bookkeeper.

"There were very few woman-owned businesses in 1955 and none in the foodservice industry," she said. "I ... signed all of my orders and correspondence L.J. Murker, as I thought no one would answer if it was known that I was a woman."

Two days after opening, the store reportedly sold its entire inventory to K.I. Sawyer Airport in Gwinn, to equip the first dining hall there. With cash in hand, Lois said, "I spent that entire night typing orders to replace the inventory and add more." She would spend the next five years "building inventory by reinvesting all the profits" and "traveling the Upper Peninsula and explaining who I was and what Hiawatha Chef Supply could offer."

As the business grew, the company moved to ever bigger quarters. It relocated first to 1612-1614 Ludington St., to the building that now houses Thrivent Financial and So's Tailor, then to its present spot in the former National Guard armory at 400 N. Lincoln Rd., adding a warehouse there in 1986.

Lois also changed partners. Wescott left the business in 1956 to pursue a career in education and, in 1958, Lois married Ralph Thompson, a factory representative she'd met when he called on her at the store. In a 1975 biography prepared by FEDA, the Foodservice Equipment Distributors Association, she was quoted as saying, "I couldn't afford to hire a salesman at that time, so I had to marry one!"

Together Lois and Ralph continued to grow the business, expanding its product line to include not just commercial foodservice equipment and supplies, but also janitorial equipment and supplies, chemicals, paper and disposables. In addition, they purchased Northern Chemical Company in Escanaba and for eight years, 1978-1986, operated a branch of Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc. in Green Bay. It was in 1978, too, that the company began manufacturing its own high-volume chemicals and compounds under the Hiawatha name.

"Lois was a pacesetter for women, being very, very active in the business world," said Will Carne, owner of Carne's BP Amoco Service in Escanaba

and Gladstone, and chair of Michigan Works! The Job Force Board. She was a tireless worker. "She showed women could do it."

Lois credited her inspiration to a great aunt, owner of a "five-story, square-block department store" in Hibbing, Minnesota. Speaking at the Central Upper Peninsula Entrepreneurship Forum at Northern Michigan University in Marquette in 1985, Lois said she was just 7 when she visited the former dry goods store that her great aunt had started with a \$1,000 loan from her mother. She said, "The day before I left for home, my aunt assigned a clerk to spend all day with me selecting gifts to bring my three sisters and my mother and dad. Consequently, when the question was asked in my Shirley Temple *Think-and-Do Book* on what I wanted to be when I grew up, naturally my answer was, "Have my own business."

The one-time high school valedictorian and summa cum laude graduate of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, took the company's name from "The Song of Hiawatha," a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem set in the Upper Peninsula of her birth.

"Nothing — neither the dissolution of the original partnership or getting married and having a family — dissuaded her," editor Russ Carpenter wrote about Lois in the national foodservice equipment trade magazine, *Dealer*, in July 1974. "In 19 years, she has created a rock-solid business that's thriving, and shows every indication of continued growth."

"Lois was an incredible businesswoman," said Bob Davis, CPMR, owner of Davis & Associates, Inc., in Muskego, Wisconsin. "She was a classic," added Bill Schinner, account manager and sales representative for A.D. Schinner in Milwaukee.

An avid reader and bowler in her free time, she also enjoyed playing tennis and, later, golf. She took an active role in the community, as well. Lois was a member of the Delta County Area Chamber of Commerce, Escanaba Woman's Club, Delta County Historical Society, Parent-Teacher Association, St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Escanaba Elks Lodge 354 Auxiliary, R.C. Hathaway Order of the Eastern Star, of which she was a past

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Worthy Matron, and Phi Beta Kappa National Honor Society.

Wolf said, "She was always concerned about making things better, whether at the workplace or giving to charities and colleges and universities." Her giving earned her a membership in The President's Club of Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan.

"I worked for Lois for more than 20 years and ... I learned a great deal from her," said Mary Feldhusen, general manager of Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc., "especially the importance of paying attention to detail. She was successful in an industry where many others have come and gone. I hope we can keep her legacy alive at Hiawatha Chef and continue to grow the company into an enterprise she would be proud of."

Ralph Thompson died in 1987 and Lois retired eight years later, spending several winters at her second home in North Fort Myers, Florida. But the business remains in the family. Its ownership was transferred to their sons Terry and Tracy in 1995. By then, the company was valued at more than \$1 million. Tracy became sole owner and president, when Terry relocated to Fort Collins, Colorado, in 2003 to start his own foodservice supply company. Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc. now has stores in both Escanaba and Appleton, Wisconsin, and can be found on the Internet at [www.hiawathachef.com](http://www.hiawathachef.com).

Lois is survived by her sons and by her daughter, Candace Oslund of Spalding, Michigan, their three spouses, her 13 grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren and many nieces and nephews. Besides her husband, Lois was preceded in death by her parents and all three of her sisters.

Hiawatha Chef Supply, Inc. is a 50-year member of FEDA and a member of the Excell Foodservice Equipment Dealer Network, NISSCO Group and ISSA: The Worldwide Cleaning Industry Association.