



by Kirsten Gehlbach

Blood's Seafood Celebrating 60 Years



In 1947, while the price of gasoline hovered around 15 cents per gallon and a loaf of bread cost 13 cents; while the radio blared Frank Sinatra's "Mam'selle," and big screen audiences chuckled through Bing Crosby's quips and spoofs in *Road to Rio*, Denman "Denny" E. Blood, a meat cutter by trade and his wife, Gladys L. Coutermarsh, opened Blood's Market, a grocery store selling S.S. Pierce products and a full line of beef and chicken, at the corner of 55 South Main Street in White River Junction, Vt.

Their son, Michael "Mike" D. Blood, was born that same year. As soon as Mike was old enough to wander around the sawdust floor along the aisles of canned goods and cracker boxes, he watched and admired his dad at work. As he grew, Mike pitched in where he could.

Sixty years and many hours of sweat and tears later, Mike and his wife Donna are still carrying on the traditions of Blood's Seafood, Catering & Party Rentals Inc. "This is truly a family business," explains Mike.

From the early days of the market and lobster pool through the years of lobster parties, clambakes and barbecues to today's full-service catering and party rentals, family and friends have worked side by side during long days, nights and weekends to keep the customers happy.



"We have built the business on quality, freshness and service. Dad taught us that the key to this business is to treat people the way you want to be treated yourself."

Ever Consider Selling Fresh Fish?

"Denny" Blood established a solid customer base at Blood's Market. "One day, a customer asked Dad, 'Ever considered selling fresh fish and seafood?'" Mike says. Known for seeing a business opportunity when it came along, Denny made some contacts in Boston and Portsmouth, and the fresh fish, packed in wooden barrels with ice along the side, flowed north overnight by truck.

From 1947 to 1957, Mike recalls his dad was "nervous." How much fresh fish should he buy? Would the fish sell? What would be left

(Above) Bloods Market. Hotel Coolidge, WRJ, Vt. Denny is on sidewalk.
(Above left) Mike, age 7, working with Denny, age 44 in 1955.

over? Just when he hit his stride, the landlord increased the rent from \$200 to \$225 a month.

"Dad was upset. I can hear him saying, 'We're not going to pay that kind of money.'"

By the end of the year, Denny had a new plan. Blood's Market closed and Blood's Lobster Pool opened at the Blood homestead on Chandler Road in White River Junction. With wooden tanks in the two-car garage and a reservoir buried in the backyard, they were back in business. This was a residential area, but no one complained – not when you could get fresh lobster from April to November.



Courtesy the Blood Family

Gladys and Denny Blood, August 1943

Just look for the “DB” on the chimney, drive in the driveway and hit the buzzer on the front door. Priced at \$0.69 a pound in the spring, Denny would panic when the price went to \$0.79 a pound in July and August. Denny also converted a Coca-Cola cooler to meet the requests for steamers. These sold at 39 cents per pound or \$16 per bushel during the early summer season with a 10 cent per pound increase after the 4th of July.

Denny then decided to bring the lobsters to the people. On Sunday afternoons, Denny and one of the brothers – Mike and Greg would take turns for the much coveted road trip with Dad – headed to Portsmouth, loaded up the Blood’s Lobster truck and went town to town. The trip included Keene, N.H. and Brattleboro on Tuesday, Bellows Falls and Springfield on Wednesday and Rutland on Thursday. Whenever they ran out, they headed back to Portsmouth to restock. Friday was a big day – Hanover in the morning at Tanzi’s Fruit and Produce on Main Street and Woodstock in the afternoon.

“Dad was never afraid of work. He was a go getter,” says Mike with a proud smile.

No one in the family shied away from getting things done to satisfy the customers whether it was for clambakes, lobster parties and barbecues on the weekends, or when Denny’s friend gave him a homemade clam chowder recipe, still used today.

“I can picture it right now, Mom sitting on the front porch dicing onions, bacon and salt pork and cutting potatoes while still watching for customers to come by.

She would fry it all down, right in her kitchen.”

Just when things were humming along, the Rutland aldermen told Denny to stop selling lobsters from his truck and leave town. Neighbors up on the hill had complained about the smell.

“Dad was furious. The only smell was the melting ice dripping through the fresh seafood,” explains Mike.

The *Rutland Herald* headline read, “Denny Blood Forced to Leave Rutland.” The public, in particular his customers, were outraged at the news. To replace the lost income, Denny built up the clambake and barbecue business. In 1954, Denny, with Mike by his side, filled in the usual winter slump by serving barbecued half-chickens and fixings to skiers as they came off the hill from Killington.

After Mike graduated from Hartford High in 1965, he worked for Rouse Transportation during the week and helped with the catering business on the weekends. In 1968, he married Donna Manning and gained a mentor in her father, William “Bill” Manning. “He was a close friend of mine, a mentor, a great guy.”

When Denny died in 1969, from a heart attack at 57, Mike and his mom decided to continue with the business. But in 1974, his mom wanted to retire and go back to night school. “She offered to sell me the business for \$1,000. The old truck body was worth more than that. I took her up on the offer and bought the business over time.”

While Mike worked for his father-in-law at Hartford Oil Company during the week, he and Donna did catering from their home on Manning Drive on weekends. In 1976, his

The Blood’s home, 1952



Courtesy the Blood Family



Courtesy the Blood Family

Blood’s catering crew and truck.

father-in-law called him into the office. “He knew I wanted to do a seafood market and convinced me, even though I was scared, to do it.”

Mike met with Ned Pettengill of Petco Oil, who owned the building next door to the current Blood’s location on Route 5 in Wilder. Ned agreed to lease Mike a 14’ x 81’ spot for \$200 per month. “I scrounged dollars. I found second hand materials like a reefer [refrigerated compartment] and fixed it. I bought a fiberglass lobster tank, much better than the leaky wooden ones of the old days. We still have the fiberglass tank and the reefer today,” Mike says.

In October of 1976, Mike and Donna opened for business. They sold \$78 worth of fish their first day, back when scrod was \$1.99 per pound and King Crab \$2.99.

Like Father, Like Son

Carrying \$6,000 in debt, Mike was nervous. Just like his father, he would purchase product with no idea what would sell. During the winter, when the roads were bad, business would suffer. Halfway through the winter, when Mike felt down on his luck, his father-in-law set him straight. He told Mike, “You young whipper-snappers think you will make a killing. Sit tight. People will catch on. Advertise and the word will get out. Give it three years, a good college try, and you will see the light of day.” Sure enough, people caught on and the business grew.

In 1984, when Ned Pettengill passed away, Mike purchased the property next door to the market. They built the current headquarters for the business on this location and dedicated (*Continued on page 65*)



Blood's Market in April, 1947

(Continued from page 56) the business to Mike's Mom. Known as the stickler and true perfectionist, she helped with the food preparations even after her official "retirement".

Mike and Donna expanded their seafood takeout and ran a restaurant from 1986 to 1997, until low unemployment in the valley made it hard to find help.

Like his father, Mike is also known for seeing a business opportunity and making things happen. When people started knocking on the door for tents, tables and chairs, Mike "stuck his neck out" to purchase two tents, a few 8' banquet tables and 200 metal chairs to go into the party rental business.

Today, Blood's Seafood, Catering & Party Rentals caters 400 parties a year, owns over 60 tents, 500 tables and 7,000 chairs. The company is a one-stop shop for event planning, catering and equipment. While they do delicious lobster parties, clambakes and barbecues, they cater elegant weddings, corporate gatherings and parties for up to 4,000 people. During the Dartmouth College graduation weekend, they will cater between 15 to 22 parties.

"The business grew on the footsteps of my parents, on the good advice from my father-in-law and the hard work of my wife, children, family and friends," says Mike. "I wish Dad was around to see what we do on a single weekend. Oh, he would be nervous and would probably say, 'You and Mom take care of it,' but he would go along with us and smile." ♦