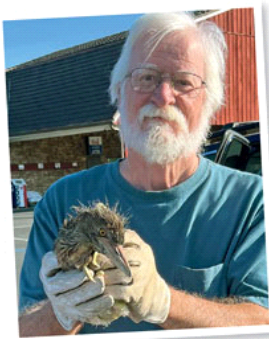


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That's a Lot of Candles

John Friel



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A couple of months ago This Space profiled a Montana IGC that opened in 1896. That's pretty special. But I didn't need to leave the East Coast to help celebrate a green business that's significantly older.

Babikow Greenhouses (Baltimore, Maryland) has been in the same place, owned by the same family, since 1875. They threw a party this fall to celebrate their 150th: lots of food, open bar, greenhouse tours, a band and guests from several surrounding states.

Well over 200 attendees were shuttled from off-site parking—some in an immaculate 1927 Mack truck outfitted as an old-time streetcar, spittoons and all.

That cool antique was built nearly half a century after Babikow's went into the flower business. We reached the range via Babikow Road—a sure sign that your destination has been around a long time.

Russian émigré William E. Babikow began growing produce on 32 acres shortly after the American Civil War. In 1875 the farm transitioned from field-grown edibles to cut flowers in cold frames. Next came greenhouses for flowering potted plants, then bedding. Today's offering includes perennials, natives, grasses, annuals and spring pansies. Landscapers account for nearly 75% of sales; IGCs absorb the rest.

Some historic practices hung around surprisingly long. In the 1980s, potting mixes still included real topsoil, sterilized in a wagon fitted with steam pipes hooked to the boiler room. The aroma is unique. To call it "earthy" puts the Duh! in redundant, but few other adjectives fit. Once smelled, it's forever recognizable.

Between my Montana trip and recent Baltimore bash came two personal sojourns: A Midwest reunion and a New Orleans wedding. I knew nearly as many people at Babikow's as at those family gatherings. Like me, some attendees worked for businesses whose roots reach back here, like Creek Hill Nursery, Green Leaf Enterprises and North Creek Nurseries. Others included customers, brokers, vendors, friends and neighbors.

Babikow's website proudly states that customers appreciate their quality products, but also "reliability, continuity and experience." I asked Tim, who's been President for 16 years, how it felt to helm such a legacy.

"It's been fun, it's been challenging, just trying to be more efficient," he replied. "I'm very proud. The family's done

well.”

There are newer blocks of greenhouses, and modern facilities for soil mixing and order assembly. But the range also includes much older greenhouses, sensibly retrofitted for modern products. In one such house, the date 1914 is cut into a concrete slab.

Tim said, “We’re still using those houses and they still grow great crops.” Indeed, the plants looked terrific in every house I saw. Most greenhouses yield three turns a year, nurturing annuals, pansies, grasses and perennials that then move outdoors.

In hindsight, I feel silly not to have seen this sesquicentennial coming before the invitation arrived; after all, I worked for people named Babikow for over 40 years, at two offshoot companies. I knew the mother ship dated to 1875 and it doesn’t take a Stephen Hawking to subtract one four-digit number from another. But, hey, I was a language major. Doing the math doesn’t come instinctively.

Tim’s father Donald still spends a lot of his time at the greenhouses. Tim lost a brother to cancer. Uncle Paul, who received the Perennial Plant Association’s Grower Award in 2008, passed away in 2023. When Tim was younger, “We always had three to five Babikows around. It’s just my father and me here now.”

The original 32 acres shrank to 27 when a new highway sliced through. Tim said, “We’ve pretty much maximized this footprint.” Employee count peaks in spring at around 45 employees, not counting drivers, when 10 to 13 trucks leave the property each day.

Some employees including growers and buyers have been with the firm for decades. Grower Mike Coombs retired after 48 years in harness, but still helps out in spring.

“I’ve been blessed that those people have stayed so long,” Tim told me. “It’s great to have people who know what to do next. Otherwise, you’d never be able to get away. You couldn’t leave.”

Tim sums up his years in the business thusly: “(Longevity) has its advantages. I didn’t have to reinvent the wheel. We just keep it rolling.” **GP**

John Friel is a freelance writer with more than 40 years of experience in horticulture.