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Maine Drilling and Blasting Celebrates 40th Anniversary of Quality Service

by Mark Scheer

Think big, act small: when successfully executed, such a corporate strategy can be very effective for meeting growth goals while maintaining local-level contact with customers. Easier said than done in



Poetry in motion: another successful blast at a quarry in Poland, ME.

most cases. However, throughout the northeast, customers have come to depend on Maine Drilling and Blasting, Inc. to be just that. Headquartered in Gardiner, Maine, they offer the best of both worlds: personal, local service with large, high-end capabilities. Getting to this point was certainly not an overnight accomplishment. Rather, MD&B is the product of a multi-generational evolution that spans the Purington family history. This year, they celebrate their 40th anniversary. And after surviving a sometimes tumultuous past, they are well-poised to leverage that experience and continue forward as a solid leader in their industry.

A long family history

While MD&B was founded by Ted Purington, Sr., and his wife Judy in March, 1966, the Purington family's history with the industry goes back four or five generations now. "Our family has always been around this business," explained Bill Purington, president and CEO of the company. "My father started this company, but his father and his father's father all worked in this industry." Purington joked that the processes were not nearly as sophisticated as they have now become. "Back then, they used a sledge hammer and chisel to drill the holes for the black powder, and great athleticism was key to the job!" Obviously safety, technology and consistent quality are keystones for success today, and MD&B has mastered each in their forty years of success.

As this is a family business, Ted Sr.'s sons were always involved in the company to some degree from an early age. "We all just grew up around the business," recalled Purington. "During summers in high school, we never had to go looking for a job." Starting in the late 70's, each came to eventually become permanently employed with the company, with Ted, Jr. joining first in 1976. Bill Purington himself was the last to join, coming on board in 1982.

"Ted Jr. is the executive vice president and operations manager for our company," explained Purington. "He works in our [Auburn] New Hampshire office providing support for manpower and equipment needs to all our operating divisions; he is pretty much in charge of all operating issues that arise." Also based in the New Hampshire office, Jim Purington has the responsibility of ensuring that the company's more complex projects proceed smoothly. "Jim is our general supervisor," Purington continued. "When we're handling the larger, more technically complex projects, Jim travels around the company working in the

regions that need his leadership." Lastly, Tom Purington oversees all the quarry operations in Maine, working from the Gardiner office with Bill. "Tom is the regional quarry supervisor for Maine," Purington concluded. "He is responsible for providing leadership and support to our teams at the dozens of quarries we do work for in this state."

The late 1980s economic reality check

By the early 1980s, MD&B had become a very successful company, remaining dedicated to the principles upon which Ted Purington, Sr. had founded it: hard work, honesty and quality of service. Through well-established relationships built with contractors and developers throughout the region, MD&B had grown to generate almost \$3 million in annual revenue. Because of the strong demand on their finite

we needed to get smart; get back to the basics of what we do best: provide quality service on a local level," said Purington. "Our father taught us the fundamental values of hard work, honesty and quality of service. He was a man of his word and taught us to always do everything right, no mat-



Mike Lupone loads charges in a hole on the future site of a Rochester, New Hampshire Walmart.



One of the fringe benefits of doing business in New England can be the breathtaking scenery on a worksite.

resources, and the continued economic boom in real estate development, the company responded by expanding to ultimately encompass all the northeastern states, from Maine down to Pennsylvania and Maryland. As a result, the volume of business being conducted by MD&B increased almost five-fold by the late 1980s. "We really rode on the coattails of the 80s real-estate boom, and we grew quite quickly from that," Purington said.

But that tide took a decidedly abrupt turn at the end of the 80s, as the real-estate frenzy hit the proverbial brick wall and MD&B found themselves a bit out on a limb. "When it finally all played out, the failure of many banks and institutions took down quite a few companies that were very heavily leveraged," he recalled. "Because our company was dependant on many of those businesses, we were hit equally as hard." The following two years saw MD&B trim their volume by almost 40%, and by the end of 1990, a major reorganization strategy had been formulated.

"In retrospect, I believe we had a lot to learn from that experience," Purington admitted. "We never strayed from our mission of doing good work, but we were clearly guilty of chasing easy growth and opportunity, and not focusing on the quality of the projects. We ended up being a victim of that shortsightedness." As a result, Purington and his brothers took a step back to reanalyze the company's direction. "We all sat down and had some serious discussions and realized



In a nod to the sophistication of the business, laser profiling is employed to ensure the most precise preparation for a blast.

and reorganization plan to get the company back on a sustainable and secure track, the four brothers embarked on their mission to become the industry's leader in the northeast by building the company one piece at a time with strong local presence in each market they serve.

MD&B accomplished its reorganization goals several years ahead of schedule, and by 1994, was back on a secure growth track. The success of their efforts to refocus the company and move forward with a disciplined plan is demonstrated by the strength of MD&B today. By the early 2000s, the company had not only recovered their previous position, but have continued to expand almost three-fold from their low in 1991. This had been accomplished through strategic investments in infrastructure and assets, continued dedication to the principles that the company was built on, and a refocus on their core operations of drilling and blasting. After concluding several competitive acquisi-

ter what. That was very important to him.

"Any family that grows up in a business needs to decide whether they want to run that business as an entitlement, or as a business," Purington continued. "We all knew we wanted to build a strong business, so we made a commitment to each other to understand our individual strengths and weaknesses, and commit to being the best in the areas where we each excel. We are all very good at what we do." Having established a new strategic direction

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tions, MD&B today operates in six permanent locations throughout the northeast, and supports a team of more than 350 people.

Not just drilling and blasting

MD&B is structured to address customer needs from two perspectives. "Construction-related needs are a 'one-time and done' project, and can include anything from the blasting of a foundation for a house or a hole for a swimming pool, to the cutting of a mountain to make a path for a highway project," Purington clarified. While construction projects may be considered 'one-time', it is not unusual for their



Drilling at Norlite, Cohoes, NY.



Ted Purington Sr. on the job at the infancy of MD&B, circa late 1960s.

duration to stretch into years, so they can be very long-term. Purington continued. "Our mine and quarry operations provide a service for the continual extraction of aggregate. We currently serve about 130 quarries throughout the northeast, blasting rock from the ground so they can crush it to spec aggregate." Construction operations generate about 70% of projects at MD&B.

But Maine Drilling and Blasting serves customers by providing not only the actual drill and blast service, but also by offering a comprehensive approach to every project they manage. "Many companies just do drilling, or just do blasting, or perhaps offer both," Purington explained. "But we're far more comprehensive. We engage in planning, public relations, pre-blast surveys and engineering and technical support; we get involved at every stage of the process. It really isn't just about breaking rock. We meet with the public, attend town meetings, and present the components of what we're going to do. Then, if appropriate, we'll hold regular meetings with a town to hear their ongoing concerns to identify ways we can affect the process and improve the situation."

In addition to public relations, MD&B also brings a wealth of experience and technology to each project. "In the old days, the blaster would puff on his cigar until it was red hot, touch it to the fuse and run like hell!" Purington said with a laugh. But today, blasting has transitioned from art to science; the process is much more controlled and precise. "We can employ several techniques to increase our effectiveness and improve the safety of operations," said Purington.

"Knowing where to drill a hole and how to load the explosives is crucial. We utilize a laser profiling system that bounces a pulsed laser beam off the rock face to generate a precise three-dimensional image to help plan our loading process." Ensuring that the drilling was done properly and accurately can also be verified with technology. MD&B uses a Boretrak System, which consists of a stainless steel probe containing gravity sensors. Attached to carbon fiber rods, the probe is lowered into a driller's hole and generates a three-dimensional view of the actual hole by recording pitch, roll and depth. Even the explosives have become more stable, replacing the sometimes unpredictable dynamite of the past.

As a result, Maine Drilling and Blasting has not only created a work environment as safe as possible, but the results of their efforts are extremely reliable and consistent. "Over the past forty years, we have performed over one million blasts for a wide range of projects," Purington added. "And the quality of our work speaks for itself. Our customers know that when we do a job, they can be confident it will be



Loading a shot at White brothers Quarry, Westbrook, Maine.

done right. It has taken forty years to prove that, but we are well-regarded in this industry, and we're proud of the reputation we've built."

A true people business

Purington cannot emphasize enough how important it is to the success of their company to have people on their team that truly reflect the mission and integrity of their company, and he sees maintaining that as one of his greatest challenges. "You don't often find a lot of new construction people that share the same work ethics that we do," he said. "There are certainly good people out there, but they are harder to find and the need becomes even greater in this environment where their numbers are diminishing." But once MD&B finds a new team member, the relationship is quite often long-term. "Our employees have on average been here a long time; we have very low turnover. Sometimes in the first couple of months a new employee may choose to leave us, but once they decide to stay, they stay for the long term."

While finding the right people may be his biggest challenge, Purington also feels most proud of the MD&B team. "Our people provide our greatest advantage. Of all we have accomplished, I would definitely say I'm most proud of the team we have on our side. We emphasize training, safety, communications, behavioral discipline, work quality-and our people have embraced these values and are committed to being industry leaders and enjoy being on our team. We have the best people in the industry."



Ted Sr. and Judy Purington; below, left to right: Jim, Ted Jr., Bill and Tom Purington.

And as Purington and his brothers assumed the succession of this business for their generation, planning for the long-term viability of the company for generations to come is also an important part of building a strong and dependable team of people. Perhaps a new generation of Puringtons will be involved with Maine Drilling and Blasting in the future, but for now, Purington says the want to allow their children to make their own decisions and pursue their own path in life. As a result, he and his brothers are thorough in their planning for the future. "We spend a lot of time on succession planning, and offer strong leadership training and educational opportunities to our employees to be sure the next generation will be there. There are a lot of very good managers in this company, so we're comfortable the business will continue in good hands." In addition, Maine Drilling and Blasting established an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) in 2004 to give employees a meaningful stake in the company. Purington adds, "No one has a stronger interest in caring for and promoting the business of a company than the people who benefit from its success."

Maine Drilling and Blasting has come a long way in their forty years. From their humble beginning as a start-up, through the chaotic and frenzied growth of the 1980s, to their current position as a mature industry leader, they have maintained the ethics and values that Ted Purington Sr. instilled from day one. For a company that succeeds from their ability to break rock for their customers, the only thing unbreakable to MD&B is their commitment to maintain their reputation as a dependable, high-quality drilling and blasting contractor throughout the northeast.



Removing waste rock at Rock of Ages in Barre, VT; MD&B have executed over one million blasts in their 40 years.