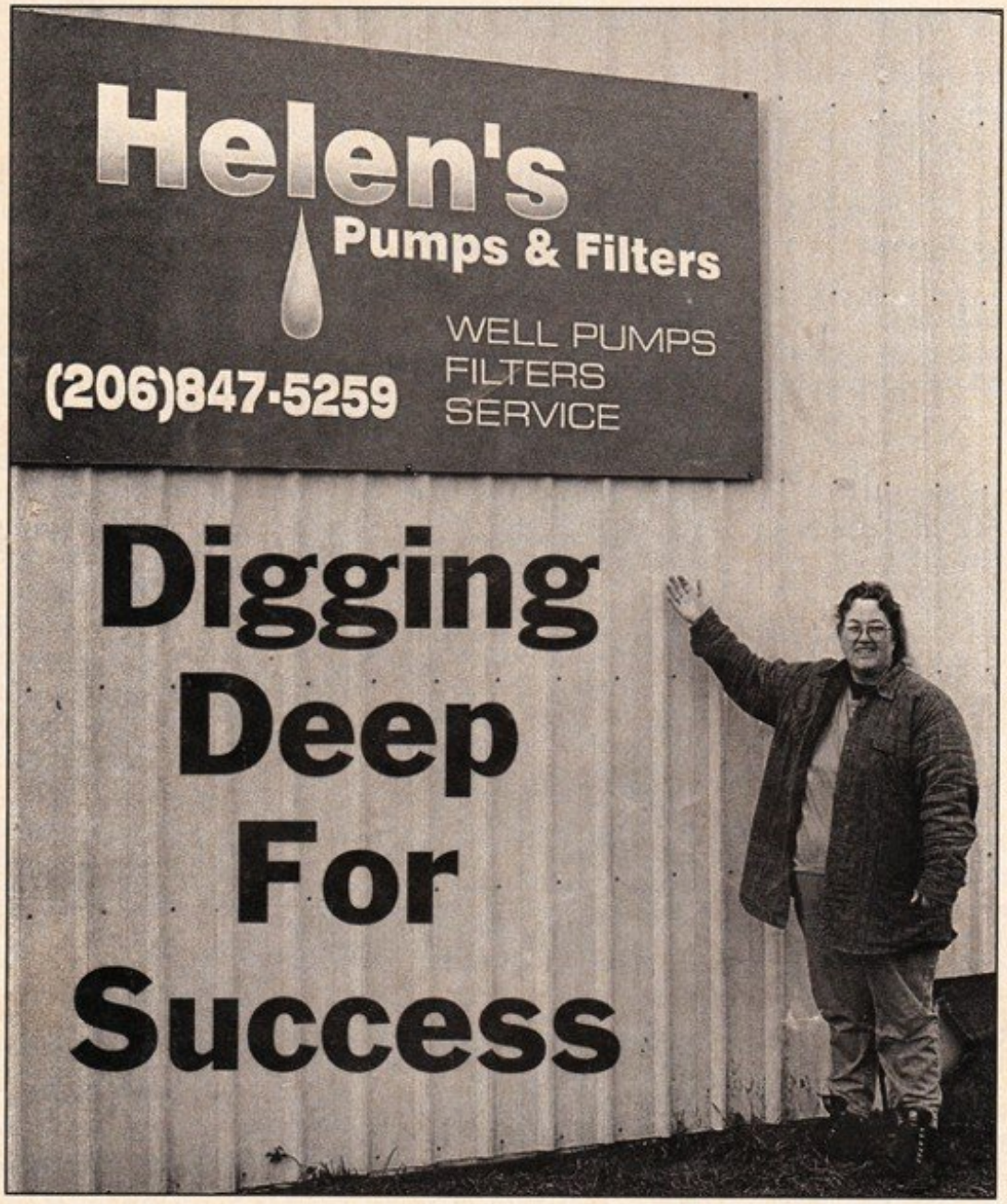

Digging Deep For Success

By Don B. Goddard

Helen Peterson could still be working on a mink ranch, or any of a dozen other low-paying jobs. After she quit high school, the harsh reality of the adult world hit fast. During a short stint in the fabric mills of South Carolina, Helen learned that no matter how sweet or kind a person might be, they still had to produce, to pull their own weight. She also learned the value of good tools ... like the right education.

Helen had a head start in the well drilling and pump business—her folks owned S&K well drilling.

"I had been working on a mink farm when my folks needed another man on their crew," She says. "They needed someone who was able and willing to start from the bottom in learning and earning."

Helen was already making the lowest minimum wage imaginable, so she did qualify there. And nobody was more willing to get out of the mink pens—and that smell—even if it did mean starting at the bottom end of the well and pump business.

"What could it hurt?" Helen asked her dad. "What difference can it make? If you have to train someone, why not train me?"

He did. That training—which Helen says never ends—began with service work on existing pumps and being on call. It was demanding, frustrating and varied work. Where else could you discover so fast just how much you didn't know?

At first, the problems she met and dealt with provided more education than she wanted. One problem in particular plagued her at first, and even now produces a tired smile and a slow shake of her head.

"I don't know how many times I have had to listen to the plaintive cry of 'It's not a pump man, it's a pump woman,'" she says.

Opposite, Helen Peterson outside her shop on the Mountain Highway in Eatonville. Right, Helen with a submersible well pump and its power cable.

Helen learned pipe size, pipe strength and what was best for which application. She discovered the hundred-and-one fittings, each with a name. She learned that even the earth she had walked on for 25 years had first and last names, like Glacial Till or Sandy Loam. All her life, she had "thought it was all just dirt," she says.

Even answering the phone was educational. By listening carefully to the caller's tale of woe, Helen says, "I could sometimes guess the cure before I got to the job, while remembering there were vast numbers of other problems I had yet to meet"—as many as the makes and models of pumps, and all their attached devices, and the waters they moved.

In the beginning, it was using the hoist that gave her the worst jitters. What if she dropped everything, she thought. All that money—all that work—but it wasn't long before she became an expert, and lowering pumps and pipes a hundred feet or so down a well was just part of the job.

The tangle of laws dealing with well drilling and the endless battles with local bureaucrats might be reasons enough to avoid a career in well drilling. Helen had an even better reason. She had almost no capital. "There was no way I could have bought a drilling rig. Anyway, few folks have the money to let a rig sit while they trouble-shoot a new system," she says.

But Helen does have a good working relation with drillers in the Puget Sound area. So she installs the pump and plumbing after the drilling rig leaves—and her job ends only when the faucet runs good water.

All this continued education and long, hard hours of work have paid off for Helen. Today she, her husband, Ray, and two boys, Jason and Jeremy, enjoy some of life's better things ... all because she was willing to put her mind to work.

"It's not your low minimum-wage job," Helen says. "We make a good living, and we get to watch the Nisqually River roll by our home site."

Hanging on the wall at Helen's Pumps and Filters in Eatonville—among her certificates in well drilling, water analysis and water handling—is one that means more to her than all the rest. Helen completed her G.E.D. last November, and if you can spare a moment she will be glad to tell you just how important it really is.

"It was nearly 20 years late in coming," she says. "It took six solid months of adult study, and there were times when I had convinced myself that I could never do it." But all the scary little doubts disappeared the day Helen passed her test.

Helen has a few important words for anyone considering dropping out of school. "Stay and learn," she says. "Then, stay and learn again."

Among Helen's customers are several water systems. This puts her and her crew on call 24 hours a day. "As bad as that might seem," Helen insists, "with high-tech devices like fax and beepers, we find more free time than my folks did in the old drilling business."

Work orders send Helen and her crew all around Puget Sound—and sometimes out upon it. Anderson Island, and the other islands in the Sound, are familiar ground to her equipment and crew. Fall City and North Bend are familiar as well. Wherever sampling must be done, filtration systems designed or sulfur and iron problems solved—she goes.

Her shop on the Mountain Highway is a long way from the textile mills of the South. And her busy career today is far from a young high school dropout's mistake. ■