

By ANGEL ROY-Staff Writer  
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A late night drive in April 1941 started it all. When Ken Cota and his friend, Bingo Lawlor, began their drive from Bellows Falls to Springfield their vehicle collided with a deer on Missing Link Road. That moment proved, indeed, to be the missing link for Cota.

On the long walk back to town, Lawlor told Cota that he was joining the Navy and needed to sell his kerosene business. After a discussion between Cota and his wife, Helen, the Cota & Cota Oil was born May 1, 1941.

Now, 68 years later, behind the desk at Cota & Cota with a wooden Vermont-shaped clock hanging on the wall behind him, sits Ken Cota's bow tie-clad grandson, and president of the company, Sean Cota. Cota, and his brother Casey, are co-owners.

Cota grew up in the fuel business alongside his father and grandfather; he began working with the company when he was 14, helping on the kerosene route, filling barrels, and cleaning furnaces. "My father never asked me if I wanted to join the business, and I never asked him," Cota said.

It wasn't until Cota was flunking French at Kalamazoo College at a time when the company was on the verge of buying a large competitor that his father, Hugh, told him that if interested, he would have a job.

Cota then quickly changed his major from international economics with a minor in French, to what he calls a "real degree", business marketing, and continued to work at the company during school vacations until he came on as a full-time employee after graduation.

In addition to teaching him the ropes, Hugh Cota encouraged his son to go to trade association and government meetings

so that he would know what was going on in the industry as a whole.

“Between (attending meetings) and learning from my uncle Chris (Cota, who is the current senior vice-president), I learned a lot about both politics, and how the regulation system works,” Cota said. “However, the most important thing I learned though is that just because we are small, it doesn’t mean that we can’t develop the knowledge equal to companies hundreds or thousands times our size.”

Most recently, Cota has been making waves by speculating in energy markets on a national level for the heating and gas retailing industries.

In addition to the U.S. Senate, Cota has testified in front of such national organizations as the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and the U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commissions.

“The House, and Congress are working to re-regulate the markets to bring them to back to the point before ENRON controlled the market,” Cota said. “They are (re-regulating) in the interest of investors wanting to make real investments, and in the interest of consumers.”

Cota was featured on an episode of 60 Minutes on CBS in January to share his opinions derived from his local, and national, experiences with trading, and the market. Cota also spoke of fuel issues on the international level and of warning petroleum marketers several years ago that the “financial bubble” would burst as it did over the past year.

“ENRON rewrote all commodity trading rules to do their own in-house trading; it was very brilliant and made them lots of money, before they went belly-up and took a whole bunch of peoples money with them,” Cota said of the poor trading regulations. “(After that) the commodity trading rules were never changed.”

It is to no surprise that with his experiences in government, it has been suggested to Cota that run for political office.

“I know how it works, I’m a pragmatist, if something is very obvious I will be happy to point out the pink elephant in the room that for political purposes no one wants to recognize,” Cota said of the political system. “The dilemma is that I know what I have to do to win and to be successful (in an elected position), you have to compromise on principles” Coming from Vermont is something that the Bellows Falls-raised Cota says is an advantage politically.

“An advantage for politicians coming from a small state is that we do know everybody on the state level, and never have to deal with politics that they have in a lot of other states that have so much money that they can’t get things done,” Cota said. “When small state politicians go to the national level they don’t have the proper amount of fear, as the saying goes, “fools rush in, where angels fear to tread, 1 our state provides lots of fools, and I am one of them.”