

# Fired at 58, now heads own company

By Darlene Meakin  
Tribune Business Writer

The career of Louis Werner, a 58-year-old sausage-maker for a Winnipeg firm, seemed to come to an abrupt end last summer.

After 42 years of dedicated service he was fired and told that he would be replaced by a computer.

Too young to retire and too old to begin stacking up enough years of service before retirement with any other company, Mr. Werner was in a quandary about his future.

But today his life is back on course.

As president and general manager of a company he started with two former co-workers, William Muzik and Paul Werowski, he couldn't be better.

The company, Winnipeg Old Country Sausage Ltd., no more than an idea on paper a few months ago, is fast making its mark in the local meat trade.

Located at 575 Jarvis Ave., it officially opened its brand new plant last weekend. Occupying 8,500 square feet and built at a cost of just over \$1 million, it has been operating since Feb. 5.

The increase in production since that time has been phenomenal. In the first

week of operation, 3,000 pounds of raw meat were processed; but today, the plant processes 8,000 pounds of raw meat daily into smoked and cured meat products.

Sales figures are equally impressive. Old Country Sausage had sales of \$47,000 in February, but they increased to \$170,000 in March.

Mr. Werner anticipates that this month's sales could go as high as \$200,000.

In the longer term, he projects sales reaching \$5 million during the first year in business.

Some people, he says, were less optimistic at first about the company's potential, but now they're having difficulty taking issue with this sales projection.

The pre-Easter period is busy, with consumer demand strong for hams and other smoked meat products.

Beyond Easter comes the summer barbecue season, when there is a lucrative trade in products such as hamburger patties and a true company specialty, wieners.

In fact, Mr. Werner anticipates that except for January and February, which are generally slow months, the plant will continue to operate at full steam on a year-round basis.

It employs 34 full-time workers, including some office staff and a sales force of six.

The plant itself is divided into office space and a large central work area around which are situated three smokehouses and steamers, a pork cutting room, curing room, cooler, and a shipping area where meats are packaged.

A three to four-month delay in getting labels has been a bit of a nuisance, Mr. Werner said; consequently, not all of the company's 30-plus products have "Old Country" wrappings.

But the company has made considerable inroads in being able to market its product line in several major food chains as well as at Eaton's. A number of restaurants also buy from Old Country, and several other potential customers promise to boost sales to higher levels.

Having together served the meat business for 75 years, Mr. Werner said, he and his two partners knew what they wanted in terms of product and plant.

The priority has been to manufacture a quality product.

Mr. Werner, who began in the meat trade when he was 16, boasts of having the

most up-to-date facility of its kind in the province.

By word-of-mouth and past connections, his two sales-oriented partners have established the marketing end of the business.

Phones in the front office ring constantly and a steady flow of customers, orders in hand, comes and goes.

"We feel we just can't go wrong," says Mr. Werner, who also says that in addition to experience "you've just got to have the determination and guts that you're going to make it work."

According to Mr. Werner, realization of the dream he and his partners shared of one day owning their own business has come about with few snags.

There has been encouragement and support from government, plus a \$210,000 DREE grant to help build the plant, and a helpful bank manager aided the three in getting the balance of their financing.

The staff "is terrific . . . a real team," says Mr. Werner.

The partners' only regret is that they didn't go into business for themselves much sooner.

Says Mr. Werner: "Years ago we talked about going on our own . . . Now we wish we had."