

A MATERIAL



Sample glass containers are filled with different grades of vermiculite at Whittemore Company in Lawrence.

SUCCESS

Whittemore Company has been bringing minerals to market for three generations

Who knew? A mineral made deep in the earth millions of years ago from volcanic activity would wind up being the source of dozens of common household, commercial and industrial products.

And that those products would be produced in the Merrimack Valley by a family-owned company that's been around for

100 years.

Vermiculite and perlite are the two shiny metals formed by the cooling of molten lava. After billions of years, these crystals are mined from the earth, put in freight train cars and shipped to Lawrence. There, at a nondescript, gray warehouse, those minerals become a usable, lightweight, nontoxic, flame-retardant substance used in everything from packaging and potting

soil to swimming pools and plaster.

But any business is about more than the product it creates.

At the heart of Whittemore Company, located at 30 Glenn St., Lawrence, are the Sheehys, where a third generation of family members are carefully nurturing and managing the business into its second century.

Led by an affable and exuberant Jeffrey Sheehy, who at 63 is the principal of the

By Bill Kirk • Photos by Tim Jean

company, Whittemore Company didn't start out in the mineral industry. But it has flourished in that field nonetheless.

In fact, Sheehy says, the business was started in 1919 in Roslindale, selling feed, coal and grain. In 1949, the owner at the time got into perlite, making Whittemore Company the oldest perlite manufacturer in the world.

Sheehy's father, Augustine Sheehy, purchased the business in 1973 and moved it to Dundee Park in Andover before moving it again to its present location in 1985.

It was under the Sheehys that vermiculite was added to the manufacturing process in 1993.

Family dynamics

As an enthusiastic Jeffrey Sheehy takes a reporter and photographer on a tour of the eclectic building, his children, Bridget Tipton, 30, and Jeffrey Jr., 28, take care of things in the office under the watchful eye of Kathleen Sheehy, 86, matron of the family.

Both of the younger Sheehys worked other jobs upon graduating from college, but soon came to work for the family business.

"I did consulting for two years, and it was a great experience," Tipton says. "There was a lot of travel."

But then she went with her mother, Karen, and father to Sidney, Australia, for a conference of the Perlite Institute.

"I found myself being more and more interested in the business," she says. "I started in sales, production, financial ... learning to see the whole picture."

Tipton says one of the recent upgrades she favored was the hiring of women, which started a year or so ago. Now, about half the workforce is made up of women, and most of the company's 35 employees are from Lawrence.

"Some of our best workers are women," she says.

Jeffrey Jr., meanwhile, has gravitated mainly toward sales, taking over for John Yurgalewicz, who has retired.

"I started working here in high school, doing odd jobs, bagging, sweeping up piles of dust," says the 2015 graduate of Central Catholic High School in Lawrence.

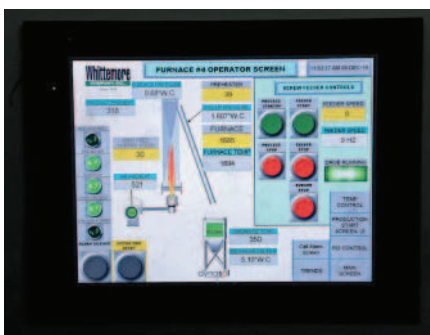
He started full time in July 2016, working in the factory, helping the supervisors, learning how the furnaces worked.

It certainly appears to be a somewhat egalitarian atmosphere.

"We don't have titles around here," Tipton says. "We all do the work."



Jeffrey Sheehy, principal at Whittemore Company, is leading the third generation of his family at the business.



This touch screen controls one of the furnaces used to refine perlite and vermiculite at Whittemore Company.

One of the benefits of working in a family business, they say, is that you are with your family.

"I like seeing family members every day," Tipton says. "You have leniency to get testy with your family. In a corporate environment, you can't show your emotions."

Jeffrey Jr. agrees.

"There's no sugarcoating," he says. "You get right to the point."

They say that for the most part, their work is collaborative.

"Usually, it's me and my sister trying to convince our dad of something," Jeffrey Jr. says, adding that their father is a good boss.

"No matter how ambitious our father can be, he says, 'Try as hard as you can and be happy,'" he says.

While many of their friends view their jobs as easy because it's all in the family, there is definitely pressure to succeed as a company.

The elder Sheehy says that when he got out of college, Whittemore Company was doing about \$800,000 in sales and had just two or three employees.



Jeffrey Sheehy holds a sample of coarse vermiculite, often used in soil.

"Forty years later, we're at \$8.5 million," with 35 workers, he says.

Expanding market

Jeffrey Sheehy says the industry continues to grow worldwide, as more and more uses are found for perlite and vermiculite.

And Whittemore tries to keep up with the demand and with the growing number of uses.

During the nearly two-hour tour of the facility, Sheehy points out the different grades of perlite and vermiculite and their various uses.

One stack of bags, he says, contains vermiculite designed to be used as bedding for swimming pools. Someone realized that putting a 2-inch layer of vermiculite underneath a pool liner creates a softer and less abrasive surface, making liners last longer and creating a more comfortable surface for swimmers' feet.

"There's a big market in the east," Sheehy says.

Nearby, another grade of the material is used for chimney relining. He explains how a vermiculite/cement blend seals chimneys,



Members of the Sheehy family, owners of Whittemore Company, include Kathleen Sheehy, seated; her son Jeffrey Sheehy; and his two children, Bridget Sheehy Tipton and Jeffrey Sheehy Jr.

protecting them from heat and the elements.

One reason is that both vermiculite and perlite are heat resistant, much like asbestos.

Sheehy blanches at the comparison to asbestos, in part because one company in Libby, Montana, for years was pulling the minerals from a mine that was contaminated with asbestos. That mine has been closed, and now, the material is closely monitored for any trace of asbestos.

While asbestos is blamed for thousands of deaths and illnesses among people who work with it, perlite and vermiculite are considered safe enough that only a dust mask is needed for people employed in the plant.

And it is dusty.

During one day in December, shafts of sunlight streamed through warehouse windows, revealing the dust in the air.

Sheehy explains that no dust escapes the building, and, in fact, the byproduct of burning the two minerals at high temperatures is caught in huge dust collectors on the roof of the plant.

The process itself, he says, is fairly simple, and much of it is automated from inside a small room about the size of a walk-in closet.

A load of perlite, for example, will arrive by rail car from mines around the country or overseas, in places like Greece.

It is loaded onto conveyor belts, which then carry it to vertical ovens. Heat guns



Sheehy family members gather with their employees outside the company in Lawrence. The business employs about 35 workers, about half of whom are women.



Whittemore Company is seen in 1978, when it was in Dundee Park in Andover.

blast the material as it is forced out of high-pressure nozzles.

As it “cooks,” it expands into varying sizes of beads, depending on the mineral and the end use. It is then forced up a tube and onto another conveyor belt, which then feeds into a silo. As the silo fills with the finished product, workers pour it into bags, which are then sealed and stacked, having already been marked for household, commercial or industrial use.

The perlite is cooked at about 1,600 degrees, while the vermiculite is heated up to 1,300 degrees before it “pops” and becomes a usable product.

An ‘economic staple’

Jeffrey Sheehy notes that the first thing his father did when he took over the company was to join the Perlite Institute, which holds conferences and meetings all over the world. He says it’s a great way to pick the brains of other manufacturers and learn about new

uses for their product.

They hold meetings in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Turkey and Australia, among other places.

“You meet all the miners and other guys like us,” he says. “You pick up the best ideas at the cocktail parties.”

He says many of the old uses for asbestos have now been switched over to vermiculite, including its use as spray-on insulation, roofing material and even potting soil. Those small, white beads found in bags of potting soil sold in home improvement stores and garden centers are made from the minerals. The beads aerate the soil, while also improving drainage.

The family’s efforts and contributions to the business environment in the Merrimack Valley haven’t gone unnoticed.

Last October, Whittemore Company was named Manufacturer of the Year for the region.

The team was invited to the Statehouse for a ceremony in the Great Hall of Flags with House Speaker Robert DeLeo and Secretary of Housing and Economic Development Mike Kennealy.

A letter from state Rep. Frank Moran, D-Lawrence, congratulated Sheehy and his team for their 100th year in business.

“Since your relocation to Lawrence in 1985, your company has been an economic staple in our community,” Moran wrote. “I wish you continued success.”

If the next 100 years are anything like the last 100, Whittemore Company is sure to see future generations of Sheehys at the helm. **NOB**