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Industry - Alpine

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A breath of fresh air

Alpine Industries makes 'thunderstorms in a box'

By **SHARON CASKEY HAYES**
Times-News Business Editor

GREENEVILLE — You have to see it, actually breathe it, to believe it.

Alpine Industries can't sell its technology off a store shelf. Nor can it market the product through normal advertising channels.

But the company is one of the fastest growing in the nation, doubling in size in just the last 120 days.

So what exactly is it?

Co-owner Mike Jackson says he's selling "thunderstorms in a box."

"It duplicates what nature does to clean the air outdoors," Jackson said.

Alpine is an air purifying system that works differently than anything else on the market. Unlike typical air cleaners, Alpine uses no filters to siphon dust particles from the air.

Instead, Alpine uses a unique technology that ionizes the air, just as nature does during a summer thunderstorm.

Jackson's partner Bill Converse invented the technology more than ten years ago.

"Bill didn't want to make something like everybody else, another filter for your furnace. Most of the air in your home never gets to a furnace, so most of the air never gets filtered," Jackson said.

Instead, Alpine's technology goes into the home's environment, purifying "every square inch of air in the home," he said.

Jackson uses an onion to demonstrate the system's abilities. He rubs the onion on the back of his hand, then holds it up to an Alpine air purifier for 60 seconds. His hand is still wet, but the smell is gone.

"The product works, and we let people try it for themselves to prove it," Jackson said.

Therein lies the company's success.

Alpine Industries sells its products through direct marketing, recruiting people to work out of their homes to sell the air purification systems through product demonstrations.

Currently, there are about 60,000 Alpine dealers in North America. Last month alone, the company recruited 13,500 new dealers to its fold.

Direct marketing is used because the Alpine system isn't cheap. An Alpine capable of cleaning a 2,500-square-foot home costs \$595,



Times-News photo — Sharon Caskey Hayes

Alpine Industries executive Mike Jackson says the company's air purification system 'duplicates what nature does to clean the air outdoors.'

while one designed to clean an apartment costs \$395.

"Put a \$595 air cleaner on a shelf next to a \$39 air filter, and which one do you think the customer will buy?" Jackson said.

But customers who see the Alpine system work for themselves know what they're paying for.

Jackson said the Alpine system can help various health problems. He tells the story of a family with two daughters, one of whom has had severe allergies since birth. After getting an Alpine system, the child has had "no problems."

Indeed, Converse — the man who invented the machine — knew he had discovered something special because of his wife's headaches.

Eva Converse had suffered from severe migraines for years. But those headaches disappeared when she visited her husband in his laboratory, while he was working on the air

purification technology.

Apparently Eva Converse's migraines were caused by indoor air pollution.

Jackson said that indoor air pollution started getting worse about 20 years ago, during the nation's energy crisis. At that time, people started adopting energy conservation practices, such as installing more insulation and double-paned windows. While those practices lowered heating and cooling costs, they kept natural air outside, trapping dust particles and other forms of pollution inside.

Today word of the Alpine air purification system is spreading.

Jackson said the company gets thousands of customer letters a year, thanking it for the technology.

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Alpine markets 'thunderstorms in a box'

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Meanwhile sales keep swelling, and the company can hardly keep up with the orders.

Jackson said that Alpine recorded \$23 million in wholesale sales — or about \$45 million in retail sales — last month alone. In one day last week, the company's customer service center took more than 5,700 calls.

And all this new growth is happening right here in Northeast Tennessee.

Alpine, previously headquartered in Minnesota, expanded into Greeneville four months ago.

Since then, the company has operated out of a temporary facility in the Mt. Pleasant Industrial Park, and currently employs more than 450 people there.

Another expansion is on the horizon.

Alpine is searching for land in the Greeneville area to build three new manufac-

turing facilities with about 200,000 square feet each; a research and development center; and corporate offices.

And the company plans to construct a facility that would broadcast via satellite training programs to Alpine dealers across North America.

Moreover, Alpine plans to bring thousands of its dealers and associates to Northeast Tennessee.

Jackson said the company has already booked the MeadowView Conference Resort & Convention Center in Kingsport for next spring, when it holds its annual convention. Some 5,000 Alpine dealers are expected to converge here for the event.

In conjunction with the convention, Alpine will host the 1998 Iris Festival, a two-day arts and crafts gala in downtown Greeneville. Jackson said the festival will give Alpine's out-of-town dealers a "flavor for East Tennessee."

He said Alpine will bring

thousands of visitors to the area all year round. "We'll house them in hotels in the Tri-Cities. We'll bus them to Greeneville. They'll eat at restaurants throughout the area," Jackson said.

And area merchants will know when Alpine dealers come to town. During the company's annual convention, Alpine gives each of its people \$200 in spending money — all in the form of \$2 bills.

Alpine also will boost the local economy through employment.

Already, Alpine has hired more than 450 people since it set up shop in Greeneville. That number is expected to swell to nearly 3,000 once Alpine's building plans are complete.

Alpine will keep its manufacturing facilities in Minnesota. After all, Jackson said, "they built this company."

"And we're very loyal to those people, so whenever possible, we'll keep those op-

erations going," he said.

But both Jackson and Converse are moving their families to the Greeneville area.

Jackson said he bought a couple hundred acres where his children can enjoy farm animals and country living.

"It's quite a bit different from the Twin Cities," he said.

He said he's often asked why Alpine decided to relocate its corporate base to Greeneville, along with manufacturing operations that will eventually employ 3,000.

He said his answer has to do with a "gut feeling."

"Bill and I run our business on gut feelings. We've been all over the world, doing seminars and trainings, and you kind of get a feel for areas.

"We were in Johnson City where one of our affiliate companies, Best Investments, operates. We started talking about the fact that we were growing so rapidly, that we needed to relocate and grow

the operations. Somebody said have you ever thought about this area down here? The next thing you know, here we are," Jackson said.

"It's been a good move," he said.

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In brief

Carico gets no jail time for assault

• WISE — A Coeburn man convicted Wednesday of assaulting a 16-year-old girl was given a suspended 90-day jail sentence and 12 months' probation. Michael Joe Carico, 20, Fairview Road was riding in a car driven by the juvenile on May 19 when the assault occurred. According to a criminal complaint made by the girl, Carico grabbed her arm, beat it on the gear shift and started choking her. They began wrestling and he kicked her near the ribs, the complaint stated, and when the car stopped, he got out, grabbed her arm and smacked her in the face, before she was able to escape.

Bluff City man charged with theft

• JOHNSON CITY — A 20-year-old Bluff City man was arrested Tuesday and charged with felony theft over \$500. Joseph J. Morrell, 448 Flatwood Drive, was arrested after officers investigated a call at Kmart Super Center, 3019 Peoples St., police said. Store security charged Morrell with taking a portable television and two VCRs and leaving the store without paying, according to a news release. Morrell is scheduled to appear in Sessions Court July 24 at 9 a.m. His bond has been set at \$3,000.

Suicide notes cite sheriff's department

• BLOUNTVILLE — Suicide notes left by the chief of the nursing staff at the Sullivan County jail suggest he was struggling with personal problems and dissatisfied with his job. "What has brought me to all this? Sullivan County Sheriff's Department," Norman Henry "Tim" Pippin wrote shortly before he died. Sheriff Keith Carr said Pippin never complained to his employers about his position. Authorities found notes to his wife, son, friends and a lawyer along with Pippin's body in his Volkswagen Fox last month. Pippin apparently believed that Medicaid funds had been mishandled by someone in the Sullivan County Health Department. Carr turned over a file of information Pippin apparently believed pointed to that to county District Attorney General Greeley Wells. Wells didn't find any substance to the charges, said Carr. Wells couldn't be reached for comment. Pippin was upset over his divorce.

Sundquist supports manufacturer

Tenn. governor says 'nothing has changed' regarding Alpine's expansion



Tenn. Gov. Don Sundquist, left, welcomes Alpine President William Converse to Greeneville in this 1996 photo. The company's products were the subject of a critical story on 'Dateline NBC' Tuesday.

By SHARON CASKEY HAYES
Times-News Business Editor

Gov. Don Sundquist on Wednesday threw his support behind Greeneville-based Alpine Industries, a day after a national television network broadcast claims that Alpine's products are unsafe.

Meanwhile, Alpine's founder William Converse said "absolutely nothing has changed" regarding the company's multimillion-dollar expansion into Greene County.

"Alpine is proud to be a part of the community in Greeneville and looks forward to the start of our world headquarters in the very near future," Converse said.

Alpine was the target of a "Dateline NBC" investigation Tuesday night, which claimed that Alpine's ozone-producing products could pose a health risk to users. Alpine says its air purifier cleans the air through ionization,

just as nature cleans the atmosphere after a thunderstorm.

On Wednesday, Gov. Sundquist vowed his support for the company, which moved its headquarters from Minnesota to Greeneville earlier this year, promising to bring with it as many as 2,700 jobs.

"The last time I checked they already had over 500 people employed. They're ahead of the schedule," Sundquist said proudly.

He said he didn't see the "Dateline NBC" report, and was unaware of any lawsuits involving Alpine, or its history in Minnesota.

In 1992, the Minnesota Attorney General's Office sued Alpine for consumer fraud, alleging the company failed to warn consumers of potential health threats of ozone. Alpine was found liable in the case and fined \$70,000 in civil penalties and \$104,000 in court

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AAA report finds gasoline prices lower

By KAREN PIERCE
Times-News Staff Writer

Average retail gasoline prices were mostly lower this week, according to the AAA East Tennessee Fuel Gauge Report.

Wednesday's nonscientific spot check of gas station sign board prices for regular, self-service, unleaded fuel showed averages dropped in Kingsport, Johnson City and Knoxville, while Bristol prices remained the same as last week's.

Wednesday's prices represent drops of between two and 12 cents per gallon from the same period in 1996.

"We're really in pretty good shape right now as far as gas prices are concerned compared to last year," said Don Lindsey, director of public affairs for AAA East Tennessee. "I know we're down several cents. That's always good news from a buyer's point of view."

Nationally, prices for the Independence Day holiday fell five cents from last year. The national cash price average for self-service regular unleaded stands at \$1.25. The Southeast reported the lowest average price — \$1.17, 4.3 cents less than 1996.

Kingsport's average came down 1.8 cents from last week to \$1.104. The city's high remained the same at \$1.139, but the low dropped three cents to \$1.049.

The Johnson City average dropped 3.5 cents from last week to \$1.105. The city's high dropped two cents to \$1.129, while the low dropped three cents to \$1.089.

Knoxville's average fell four tenths of a cent, sending that figure to \$1.087 this week. The highest price dropped two cents to \$1.119, and the lowest price remained the same at \$1.049.

In Bristol, the average remained the same at \$1.38. The high stuck at \$1.69, and the low stayed at \$1.109.

AAA's national Fuel Gauge Report is based on figures from Oil Price Information Service.

Allen seeking to protect

