

Streater's Flowers

Streater's Flowers as told to Patchwork by William Streater.

Interviewed by Trevor Kepner & Andrew DiPasquale in the spring of 2001

Streater's Flowers is a large business located in Bloomsburg. It has served the area's floral needs for over 80 years. Streater's has made a large impact on Columbia County's horticulture business by increasing the competition of other flower shops in the area.

William Streater is the current owner of Streater's Flowers, which has been in business since 1929. William took over the family business when his father retired. He grows plants for all occasions, such as mums for Easter, poinsettias for Christmas, and also crops like green peppers and corn.

PATCHWORK: How long has Streater's Flowers been in Columbia County?

STREATER: My grandfather and father bought this place back in 1929. They came from Chinchilla, up above Scranton. They used to raise pickles. They wanted to come here and get a place where they could raise vegetables and grow flowers.

PATCHWORK: Since it's a family-owned business, how is it passed on from generation to generation?

STREATER: Well, we're incorporated. My grandfather and father were in business together as a partnership in 1965. I came in around 1955, right after I got out of Navy. In 1965 we went from a partnership to a corporation. Now I'm in the position where I have to pass the business on to my son...if he wants it.

PATCHWORK: How old is your son?

STREATER: 42, but this is a tough business.

PATCHWORK: Do you have employees now?

STREATER: Oh yeah, we got three fulltime workers, plus my son and myself. My wife works part-time. She does the books, marks down and works part-time in the greenhouses.

PATCHWORK: How have you kept the greenhouses running for so long?

STREATER: We're open year round. We never shut down. We grow poinsettias in the winter. We raise about 30,000 pots for Christmas. Then everything falls around that right after Christmas. We plant all our seeds in January and the first of February for bedding plants. We run about 5,000 six and a half inch mums for Easter. We run about 6,000 hanging baskets for Mother's Day. Incidentally Mother's Day is the biggest shipping day of the year. Easter is big but Mother's Day is bigger. We've got about 8,000 bedding plants. Plus all the vegetables we raise are for farmers. We have peppers, 800,000 pepper plants, and 500,000 zucchini, which we are seeding right now.

PATCHWORK: Is there any time that is a slow growing period?

STREATER: We don't have a slow time. At one time we were a large pom pom grower here. However, South America put us out of business. I used to have 45 people working for me. But now we're down to three. We generate the same amount of money, but with a lot less help. We run corn on the side and we also raise string beans. That helps buy the fuel.

PATCHWORK: Are you proud that Streater's is a family owned business?

STREATER: Yeah, it's quite a feat. Although at 40 years old I had to start over broke from the '72 flood. We lost everything. Back in '96, I could walk down seven steps before I could hit water but of course I had my pump running. We didn't lose any Easter crops. However, we lost the boiler room power but it turned a little bit warmer instead of icy cold. I saw what was going to happen so I got over 100 gallons of kerosene and we burnt that until I could get my coal furnace going again.

PATCHWORK: So the '96 flood didn't cause any damage?

STREATER: In 1936, 1975, and 1996 floods were all within one inch of death. In 1972 the water was about five feet higher.

PATCHWORK: What things in the town of Bloomsburg have changed business for you throughout the years? Are there any other competitors?

STREATER: There are other competitors, but I don't ship in Bloomsburg.

PATCHWORK: Where do you ship?

STREATER: I ship all over the state, like Philadelphia, Allentown, Germantown, Reading, down toward Harrisburg, and all around.

PATCHWORK: Where would you say your biggest shipment would be to as far as a city?

STREATER: For bedding plants, I would say up to Lansdowne, Pennsylvania. I supply up through the valley and all over.

PATCHWORK: Do you ship across the country?

STREATER: No, our trade agreement in this country is horrible, and I'll tell you why. Canada, they ship a six and a half inch pot into this country for about \$3 and they sell it. When they take that money back, there's an exchange there. And they come up with about \$4.75. However, they won't allow the American growers to do that. They don't want anything to do with us as far as shipping that same thing into their country, you follow me? This is what Bush is up there arguing now. He wants free trade to the Americas. Trade any place. You take our stuff and we can send ours up there. That's what should be happening

PATCHWORK: Has Streater's tried to trade with other countries?

STREATER: No, I haven't, but even if I wanted to, the Canadians have made that impossible. It's killing the farmers in this country. Mexico, South America and all that is what really put us out of business as far as a cut flower business because of their labor. They pay like a dollar a day where we pay six or seven dollars an hour. With the automatic watering and all the automatic spraying, you have to use a lot of cash, which you can only use so much. In America the government has you pinned down pretty well with labor laws and spraying material laws and all that. The other countries don't have all the laws we have. It really isn't fair but I don't mind competition.

PATCHWORK: Thank you very much.