



Brothers Glenn and Brian Cotton do some figuring while a shop employee works on tub liner at Bath Magic's plant in St. Eustache.

# BATHTUB'S SILVER LINING

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

**B**rian Cotton learned the hard way that renovating a bathroom is not for the occasional handyman. By blending luck with determination, however, he has channelled his experience into a venture that has invaded bathrooms from Nova Scotia to British Columbia.

Cotton was living in a turn-of-the-century house in Laval. It was "a neat old place... that had a bathroom problem," he said.

The problem was the bathtub, which was an eyesore. Before it could be replaced, however, tiles and flooring, too, would have to be removed. That's where the would-be repairman met defeat.

"It turned into a much bigger project than I ever imagined," Cotton said. "I eventually had to get professional help, because I was not able to do it."

He related his story to an acquaintance, Nord Hovermann, who ran a small fibreglass-molding company in Point St. Charles. Hovermann, now Bath Magic's plant manager, suggested he should have left the original tub alone and placed a new one inside. It was meant as a joke, Cotton said, but it was taken seriously.

"I started thinking. I said, 'Jeez, you know, I think there's some possibilities there.' That's how the whole thing got started."

It took a year of experimenting in Hovermann's shop before Cotton figured out how to place a liner, molded in an epoxy form, into an existing tub. Because the old tub stays in place, the need to uproot surrounding walls and floor is eliminated.

Cotton thought he had developed something new, and set up a company called Bath Magic Inc. to market it. Then came the jolt. Browsing through a trade magazine, he saw an ad for a similar system.

"We thought we had invented the product," he recalled. "It was a complete shock. It was as if somebody let the wind out of a big balloon."

The ad was for American Bathtub Liners Inc. of Arizona, which had begun selling a similar process in

1978, seven years before Bath Magic went to market. American Bathtub Liners sells across the U.S. and is the biggest in the field, according to Bill Ginalski, vice-president (operations) at the parent company, ReBath Corp.

But Cotton and his brothers, Glenn and Wayne, had invested their savings — he won't say how much — in Bath Magic and had worked two years without pay. There was no turning back.

Another jolt awaited: the high number of molds it would take to be able to sell across Canada. Cotton thought 20 or 30 shapes and sizes of tubs would be needed. Now, though, the catalogue has grown beyond 300 entries, and there is no end in sight.

Driven by customer demand, Bath Magic also installs bath walls, either separately or combined with tub-liners. Custom-designed, they are applied to existing walls, again eliminating the need for laborious removal of tiles. The one-piece walls are seamless and water-tight, and reach to the ceiling.

Cotton expects to install 10,000 liners or walls this year. He would not disclose revenue, but said annual sales of Bath Magic products by its 22 dealers are nearing \$7 million. By comparison, annual sales for American Bathtub Liners's 37 U.S. franchises are at a level of about \$12 million U.S.

Bath Magic's first customers were commercial users, such as the Royal York Hotel and the Salvation Army, both in Toronto. Now, however, residential work accounts for 65 per cent of volume.

Last summer, Gordon Stephan, owner of a Bath Fitter franchise in Hamilton, sold 20 tubs and 20 walls to a McMaster University residence in Hamilton, and 57 walls to a Brock University residence in St. Catharines, Ont. He charges \$490 to \$540 for a tub-liner and \$560 to \$625 for a wall.

With about 250 units installed in his first nine months, despite the recession, he is bullish. "The unlimited potential is there," he said.

Since August, N.H.D. Developments Ltd. in Toronto has installed three Bath Magic liners and

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## Other ways to restore tubs



GAZETTE, DAVE SIDAWAY

Brothers Glenn and Brian Cotton are equal partners in Bath Magic.

# BATHTUB

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eight walls as a trial. A property manager with the company, Dave Schultz, said "we've got eight very happy tenants right now."

N.H.D., which owns and rents out 2,100 townhouse and apartment units, expects to buy 50 walls and 25 liners a year. "We've just got started," he said.

Most of N.H.D.'s buildings are 20 years old, and the bathrooms need renovation. Under the old system of pulling out tubs, tiles, and floorings, the bathrooms were unusable for four days.

"With Bath Magic," Schultz remarked, "I would say that bathroom is tied up for no more than six hours. That's a real convenience for our tenants, and the cost is less."

The liners, finished in acrylic, are designed to be bright and clean-looking, and to retain water heat better than steel or cast-iron units. They are guaranteed for three years, and carry a life expectancy of 20 to 25 years, Cotton said.

Another way to restore an old bathtub is by resurfacing it. Bathtub Doctor Reg'd. of Montreal has been doing that for 17 years. The company now supplies liners as well, which it acquires from a sub-contractor.

Bathtub Doctor's manager, Lisette Roberts, said she prefers the old way. Re-enamelling can be done in any color, whereas liners come in white or off-white only, she said. Her company charges \$300 to re-finish and \$600 for a liner.

The new finish lasts as long as the original, Roberts maintained. But she conceded there can be problems.

"There are a lot of people in this business who don't know what they're doing, so you have trouble with discoloration or peeling."

Brian Cotton, 44, is president of Bath Magic. Cotton, a former salesman, looks after administration. Sales are looked after by Glenn, his 30-year-old brother, who is the company's vice-president. The two are 50-50 owners. Their brother, Wayne, has left the company.

The business, which has 20 employees, operates out of a 13,000-square-foot building in St. Eustache. There are two more employees in Toronto and four in Burlington, Vt., where the company owns a retail outlet and began marketing franchises last September. Of three franchises sold so far, two were in Ontario and one was in Boston.

So far, Bath Magic and American Bathtub Liners have avoided confrontation. "There is room in the marketplace for both of us," Ginalski said.

But the relationship may heat up. The U.S. operator already has a dealer near Cornwall, Ont., and another in Edmonton, and is negotiating with two more in Canada. Bath Magic, for its part, is trying to drive south through its new franchising program.