

# Forged in steel



Rocky Cianchette, Bonnie Davenport,  
Glen York and Ryan Cianchette.

**Main Line Fence, founded in 1948 as a division of a structural steel company, continues to make inroads in guardrails and fences** *By Kathryn Buxton*

**T**HERE'S AN orderly sturdiness to the look of Main Line Fence in Cumberland. The location has been the company's headquarters since Norris Cianchette bought the company in 1969 and moved it from cramped quarters in downtown Westbrook to nine acres on a former farmstead in the rolling countryside of this quiet southern Maine town. The long, low white offices that Norris commissioned the family construction company, Cianbro, to build are solidly utilitarian in design and construction. It is the fences on display that stand out, from the straightforward picket style to elaborate wrought iron designs.

"I was in school at Lafayette College and my mom told me, 'Your father bought a fence company,'" recounted Rocky Cianchette. "He had sold construction equipment before that – he worked for Chadwick-BaRoss and set up their Caribou and Bangor operations."

So Cianchette spent that summer and his school vacations over the next two years helping out with the new family business. When he graduated with a degree in anthropology in 1971, he went to work for the company full-time, but that was just meant to be temporary.

"I graduated on a Sunday and went to work on that Monday," said Cianchette. "I thought it was only while I figured out what I wanted to do."

Now, 43 years later, Cianchette appears to have no regrets. He said that, while he had considered going to law school, once he was in the working world he realized just how little he liked school and how much he had always liked construction.

"This fits what I like," said Cianchette, who for the past 26 years has been president and general manager of the company.

## Building fences

The roots of Main Line Fence go back to 1948, when business partners Winston C. Robbins, Lloyd White and Ken MacCready decided to add a sideline to their steel erection company, Robbins & White, which they had founded with scaffolding and equipment purchased at auction from the old South Portland Shipyard after World War II. Robbins & White had been operating out of a repurposed foundry building in Westbrook. Wally Harwood, the company's job estimator and accountant, Wyman Foster, an engineer who did work for both companies, and their superintendent, Ed Burns, ran the company from the back of the Robbins & White office (Burns left the company in 1957 to start his own company, Burns Fencing). Ken MacCready's wife, Ruth, worked for both companies managing the office.

It was a good time to start a fence company. The construction industry was booming after

the war, and there was plenty of demand. There was the boom in residential and industrial construction and people and businesses needed fences. Road construction, too, was on the rise. Even before President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956, there was a highway construction boom in New England. The first section of the Maine Turnpike had been built in late 1947; the Portland to Augusta section was completed in 1955.

When Main Line Fence needed more room for equipment and materials, the company purchased a barn and storage yard nearby on Dana Street along the Presumpscot River. Fence building required lots of back-breaking labor, and staff found efficiencies wherever they could. In the early days, crews loaded and unloaded materials, including chain link and steel for guardrail, by hand. Two of company's first crew members, Phil Cyr and Merile Gagnon, fabricated a winch hoist for unloading material, a great time and labor saver.

As the fence side of the business grew, the steel erection business declined. One of the original three, Ken MacCready, had died in 1953, and the partnership between Winston Robbins and Lloyd White was under strain. Robbins & White had originally built steel bridges, but neglected that part of the business when Winston Robbins branched off to build ski lifts in Maine, New Hampshire and

Vermont during the 1960s. Even as Main Line Fence was thriving, the old Robbins & White declined and that partnership dissolved.

Ken's widow had remarried a fisherman named Carl Smith, but continued to work for the company over the years. "Mrs. Smith," as she was known to everyone at Main Line Fence, convinced Winston Robbins to sell the fence company in 1968. She held ownership of the company for only a year before declining health caused her to sell. Many of Main Line's original employees stayed on with the company, and Rocky remembers the respect everyone had for her.

"She was always 'Mrs. Smith,'" recalled Rocky. "No one ever called her by her first name."

### Norris 'knew everybody'

Over the years, Main Line Fence has installed more guardrail than any other fence company operating in Maine. During the glory days of interstate construction from the late 1950s through the 1980s, Main Line crews worked in almost every corner of the state – and throughout Northern New England. For Rocky, who in the early 1970s was just learning the business, that time spent working with crews provided invaluable experience.

It also, on occasion, gave him a great appreciation of his father, Norris, because he got to see, as few sons can, the extensive network of friends and business connections his father had established over the years working first in heavy construction and later in sales for Chadwick-BaRoss.

Rocky remembers one time working on a section of highway near Calais. It was late on a Friday when one of the crew's trucks broke down. He called his father.



**Above: Norris Cianchette in his new Main Line Fence office in 1969. Middle: A flyer advertises the company's new headquarters. Below left: The old work yard in Westbrook. Below right: Main Line commissioned Cianbro to build its Cumberland offices.**

"My dad said, 'Let me make a phone call,'" said Rocky. Soon after, help appeared and his crew was back on the road within hours. "That's when it occurred to me that my dad knew everybody in the state of Maine and northern New England, not just in southern Maine."

Like his father before him, Rocky has a strong sense of community and an appreciation for connections built over decades in the business. He and Main Line Fence are long-time members of the Maine Better Transportation Association. Rocky was president from 1987-1988 and prior to that was on the board and

served on various committees. Main Line is a frequent donor to Camp Susan Curtis, a summer camp for economically disadvantaged children. They also have supported the Boy Scouts' Pine Tree Council and sponsor no fewer than three Little League teams.

"We've had customers come in and say, 'Hey, I used to play on your team,'" said Rocky.

### Shifting markets

When Norris retired in 1986, Rocky took the reins of the company and has seen it through major changes. As highway construction has slowed during the past two decades, the mix of business between highway, industrial-commercial and residential construction has fluctuated. Whereas guardrail installations used to account for about 70 percent of the business, today it occupies only about one-third of Main Line's work time. Security fencing for industrial and commercial clients represents another third. Residential wood and wrought iron fencing makes up the final third. That increased focus on residential work has come as a result of increased competition and recessionary pressures on state highway budgets



MAIN LINE FENCE PHOTOS

and a slowdown in the commercial markets. But the company's adaptability has enabled it to keep its core workforce on board throughout leaner times.

"That last one-third of the business requires half or more of our time and resources – more marketing dollars and more time to work with the customer," said Rocky. The company has invested in equipment to make its own decorative wooden fencing – necessary these days because residential customers are demanding more variety in style and finishes. "It's not just stockade fence anymore," said Rocky.

In some cases, it has also taken more in training and human resources because, he discovered, not all of his crews were able to easily transition between highway, industrial and residential installations. Some crews worked better by being specialized.

In recent years, business has been varied and the company has completed several high profile projects. Like many heavy construction firms, Main Line Fence benefited from the stimulus funding allocated for roads and bridges in 2009 and 2010, completing several large-scale guardrail projects. More recently, there has been utility work – installing fencing



A Main Line crew installs guardrail on the interstate.

MAIN LINE FENCE

for the electrical power grid upgrade and the new natural gas transmission line. The company has worked for most municipalities in southern Maine and recently completed major projects in Cape Elizabeth, Yarmouth and Augusta.

One of the most challenging projects was installing cable barrier in the median of I-295 north of Portland. Rocky said it was gratifying to know that the job his company had installed

had already saved lives by containing a truck that veered off the road and into the median during heavy traffic.

"It was great," said Rocky. "It worked just the way it was supposed to."

#### THIRD GENERATION

Today, there is a third generation of Cianchettes working in the business – Rocky's son, Ryan, who first started working for the company

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when he was in high school and came back to the family business after he earned a degree in construction management at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island. Like his father before him, he has learned the business from the ground up and now is a project manager and estimator for the company. Rocky is visibly proud of his son, and said he hopes that Ryan will one day take over the company from him, just as he did from his father in the mid-1980s.

He also said the company has been extraordinarily fortunate to retain a core of talented people, some who have been with the business for decades. Armand Gagnon is the longest-serving employee. He started with the company when he was just 19 – three years before Norris Cianchette bought the company. Gagnon, whose uncle was one of the company's original employees, now works as a machine operator, welder and mechanic at the Cumberland headquarters and has been with the company for 46 years. Other long-timers include Vice President Glen York (43 years) and Ray Clark (39 years) and Jack Kinne (33 years), both foremen.

Experience has resulted in a good safety record, as well. During the past two years,

the company celebrated 100,000 hours without a reportable work time injury. That is no mean feat, considering that Main Line completes more than 500 different jobs in a typical year. "We complete about a dozen projects every week, so that means our crews have to be sharp and focused," said Rocky.

Another advantage of having worked decades in the business is an appreciation for the important things – including workmanship and quality.

Rocky talked about installing guardrail on the reconstruction of I-295 from Brunswick to Augusta. Main Line had installed the original guardrail on the road in 1977, and one of the original crew members on that job helped out with the reconstruction.

"We looked at the guardrail we were taking out, and it had held up well," said Rocky. "If they hadn't been raising the roadbed, it could have stayed there a lot longer." ■



Main Line's work can be seen all over the northeast, including at Portland Headlight and the Brunswick Naval Air Station.



MAIN LINE FENCE PHOTOS



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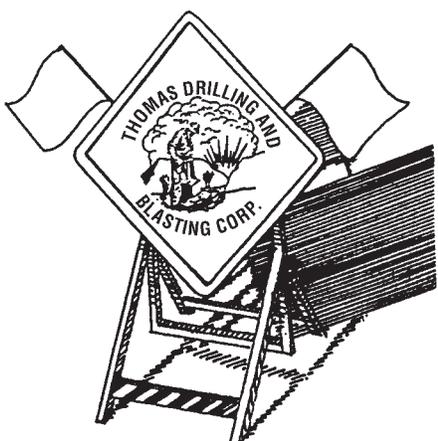
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