

# Michigan tub manufacturers compete for same market

AP — Taking a bath can be a difficult and dangerous experience, sometimes even a humiliating one, for people who need help getting in and out of a standard tub.

To address that, two Grand Traverse area companies make special bathing equipment for the elderly and handicapped.

The launch of a second producer raises the prospect of a "tub-of-war" for sales, but both say the market is growing and there's probably room for all to prosper.

Both companies can trace their roots back about 10 years, when Art Sills and John Kraft came up with a new tub system called the Bather. It featured a front tub wall that lifted up and out of the way.

People could walk in and sit down on the built-in seat without having to climb over a high sill. The front wall was then lowered and sealed into place and the tub

filled to allow for a deep-bath hydromassage.

It proved to be popular for hospitals, nursing homes and even some private homes. In 1983, the Bather received a Michigan New Product Award from the state Department of Commerce and the Michigan Society of Professional Engineers.

Today Silercraft Corp. expects to sell about 350 front-opening bathing units of various styles and configurations. One includes a model with a front wall that swings to the side like a car door. Prices range from \$3,600 up to \$9,000.

But Sills, who in 1989 sold off his share of Silercraft, has since formed his own company, Grand Traverse Technologies Inc. He says he's come up with a new approach that he thinks will have even broader appeal.

It's a tub with a front wall that rolls down and under the tub. The new Freedom Bath unit fits in the

same space as the standard bathtub. Prices, including whirlpool equipment, start at \$3,400.

Once the rollaway door is pulled up, a seal inflates to create a snug fit with the rest of the tub. It's the same type of inflation-seal system used for submarines, the Abrams A-1 tank and nuclear facilities, Sills said.

"I figured if they could do it, I can do it with my bathtub," he said.

So far, Sills has a single preproduction model of his new tub, but said he has the gears turning to begin manufacture and delivery

soon. Getting up to speed is becoming urgent, he said, because a recent showing of the Freedom Bath at trade shows drew very strong interest and firm orders.

Manufacturing will take place in temporary quarters until a new 6,000-square-foot plant in built in Traverse City's Airport Industrial Park, he said.

"That already may be too small based on the interest we are getting," Sills said.

The company's patent application lists 50 features of the Freedom Bath as unique, Sills said.

Another design goal was to make sure the bather wouldn't need help to operate the unit. And it had to look nice.

"This is something they can be proud of and not ashamed of," Sills said. "This looks like a deluxe whirlpool spa. I think it's a very timely product and it works for all markets."

Meanwhile Kraft, president of Silercraft, is rolling out his own line of new bathing products, including a barrier-free shower that fits in a standard shower space and the side-swinging door tub model. "Our effort still remains

focused on the nursing home product line," Kraft said. "There is a good potential market in the home care and retirement markets, but it's still a little ill-defined yet."

Silercraft has come a long way from its rocky years of learning about the industry and is now seeing increased sales and decent profits, Kraft said.

"In some regards, we may be competing with Art, but I doubt many will notice that outside of the local area," he said.

"It'll be interesting and I wish him well."

## Success in building lies in contractor choice

Finding a good contractor and establishing an effective working relationship is a little like courtship and marriage. First you have to make a good match; then you have to live with your choice at

least until the house is finished.

Here are a few tips from Building Ideas magazine.

■ Get the names of several contractors. Ask for recommendations from your architect, banker,

or friends who have recently worked with contractors.

■ Get estimates from several contractors. Ask the ones that interest you to give you rough cost estimates. Discuss ideas with them;

ask for advice. A reliable contractor will tell you an estimate may be slightly higher or lower than the final bid because not all materials and labor are precisely figured at the time.

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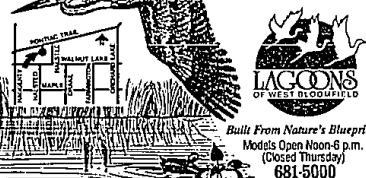
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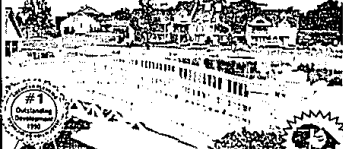
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