

Terry Dillon — 2005 Ditchdigger of the Year

USUALLY, THE PEOPLE WHO TAKE A CRACK AT STARTING THEIR OWN BUSINESS ARE CUT FROM A RARE CLOTH. IT CERTAINLY ISN'T FOR EVERYONE, AND IF MOST KNEW WHAT IT REALLY TOOK TO SUCCEED, THEY WOULD PROBABLY RUN FOR THE HILLS. BUT FOR PEOPLE LIKE TERRY DILLON, IT'S THE ONLY WAY TO LIVE.

BY NICK ZUBKO, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Growing up working for his father's Lafayette, Ind.-based masonry business, Dillon had the entrepreneurial spirit instilled at an early age. So it was no surprise when he decided to take the reins of one of its divisions at the age of 20. He later started his own sewer contracting company, Atlas Excavating Inc., with little more than a pickup, a backhoe and the willingness to do whatever it took to make it work.

"The way I was raised, everyone in our family had their own business. When you grew up, you just naturally tried to start your own thing," says Dillon. "So there was never any fear involved. When I started, I didn't know how to run any pieces of equipment, read the drawings or how to bid and estimate. I had to teach myself all of that. At the time, I was working over 12 to 20 hours a day, but that was what it took."

And when Dillon began participating in NUCA more than 15 years ago, his work ethic certainly carried over. Throughout that time, he has been involved on the national level



As founder and brought his life industry to NUCA

as treasurer and now as senior vice president. He chaired the education training task force that eventually became the Education Committee and was instrumental in the development of NUCA's Heavy Equipment Operator training course. As a result of his commitment to the industry and the association, Dillon was named the 2005 Ditchdigger of the Year.

"My involvement with NUCA goes back to my first Washington Summit in 1989," recalls Dillon. "I always believed in having a voice in

whatever I do — I'm that way around home and I wanted to be that way nationally. I never wanted just one person or a handful of people making the decisions of how this industry should be run. I'm just the type of person who likes to get in my two-cents worth."

Starting from Scratch

Dillon's career in construction started out when he was barely a teenager, tagging along with his father, Pat, who ran Dillon & Son Masonry, installing footings, founda-

tions and poured concrete. By the time he graduated from high school, Dillon was a superintendent, running the foundation and brick laying part of the business. He says that early experience helped instill the values that he still holds today.

“My dad was the type of guy who worked two jobs, so my happiest days were going to work with him,”

accident. While both emerged relatively unharmed, Dillon’s lower back was never the same. When he returned to work, laying brick proved too painful and he soon took on a managerial role. However, it didn’t take long to realize it would be difficult for him to make money sitting on the sidelines.

“In that line of work, you have to do it yourself, so I decided to change businesses,” Dillon explains. “I sold the masonry business to my brother-in-law, Pat Foley, and went out and bought a Case 580 backhoe. I still had a fascination with the construction business, and I figured I could run a backhoe without bothering my back. I didn’t know how to run sewer lines, what minimum grade was, size of pipes or how it all worked ... but eventually, you learn.”

Because of his father, the family name was already associated with quality and excellence in construction. Dillon had already begun to carry on that legacy in his three years running Dillon Masonry, building upon existing relationships with builders around town. So when he ventured into the excavating business and formed Atlas, the rest simply fell into place.

Along with an operator from his masonry business, Gerald Wilcox, Dillon looked to the residential market for work. Met with a lackluster housing market plagued by the high interest rates of the early 1980s, he figured out what a Dodge Report was, and started finding work through local general contractors.

“We started bidding work to general contractors and landed four or five courthouses and a couple of schools,” Dillon recalls. “We went from having one backhoe to buying an excavator, a dozer, a few loaders and some dump trucks. We were buying equipment when interest rates were around 22 percent. I was too young and inexperienced to know that that was almost impossible to do, but somehow we worked through it.”

Building Atlas

After more than three years of barely breaking even with often

unrewarding subcontracting roles, Dillon finally decided to fully concentrate the company’s efforts on building sewer projects for cities and municipalities. It was then that he realized where the real money could be made, and where he had the best chance to develop a niche. For Dillon, the projects that started to look the most attractive were the ones that no one else wanted.

“Whether they were deep, wet, going through rock or swamps, we wanted anything that regular contractors were scared to do,” he explains. “Now we’re set up to do jobs that are more than 30 ft deep, and we have even done some that are closer to 55 ft deep. We also take a lot of jobs that are wet, but we have our own dewatering equipment and we know how to handle them.”

As the scope of the company’s specialties grew, so did its geographic work area. When Atlas first started, Dillon focused on the Lafayette area, but now Atlas crews work all the way up to the state lines of Michigan, Ohio and Illinois — essentially covering the upper two-thirds of Indiana.

But Dillon soon realized the cost of putting in so many hours on the job, and cut back his hours. He hired more people and by 2001, Atlas had grown to 340 employees. Another stress-reliever resulted from involving his family in the company. Dillon’s wife, Tina, has been his partner in the growth of Atlas since the beginning, while his two sons, Casey (the eldest) and Nick, have also taken on increasingly vital roles.

“Tina has been a superintendent and even drove a dump truck up until she was eight months pregnant with Nick,” notes Dillon. “It can be challenging to work with your wife, since you really get to see all of each other’s weak points. But in our case, my wife and I are cut from the same cloth. She deserves as much credit for any of our success as I do.”

In 2004, Dillon scaled back Atlas’ operations. Now employing between 100 and 130 people (including 20 superintendents), Atlas still brings in about \$30 million in volume every year. According to Dillon, the involve-



President of Atlas Excavating, Dillon has long passion for the utility construction CA for more than 15 years.

he explains. “It was intense and hard work, and I loved every minute of it. I saw where his drive came from and what his values were, which in turn created good moral judgment for me. He was an honest man and if he made a mistake, he’d completely tear it down and fix it without anyone asking. That’s how I was taught and how I believe in doing things now.”

In 1976, Dillon’s father sold him the masonry part of the business, which continued to be profitable for about three years, until he and his wife, Tina, were involved in a car



In the early years of Atlas, Dillon realized the best way to develop a niche was to look at the projects that no one else wanted.

ment of the entire family has made the transition possible.

"I'm fortunate with how things are set up now," says Dillon. "I'm 50 years old and I have Casey running the estimating department and Nick is one of our best superintendents in the field. Just having those two in here has been a big stress release for me. They both have tremendous work ethics, they believe in what we are doing and they are very professional. They understand that they have to outperform everyone in the company — and they do."

Growing Up With NUCA

For Dillon, growing Atlas into a successful contracting company involved a lot of different factors. One of the most important came about in the late-1980s, when Dillon became a consultant for a trench box manufacturer. He was asked to help represent the company at the 1988 Utility Construction EXPO.

Soon after, he attended his first Washington Summit and began to realize how much he could benefit from the involvement. Raised with what he calls a "construction guy's mentality," Dillon realized he had to adapt his approach as Atlas continued to grow and become a more prominent fixture in the state — which helped him improve at dealing with owners, engineers and government agencies.

"NUCA really helped me learn how to be more of a professional and

how to present myself," Dillon says. "It helped me mature and learn how to compromise and see both sides of every issue, to make better decisions. And when you have an association backing you up, you have the voices of 40 or 50 other contractors in your state, or thousands across the country. So whatever point you're trying to make, it comes across a lot stronger and you get more respect."

As Dillon became a more active member of NUCA through the 1990s, he realized the value of the wealth of knowledge the association provided. He had always been known to find people who knew more than he did about a topic and bleed them for information — plus share his own experiences with anyone who would ask. This belief in sharing knowledge eventually led to the creation of NUCA's Education Committee, which is working on several training DVDs, most recently focused on pipe installation.

"I have always believed that it's much cheaper to just ask someone who knows," says Dillon. "NUCA has so much knowledge available, but you have to be wise enough to use it. So after I participated in the Heavy Operator Equipment Training course, we discussed forming what is now the Education Committee."

Recently, Dillon helped make some changes on the local level as well, having realized that Indiana was in need of a more focused approach to its representation in NUCA. While

Indiana had been a NUCA chapter for years, it had been through the local highway association. Two years ago, Dillon contacted Jeff Reynolds and Chuck Norman to create NUCA of Indiana, for which Dillon now serves as treasurer.

"The highway association did a great job, but the utility part was a little bit of an afterthought," Dillon says. "So I thought we would be better off to start our own association that focused just on our issues. It has been tough going these first two years, but we have 25 to 30 members now and we just need to stay dedicated."

On receiving the Ditchdigger of the Year Award, Dillon says he isn't exactly sure what qualified him to earn it. But when he looks at past winners, he does see a few similarities with himself. When they say they are going to do something, they get it done. Whether it's putting the extra time, money or effort into helping NUCA become what it is.

"My persistence can be seen as a negative, but at the same time, if someone tells me something can't be done, I'll show you that it can," he says. "In reality, Atlas has taken me to where I am today — not the other way around. A lot of people say you have to be a fool to put your house and your whole livelihood on the line. And that's what you do in this business; my belongings are up for grabs every day of the week. But if you're successful, it's also a hell of a lot of fun." **UC**