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Bringing in the New Guy

By Rusty Signor, President, Pile Driving Contractors Association

PDCA has a tradition of the incoming President letting everyone know a little bit of their background. I thought it would be more interesting to tell about my construction company's history rather than my college life, so here it goes.

My first residential foundation piling project was in the late-1980s. We were driving piles on a dock next to an expensive waterfront subdivision on Lake Austin in Texas. The house was planning to use drilled piers for its foundation. The drilling was in progress when the Property Owner's Association shut the job down, as the dump trucks hauling off the alluvial spoils (I say the geotechnical term is "baby poop") were squirting the mess out of the cracks in their tailgates. This was before the city had an environmental department, so you can only imagine the mess that was made. The builder asked if we could have our crane come ashore and

drive pilings on land. I told him as long as he didn't tell the crane it was going to drive piles on land, it was fine – a little sarcasm for an old contracting friend. So we came ashore and drove piles on that home, and then, later, the majority of homes in that subdivision.

This was a nice niche for our company to add to home construction, recreational facilities, water parks and marine construction. For over a decade, we only had a piling job every few months. These piling jobs were strictly on the edge of Lake Austin and were designed by a couple of engineers who had driven pile experience from the Gulf Coast. None of the geotechs ever specified piles, and the vast majority of engineers would never include driven piles in their plans unless they were specifically included in the geotechnical report (which some engineers honored as biblical, or that's how they justified making no suggestions on value engineering).

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Photo by Kevan Gearing/Photos.com

We bumped along (I guess I should say "pounded" along) for over a decade, relying on what I now call "road kill". Then I joined PDCA! I really wish I could remember what prompted me to join, but I can't. Yet, I can definitely say that it didn't leave us where it found us.

During one of the first annual conferences I attended, I heard a seminar on pile testing by Dr. George Goble. He put on a very conservative static load (pile of concrete road barricades) in the Denver area. After giving all the engineers a copy of the soil report, he gave a sort-of analysis test. The result was amazing. All but one was 80 percent wrong and that one missed by 20 percent. I asked myself, would I like to have any of these engineers design my foundation?

When I returned to Texas, I put on a static load test with resistance piles and a jacking system conducted by some engineers I found by the Texas coast, approximately three hours away. The design engineer said that the frictional piles could only hold eight kips and the refusal piles 12 kips, so he had designed the piles four-foot on center. Well, the frictional piles delivered 32 kips and the refusal piles were

not budging at 120 kips. The jacking system was only rated to 120 kips, and since we only had a maximum load of 29 kips, we finished off the test without driving three hours away to get a bigger jack.

The foundation design piles were moved to 15 feet on center and, thus, saved the owner over \$80,000. This was the last test for foundation that I paid for when I realized who pocketed all the money. Fortunately, for my pocket, all the test piles were contrived into reversing stairway landing, so I could at least charge for these.

That finally got things going for our company. We started having dynamic tests for projects and always invited engineers to come and watch. Finally, we actually got piles on a soil report as a recommended option. We have it framed in our office. By the way, now the owners pay for their test-

ing with all the money they save.

I am very fortunate and blessed to have my son Clayton, who is excited and passionate about the pile driving business. We started to have "Lunch and Learns" about piles with around three-dozen engineering firms several years ago. Then, he went back to get his second Master's in geotechnical engineering. Now we are in the second round of our "Lunch and Learns", telling about his test results in expansive clay, which he did for his Master's thesis. Now we have continuous piling projects all around central Texas.

During my term as President, I want to convey to contractors to not waste as long a time as I did waiting for "road kill". Reach out to engineers, students, D.O.T.s and contracting organizations to let them know the benefits of the driven pile. ▼

I want to convey to contractors to not waste as long a time as I did waiting for "road kill"



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