



rk Miles in Manchester circa the 1950s

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rk miles at 80!

A family business is like a house. When it is built with a sturdy frame and structure, using high-quality materials according to a well-drawn plan, it can last for generations. By building its reputation on a foundation of trust, honesty, and accountability, the Miles family has cemented its business as a dependable and successful regional institution.

According to third-generation family business owner Joe Miles, the origins of the Miles family in Southern Vermont dates back to the 1800s. Before moving to Vermont, Joe's great-grandfather, Frederick Miles, owned and operated an ironworks factory in Copake, New York. At the time, most ironworks were powered by charcoal combustion. Logging operations in New York State had drastically reduced the number of trees in the surrounding areas, and charcoal had become a pricy commodity.

So, Frederick bought land on Red Mountain in West Arlington in 1886, where he set up a logging operation to source fuel for his ironworks business. He ended up selling the timber that he logged and milled to local outfits and businesses. He also owned and operated a small water-powered mill on the Battenkill River. After acquiring property on Railroad Avenue in Arlington, he transitioned into the lumber supply and hardware business and opened the Miles Lumber Company in 1927.

When rk Miles first opened the doors of its Manchester location 80 years ago in 1940, the company started as a lumber and hardware



The E.M. Lathrop / Miles / Vaughn Mill in Arlington, Vermont

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Joe Miles in the Manchester store

distribution hub for local contractors and construction businesses. Over the years, the store has expanded to meet the demands of a changing economy and clientele. Current president of the company, Joe Miles says that when he first joined the company in 1987, he saw that “there was a good business opportunity in the town of Manchester beyond the dusty lumberyard. There was real retail potential, and my dad [Richard K. Miles Jr.] was on board with that idea. We redid the store in 1990 and gave it a much more retail-oriented feel. That worked out pretty darn well.”

Joe explains that the increase in business they experienced after the rebranding led to expansion into new markets, which coincided with the second home housing boom in

the early 2000s. New product lines included doors, windows, and paint.

After the housing boom peaked in the mid-2000s, there was a period of necessary reinvention and restructuring for the company. They re-assessed their locations and distribution strategies. Joe says that they “were often delivering goods as far north as Burlington and as far south as Pittsfield, Massachusetts. It just didn’t make sense. There’s the law of diminishing returns with every mile traveled and it added up pretty quickly.”

In 2005, the Miles family decided to open stores in Middlebury, Vermont and in Williamstown, Massachusetts, thereby shortening the delivery distance between their shop locations and clients. They have since

expanded to Hatfield, Massachusetts, and Stowe and Morrisville, Vermont.

The rk Miles empire is growing even further this year. The company is purchasing the Allen Lumber Company, another family-owned Vermont business. The Allen Lumber Company has four locations in the northern end of the state and has been in operation since 1888. Joe makes it known that as a fellow small family business owner, he “feels a lot of responsibility” in assuming ownership of the company. He reports, “Things are going great! We’re up there now working through the changes and the implementation. We’ve got a great team on that, so it’s going well.”

Joe feels that flexibility has been key to the success of rk Miles. Constant re-assessment is critical. Ultimately, after expanding into other product

lines, rk Miles found their niche by returning to the original formula that made them successful in their early years. As Joe explains, “We can’t be all things to all people. You’ve got to figure out what you’re going to do and you have to do really well in that one area. At the end of the day, we are a building material supplier, and our core customers are general contractors and small contractors. Having recognized that, we continue to focus on lumber, building materials, and hardware that is aimed at that customer base.”

Joe also emphasizes the importance of community connection.

He is a native Vermonter who loved growing up in Arlington. “I had friends up and down the road. I

would wake up on a Saturday, roll out of bed, and call my buddies. We’d play touch football and kick-the-can all day long until we heard the cowbell ring at seven o’clock. Then we knew it was time to come home.”

Joe still lives in Southern Vermont. He and his wife, Christine, raised their children in Manchester, which he says is “a wonderful place to raise a family. There are great things to do: The rink, the schools, the mountains ... all those things that kids want and should be doing. That’s what makes it so terrific.”

Joe’s 27-year-old son Henry is now involved in the family business. He is busy at work, helping with the Allen Lumber acquisition and continuing the tradition of family ownership and

company re-invention.

Joe became involved with the family business in his 20s in a similar fashion to Henry and speaks fondly of his early years working at rk Miles. He emphasizes the crucial role that other employees played in the development of his work ethic. For example, Wayne Norris, the manager who he worked under when he first started in the late 1980s, was “a taskmaster. He would tell me ‘Joe, I want you here at 4:30 in the morning. We’ve got to be on top of Stratton to unload a truck.’ That type of work, that physicality—I really liked that. I learned a lot from Wayne. He was very influential.”

Joe also credits his wife and Brenda Beanland, rk Miles’ current chief





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*“Manchester is a great place to raise a family. There are great things to do: the rink, the schools, the mountains . . . all those things that kids want and should be doing. That’s what makes it so terrific.”*

– Joe Miles

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operating officer, as influential advisors in the company’s success. Brenda began as a receptionist and progressed to her current role. Joe says that one of his primary motivations in running the business is “being part of somebody’s life and seeing their progression.”

True to this philosophy, Joe started an extensive employee training program at rk Miles in 1999, in which the staff teach new hires about the subtleties of positive customer interaction. By providing training far beyond the basic tasks of the job, rk Miles creates an opportunity for new generations of Vermonters joining the workforce to better prepare themselves for a successful career.

They learn valuable customer service skills that Joe says “help [customers] feel good about themselves when they walk into a hardware store.”

When speaking on what the future will bring for rk Miles, Joe looks to his son Henry for inspiration in the same way that his father looked to him. Henry has an optimistic vision for the progression of the family business and according to Joe, envisions rk Miles becoming even more of a central meeting place for local businessmen and homeowners.

Joe is enthusiastic about his son’s contributions, and says, “It’s great to have a young person’s perspective on a business. He’s got great ideas. He’s big on making a place where people

can come together. Where they can feel at home. If we could maintain that feeling in all of our locations, I would really like that.”

For rk Miles, the key to sustained growth and prosperity has been community connection and consistency. By employing local residents and providing excellent customer service and high-quality goods at an honest price, they increase the quality of life and prosperity of the local construction business owners and townspeople who shop at their stores. They have faced countless challenges by remaining flexible, practical, and patient. rk Miles isn’t just helping local contractors and residents build their homes, they are helping to build a better future for Southern Vermont’s economy and community.

## more information

Visit rk Miles’ Manchester Center location at:  
618 Depot Street,  
Manchester Center,  
VT 05255

And visit [rkmiles.com](http://rkmiles.com) for a list of other locations.



To listen to the extended audio interview with Joe Miles, go to VT Voices at [oldmillroadrecording.com](http://oldmillroadrecording.com)



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