

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

2022 Q2



LONGEVITY & ADAPTABILITY

A Flavor of Its Own



Front entry way to BKB Leather at 815 Elm St.
Bruce Barlow, owner of BKB with some of the staff inside his eclectic studio



The uniqueness of North Lawrence and its community sets it apart and provides local businesses the opportunity to not only survive but thrive long term.

by Darin White, photos by Steven Hertzog

North Lawrence has been around since 1867. A rudimentary ferry was used to cross the Kaw River until 1863, when a toll bridge was built. Before settling on the name of North Lawrence, the location was an independent city originally named Jefferson (most likely because, at the time, it was in Jefferson County). This city had its own government, stores and more. After the area boundaries were redrawn, and it became part of Douglas County, the name was changed to North Lawrence. The independently incorporated North Lawrence didn't exist for long; it was annexed into Lawrence in 1870.

North Lawrence has always had its own flavor, and some from the area have described it as a large family living in different houses. The term "sandrat" was initially a derogatory term to describe North Lawrencians. However, this moniker was embraced and is celebrated by the community as its own. Elden Tefft created a sculpture lovingly titled, "Sandy the Sandrat." A number of businesses have been located in North Lawrence during the years, but there are a few that have maintained various levels of longevity and consider it their home.

BKB Leather

BKB Leather, 815 Elm St., began out of the need to find work when construction worker Bruce Barlow was at home in North Lawrence recovering from an injury. He read books from the library and looked at many potential options for a career as he was crafting his future. He remembers, "Glass-bending and plastic-welding were a couple of my first interests at the time. I called the business BKB Artificer," he explains. "An Artificer is an archaic term for a skilled craftsman. Leather, wood and glass are materials I was familiar working with." He had already done some leatherwork, and friends began to ask him to make and fix tool belts, saddles or couch cushions. Eventually, the name was changed to BKB Leather, which officially opened for business in 1987.

North Lawrence was a natural business location for Barlow and his wife, Kris, who moved into their home in 1985,

where the laundry room became the workshop. As the business grew, it was relocated to the southwest corner of Second and Locust streets, where an old gas station currently houses The Gaslight Tavern. Like a chess game, the business again moved catty-corner to the Union Pacific Depot, on the northeast corner of Second and Locust streets. After the building was torn down, they relocated back to the southwest corner and eventually expanded to a shared space with Barlow's mother, who ran the What-Not-Shop in the southwest corner next to Johnny's Tavern. The business remained in this location until the 5000-square-foot building was sold, so they moved the



40 YEARS
EXPERIENCE
+
CUTTING EDGE
TECHNOLOGY

GET *LYNN*
ON THE LINE!
758-843-LYNN

ELECTRIC

- Commercial
- Industrial
- Multi-Family
- Design Build
- Design Assist
- Remodel

SERVICE

- 24-Hour Service
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Residential
- Parking Lot Lighting
- Panel Upgrades

725 N 2nd Street, Suite K, Lawrence KS 66044

www.LynnElectric.com

business back to their 500-square-foot garage on Elm Street, which was a challenge but was supported by the city, neighbors and clients. "By then, we as a family had expanded into what we like to call the 'Barlow Family Compound,' four connecting properties consisting of four homes and four generations and two family businesses," Barlow reminisces. They also added a second home business to the family compound, Hand to Hand Studio, Long Arm Quilting by Kris Barlow.

Barlow's credo: "I fix things, and I make things." As a company, he handles a wide variety of different projects, including custom leatherwork and repair, shoe repair, orthopedic buildups, saddles and tack, upholstery and more, but the goal is to try and repair anything that walks in the door. Family is very important to the couple. They work hard and play hard. "Making mistakes and finding solutions," Barlow says. "In April 1999, I quit drinking, and that allowed me a clearer vision and practice in my business. Research. Sobriety. Tenacity. Knowing there is always a solution." These are all elements of the success and longevity of his business.

BKB Leather has grown exponentially because Barlow continued to strive to learn. The more he learned, the more opportunities he discovered. The majority of his new clients come from word-of-mouth referrals and repeat clients. If people keep breaking things, he will repair what he can.

Lynn Electric

Lynn Electric has been in business since 1977 and has been located in North Lawrence for 15 years. The original idea to move from 23rd Street to North Lawrence was due to affordability and the close proximity to I-70. The bonus of being located right on the main road, North Second Street, has increased the company's exposure. Co-owner George Grieb explains, "... our favorite thing about North Lawrence is the close-knit community and the businesses that have been here for many years. Johnny's and La Tropicana are two longtime businesses that come to mind."

During the years, the company has chosen to focus on commercial work to become a larger electrical contractor. One change was getting out of single-family new-construction work in the early 2000s. Taking care of dedicated employees and providing good pay and benefits has allowed Lynn Electric to, in turn, provide excellent customer service to its clients, all part of the company's success and growth to more than 50 employees in the last 20 years. In addition to providing residential, commer-



Lynn Electric technicians installing new lights for a remodel on Mass St.

cial and industrial new construction and electrical service work in Kansas City and the surrounding areas, its sister company, Freedom Excavating & Trenching, provides underground utility installations for the fiber optic, electrical, gas and water industries.

In business, change can cause growing pains, and one of the challenges of growing can be expanding too quickly. At one point, this was the case for Lynn Electric. In hindsight, Grieb wishes he would have listened more carefully to the concerns of his network of advisors. Thankfully, the company was able to work through this challenge.

He believes one key to success is perseverance during good times and bad. The company pushed through its challenges and became smarter and stronger. Another thing Grieb thinks has helped Lynn's longevity is being able to change with the times and adjust. Including the use of technology to manage the business is one example of this flexibility. Technology has completely changed the way Lynn transacts business.

Grieb says he wouldn't change his experience working in Lawrence and surrounding areas during the last 30 years. Lynn Electric has worked with almost every community over a 100-mile radius from Lawrence. "Lawrence has been a great community to live and work," he says.

Grieb believes the City of Lawrence can be challenging to work with, and not just because of the codes. However, he is hopeful the City's customer service will become a "state of mind" rather than just a department in a building. There is always room for growth.

Reed Smith LLC – Cordova Motors

The owners of Reed Smith LLC DBA Cordova Motors are three local businessmen, Allen Reed, Wes Smith and Michael Cordova. All of the partners have lived and worked in Lawrence, and called it their homes for much of their lives. Smith is a local attorney and car aficionado. Reed has owned and operated SuperShed Kansas in Lawrence, Topeka, Hutchinson and many other Kansas locations. The DBA's namesake, Cordova, has been in the auto business for 53 years and has sold thousands of cars and trucks. Smith says, "We are really just always doing business with our friends. It's a rare customer who lives in Lawrence that doesn't know one of the three owners."

Kaw Valley Homes, which was owned by the Reed family, was located in North Lawrence. The Reeds provided Cordova Motors a generous price to rent the location as this collective venture was starting out. The location has been a convenient proximity to Topeka, Kansas City and the Kansas City International Airport (MCI). Having had a number of clients fly in from outside of the area and drive new vehicles home, being close to MCI has been ideal. North Lawrence is also a great location for travelers to see the car lot from I-70 or the busy thoroughfare of North Third Street, which is accessed by commuters, shoppers, vacationers and a high number of vehicles. Many customers come from Leavenworth and Jefferson County, and it is an easy drive from Johnson County, Kansas City, Missouri, or Topeka. One of the more unique purchases was a railroad engineer from Arkansas who stopped by the dealership after seeing it from his locomotive. Cordova Motors has made North Lawrence its home, and it has no plans to leave.

"Our bread and butter used to be \$5000 to \$10,000 cars. It has evolved into \$10,000 to \$15,000 vehicles, specializing in Japanese SUVs, Jeeps, work trucks and pickup trucks.

Michael Cordova, one of the three owners of Cordova Motors in their office and on the lot



However, it has sold a number of classics, as well as some high-end cars, over the years," Smith explains. "We just try to provide quality product at a fair price." Cordova Motors sells many "school cars" for local high-schoolers, as well as vehicles for their kids to take to college. It also sells a lot of daily driver cars. Smith enjoys refurbishing and marketing classic cars and pickup trucks, which has been a nice niche market for the dealership.

Cordova has a family photo with his descendants, their spouses and children on the wall inside Cordova Motors. With Cordova's longevity in the auto sales industry, and with the family's history in Lawrence, there is rarely a customer who doesn't know one of them. Coach Max Cordova may have taught or coached them at West Middle School. Perhaps they were one of the Cordova family member's classmates in school or sports, or were involved in other community activities. Lorrie Cordova, MD, may be their doctor. Having a familiar face or name can help build trust and eliminate some of the fear of buying a vehicle.

"The most important choice that I've made in business is not to sacrifice my reputation over a dollar," Cordova says. Smith agrees. "Michael's reputation is second to none, and it's one of the reasons that not only he has thrived but Cordova Motors has thrived." As a business, the men try to relieve any concerns and risk of buying a used car by including a rigorous inspection and refurbishment program. "Any of our cars for sale could be driven on a long trip the day it is purchased," Smith adds.

More than 1000 feet north across the bridge over the mighty Kaw River, Massachusetts Street ends where North Lawrence begins at North Second Street. The majority of the commercial companies in the area line this street, which is also Highway 40 and Highway 59 en route to the I-70 bypass and beyond to neighboring towns. The unique and diverse community continues to grow and develop, overcoming adversity and challenges through its character and close-knit ties, the neighborhood and its investment into the lives of its community members. While businesses will continue to come and go, a number of them will survive and thrive—places such as Cordova Motors, BKB Leatherwork and Lynn Electric. Each looks forward to maintaining its longevity in North Lawrence. ▲

A large circular logo for Cordova Motors. The text inside the circle reads "CORDOVA NORTH LAWRENCE MOTORS" and "SERVING LAWRENCE SINCE 1969". Below the logo, it says "Affordable, Quality, Pre-Owned Vehicles Trade-Ins (request an estimate) Good or Bad Credit - No Problem!". At the bottom, there are two columns of text: "Browse Our Vehicles & Check out our Online Specials CordovaMotors.com" and "1330 North 3rd Street Lawrence KS 66044 785-841-3737".

An advertisement for Hoke-Ley Architecture. It features a photograph of a modern building at night with interior lights visible. The text "HL" is in a circle in the top left. The text "Extraordinary Architecture" is in the middle, with "hoke-ley.com" in a box below it. The name "Hoke-Ley" is written vertically on the right side.



- **Next-day appointments**
- **Commission on Cancer accreditation**
- **Multidisciplinary physician expertise**
- **Personalized, targeted therapies**
- **State-of-the-art technology**
- **Clinical trials & genetic testing**
- **Well-being & survivorship programs**

Hope is closer than you think.

As a regional destination for oncology and hematology care, **LMH Health Cancer Center** is your connection to lifesaving expertise close to home. Our team is led by board-certified physicians with elite training from NCI-designated cancer centers and a shared commitment to the highest standards of

quality care. From traditional therapies to clinical trials, genetic testing, support programs, regional partnerships and more, we ensure the care you need to thrive after a cancer diagnosis—and we deliver it all with a personal touch that feels like home. Learn more at lmh.org/cancercenter.

Find hope in lifesaving cancer care.



A partner for lifelong health