



# Readying for Mother Nature

*Preparing for winter takes advance planning by facilities in colder climates.*

By Mark Wright

Preparing your facility for winter doesn't start in the fall, or the summer, or even the spring. If you live in snow country, getting ready for winter weather starts when you and your architect design your facility, said Michael Riva, co-owner of Stor-It-All.

"You can make up time and money just by laying out your buildings and fences correctly," said Riva, a past chairman of the SSA board of directors. "Plan for the inevitable."

The Riva family owns eight facilities totaling about 2,800 units in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont, which means they and their customers have to deal with Old Man Winter longer in some states than others—six months in Vermont, three in Connecticut.

Smart winter design means arranging your aisles so they all get some sun during those months, which helps melt the snow and ice. "Orienting your building north and south allows the sun to hit the aisles completely," Riva explained. "If you face them east and west you could miss some sunlight. You want to make sure the wintertime sun hits the entirety of the aisles during the day."

Gutters don't always help, especially when ice collects in them. Riva said they have actually taken down the gutters at their facilities. Heated driveways would of course reduce icing, but they can be prohibitively expensive.

"You also want to leave enough space between your buildings and fences so you will have room to push snow out of the way," he added. "Plowing takes a long time. You have to push it between buildings and out of the gate."

The family surprised the developer they worked with on their first really big property, said Riva, telling him they would need 10 gates integrated into the perimeter fence. "He said, 'Do you know they're a couple thousand dollars a piece?' And we looked at him and said, 'Do you know where the snow has to go?' You learn where to put the gates."

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*Photo courtesy of Randy Schubert of Bozeman Self Storage, Montana who says, "Take a good look at your facility and think about what you don't want to have to do in the winter."*

Riva said snow plowing hits your budget hard and is very unpredictable. Moving snow around is difficult enough, but "if you have to haul snow away, money just goes out the door. You just hold your breath and pray it doesn't snow too much. A few six-inch storms is no big deal, but back-to-back storms cost a lot."

He said they used to plow three of their facilities by themselves but have since changed to outsourcing all of it. "When you have a 30,000 square foot or larger facility, one plow truck won't get the job done if you have more than 10 inches of snow. We have a 103,000 square foot facility on 14-plus acres, and to efficiently move snow on something that large you have to have the right equipment, including bigger trucks, sanders and a bucket loader."

Their priority, he said, is making sure customers can get to their unit safely. "If you buy a good keypad, you generally don't have much problem. Mechanical gates will freeze and get blocked by snow, so we just do continuous maintenance and make sure gates are operating and swinging freely so they can be opened when necessary for ease of access. Sand (in walkways and driveways) in most cases works well for traction and is much cheaper than real salt."

Of course, keeping up is a constant challenge as wind blows snow off roofs and a cold night re-freezes ice that the sun had melted.

## Tackle Chores In Advance

A couple of time zones west, facility manager Randy Schubert has a regular punch list of winter preparations he works through each year for his family-owned Bozeman Self Storage in Bozeman, Montana.

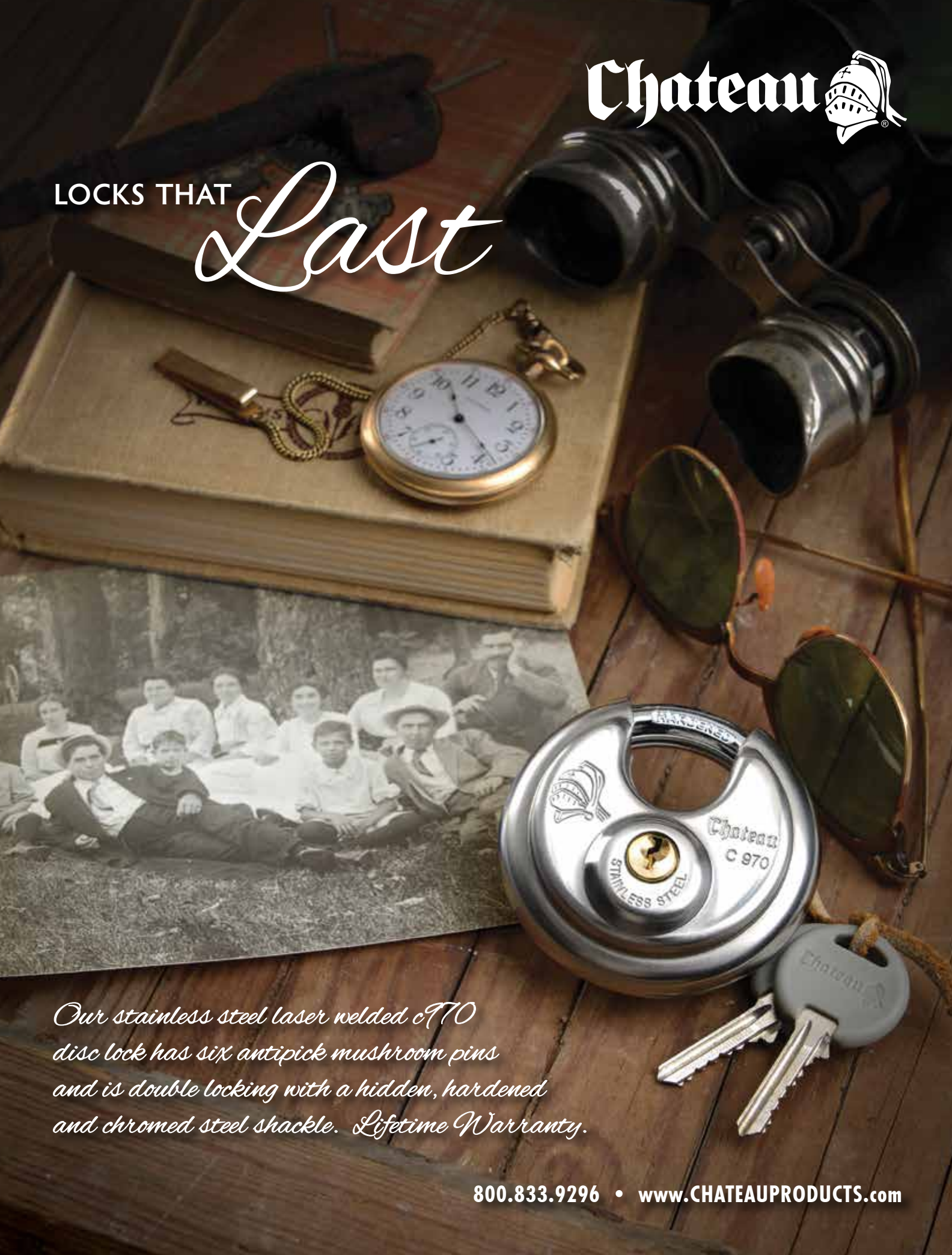
This town in the Rocky Mountain West offers local self storage facilities a winter-savvy customer base made up of—as the chamber of commerce puts it—"an eclectic mix of ranchers, artists, professors, ski enthusiasts, and entrepreneurs," plus students attending Montana State University. Nearby attractions include Big Sky (the site of SSA's 2015 Executive Ski Workshop, January 19-22) and Yellowstone National Park.

*See Snow, page 14*

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Schubert's to-do list should be required reading for any facility owner/operator or manager who intends to stay open for business in frosty climates. "Take a good look at your facility and think about what you don't want to have to do in the winter," he said.

For example, changing all your light bulbs before winter hits lowers the odds of having to mount a ladder on ice-slick pavement to tend to burned out bulbs. And repairing and sealing cracks in that pavement becomes impossible once temperatures plunge, so be sure to get it done early.

"We get our (snow) plows into the shop to make sure they look good," said Schubert. "I make sure I have good shovels. We blow out our sprinklers and turn off hose spigots. You want to check all your filters and heating for the office."

He said a vertical pivot gate is best for snow country. "But you have to lube them—you will be sorry if you don't. Water can get in there and that's not good. Lubricate them regularly every three months."

## Being Prepared

In Provo, Utah, Trolley Trax Storage owner Calvin Lasson said his area only gets from six inches to two feet of snow in a typical winter, so he calls in the plows maybe just three times a year. He can handle the rest with his snowblower.



*Iced up storm drains must be dealt with. Having the right tools on hand is important. (Photo courtesy of Randy Schubert)*

"We used to have trouble with snow sliding off the roofs," he said, "so we put snow guards up there to stop that."

While snow may be light around Provo, the air temperature can still sink below zero, which puts Lasson's water pipes at risk of freezing.

"We have five automatic drains on the water lines," he said. "I have stop-and-waste valves on anything three feet or more above ground," so the pipes won't burst.

While Lasson is happy to be spared major snowfalls, Pete Maxfield, manager at Glen Rieff Storage in South Lake Tahoe, California, has the opposite problem and is dreaming of more than just a white Christmas.

Lake Tahoe, after all, depends on skiers, snowboarders, snowmobile jockeys and other winter recreation enthusiasts for a healthy local economy. But California's drought-producing weather pattern the past few years has kept most storms short and unproductive.

"The last three winters were light, but we're hoping for a good one this year," he said. "We get more than 10 feet on average."

Still, Maxfield has to keep Glen Rieff's three snowblowers and supply of shovels, salt and sand ready for action. Winter prep includes clearing the areas where snow will be plowed and stored around the facility, which has 135 units plus 30 outdoor vehicle spaces.

"We do a contract with our snow plowing company in advance," he said. "We have to push it all away from unit doors into the middle of the aisles so the plows can clear it away."

Snow storage can be a challenge. If a big snow is expected overnight, Maxfield leaves the facility's one hand-operated gate open so the plows can get in and do their thing.

And, just like Michael Riva across the country in New England, he puts his free part-time helper to work melting ice: the sun. ❖

Three covers of SSA Globe Magazine are displayed. The left cover features a large image of a building and the headline 'Surviving Sandy'. The middle cover shows a grid of portraits of various people. The right cover also shows a grid of portraits. Below the covers, the text reads: 'Find current and archived copies of the SSA Globe Magazine online at [www.ssaglobe.org](http://www.ssaglobe.org)'.

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