

COVER

Pool man builds hectic business helping people relax

by Matthew Gallagher

Try as he might, even Jim Dobson's pet black cat, "Cat," cannot keep up with his energetic owner. Dashing from room to room, up the stairs or into his office on Spruce Street off Route 202 in New Milford to retrieve a paper or photograph, Dobson is always two steps ahead of his feline friend.

Since 1968, Dobson's thriving pool business, Dobson Pools, has been serving Connecticut residents with "the highest quality Gunite pools," as an advertisement in a local paper proclaims. Dobson, however, rarely advertises, unless it involves a donation to a special cause. Apparently, he has built his client base on word of mouth alone.

"We build all over Connecticut. We've built in Maine and Watch Hill, Rhode Island, and Martha's Vineyard, where a customer of mine had a summer home," said Dobson, a friendly, robust man, dressed casually in a tan leather jacket and slacks, who counts Henry Kissinger among his more famous clients. Dobson seems to acquire a steady flow of energy from the ever-present dish of jelly beans on his desk.

"The pools are constructed with Gunite, which is a specially applied concrete. It is the finest way to build a pool—applying concrete under air pressure—and also, because of this, more expensive." He explains that a custom-built Dobson pool begins at \$30,000 and carries a five-year guarantee.

"The prices vary, depending on pool size, waterfalls or spas, which are extra. But we do the complete job—no subcon-

tractors," he emphasizes, adding that he typically has a three-or-four-man team working with him on the sites.

One satisfied customer, among many, is Charles "Chick" Frosch, president of Union Savings Bank in Danbury for the past 12 years. "We actually contacted him before we built our house, in fact, before we bought the land," recalled

Dobson came heartily recommended.

"Jim literally did everything he said he would and for the price we had agreed upon," said Frosch. "He got there at 7 a.m. one morning with a truck full of workers, spray painted the area and, by 5:30 p.m., when I returned home, had the foundation dug out and the area all formed. I was impressed."

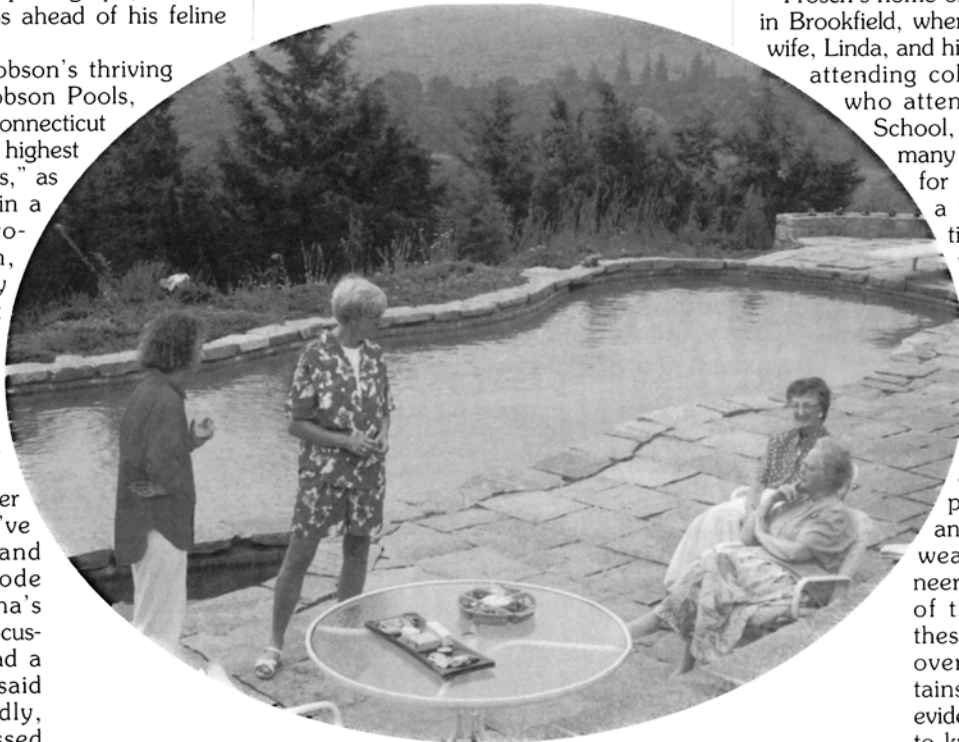
Frosch's home on Trailing Ridge Road in Brookfield, where he resides with his wife, Linda, and his children, Scott, now attending college, and Michelle, who attends Brookfield High School, provides one of the many breathtaking settings for Dobson's pools. "It's a really exciting location, on top of a hill, with a beautiful view of the Connecticut countryside," said Frosch.

Dobson has built others like it around Connecticut, providing his clients with an enviable vantage point to swim, relax and enjoy the summer weather. "It's an engineering feat to do some of these jobs, pinning these pools into ledges, overlooking the mountains, Dobson said, with evident pride. "You have to know something about architecture and design. Also, there is so much rock in this part of the country, that it's just nat-

ural to make stone part of the pool setting.

"Aesthetic principles do matter, but finally a pool is about how it is enjoyed. You can keep an eye on the kids and have a lot of family fun, provided you're careful," said Dobson.

A marketing major in college, Dobson was born and raised in Darien. He started doing pool work in high school, between stints in the Army and during college. In his early days, he was able to purchase a white 1955 Thunderbird from a lady in Stamford for \$650 after



The pool Jim Dobson built for the Frosches in Brookfield provides a magnificent focal point for gatherings of family and friends.

Frosch, when interviewed at the bank's Main Street office. He noted that he wanted to be sure the pool did not interfere with the septic system.

"Once we built the house, he met with me to scope out where the pool would go. He surveyed the area, wrote a number on a scrap of paper, and that was our contract, along with a handshake," Frosch added, smiling.

Work on the pool began in earnest in the spring of 1988. Frosch was well aware of "horror stories" he had heard from friends who had pools built, but

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vacuuming her pool. Since then, he has become an avid collector with over half a dozen middle '50s "birds."

"I started out at Wagner Pools in Darien, the oldest pool company in America, founded in 1918," said Dobson. "I had a background in cleaning pools. As a young man, I had hired some people to work for me. Then, in 1968, Wagner offered me my own business, Wagner Pools of Northwest Connecticut.

"In 1973, I left them on very good terms and started Dobson Pools. Wagner had given me excellent experience. No

question they got me started. And then I was on my own. I chose this area and bought a home and property. That was

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the beginning." During this time, Dobson also married his wife, Lucy. They have three children, Catherine, 18, who attends Colorado College, Brian, 14, who attends Shepaug Valley High School, and Julie, 10.

The key to building the business, he maintains, was "sticking close to the area" and growing from there. He con-

centrates on his clients during the pleasant seasons of the year and in winter can be found at Lake Tahoe skiing from the cabin which he built 20 years ago.

In addition to Kissinger, Dobson can name other famous clients, but prefers to keep their identities private. "I'm sure they wouldn't mind, they liked our work, but let's just say these are people who are in the arts, politics, business, heads of corporations, you name it. I'm their pool man, and I'm very proud of that title."

The most common complaint Dobson said he gets is one of regret. Many of his clients wished they had built their pools sooner.

"But if you're a businessman or other professional, you do get busy making a living. I have an awful lot of clients who have a second home here and drive in

from the city. This is their recreation, their enjoyment, and they can have it in the relative safety of their own backyard," said Dobson.

For the Frosches, like other families, it also provides a comforting and supervised haven for their children to play. "Jim advised against us getting a diving board, for safety reasons, but we wanted it," Frosch recalled. "The pool is useful to us for our children, to bring their friends over, and to have a good time. It's also nice to know where they are."

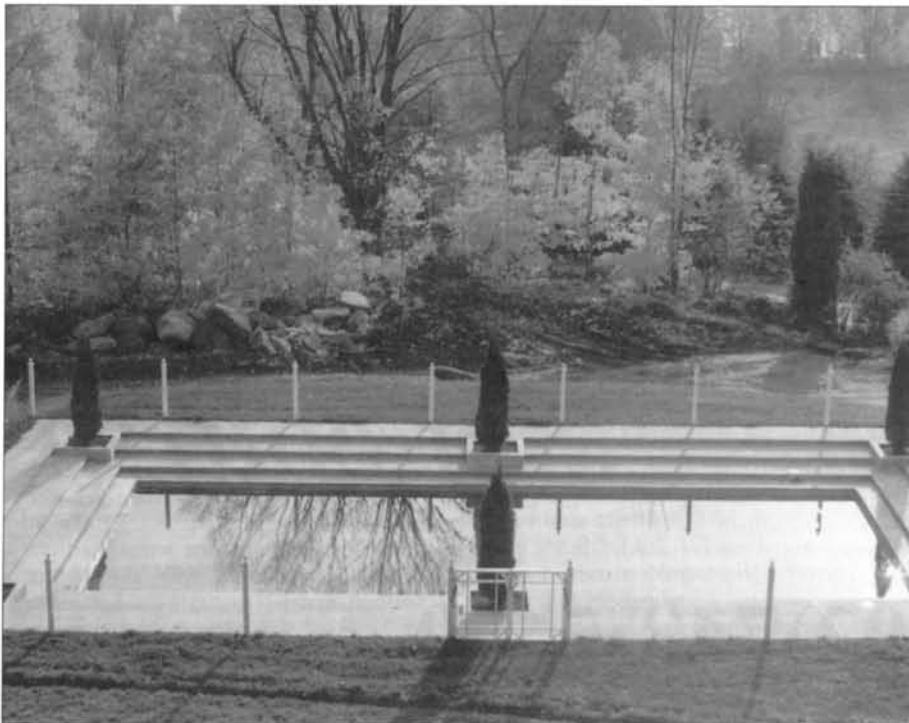
Besides recreation, clients have other reasons for building a custom pool. "A famous sculptor in Warren and his wife had a home in the Mediterranean, but then his wife became too ill to travel," recalled Dobson. "So we built them a salt water pool overlooking the cliffs, which reminded them of St. Tropez." A salt water pool, usually used for therapeutic reasons, requires Dobson to sprinkle over two tons of table salt into it each year.

Apart from the beautiful stone pools Dobson builds, often artfully surrounded by shrubs or flowers, many clients also choose indoor lap pools, which provide swimmers with year-round exercise. Dobson himself, an avid swimmer as well as skier, has a lap pool, with spa, built into his own home.

One out of three pools he builds have



Dobson maintains most of his pools, including this one overlooking Candlewood Lake that he built two years ago for Charles and Debbie Hillyer. Landscaping is by Nature's Way of New Fairfield. Charles, along with partner Steve Weitzer of Fairfield, owns and manages Arista Industries, Inc., a Darien-based firm which sells frozen seafood, vegetable oil and marine oils to cosmetic, pharmaceutical and food companies. Debbie is an aerobics instructor at Players Gold's Gym in Danbury.



Dobson designs custom pools from gracious free-form to stark geometric, such as this one.

built-in spas. "They utilize the same heater and filter. You click a valve and you can have the spa at 102 degrees, the pool at 78," says Dobson.

To construct both simultaneously is a good investment, he says. Separately, it's another story. "I had a customer who decided against the spa, which was \$3,500. The next year he decided he wanted it. I had to charge him \$10,000. We had to bring all the equipment back; he needed a new heater, new pump."

Dobson also maintains most of the pools he builds. Full service, which includes opening and closing pools for the season, weekly cleaning and adding chemicals as needed, runs about \$1,200 annually. As for the homeowner, his responsibilities are nil. "You usually have a filter that runs on a timer 12 hours a day," said Dobson.

For many, the enjoyment a good pool provides is well worth the cost and upkeep. "We use our pool for a lot of traditional picnics and other family affairs," said Frosch. "And then there is the annual Fall Foliage party which takes place in October. The water has cooled off, of course, but one friend and myself take the last, final swim of the season." •