

Trenchless TECHNOLOGY™

All in the Family

**Doetsch Environmental Services
Focuses on Large Diameter Sewer Cleaning**



SCAN THIS QR CODE
USING YOUR MOBILE
DEVICE FOR MORE
INFORMATION.

Plus Inside:
Bidding on Pipe Cleaning Projects
Laterals and Crossbores



All in the Family

Doetsch Environmental Services

Keeps Its Focus on Large Diameter Sewer Cleaning

By Sharon M. Bueno

Warren-Mich.-based Doetsch Environmental Services is a family-owned and operated business that has stood the test of more than a century. In business for 113 years, the simple yet unwavering philosophy and work ethic instilled into the fourth and fifth generations who run the company today have stayed true to the family's roots.

Back in 1898, the company was known simply as Doetsch Bros., a simple, two-man operation in southeastern Michigan whose owners made deals with a handshake and a promise and at times bartered for payment of services rendered. Plumbing and heating services were the bread-and-butter of the company, with some sewer cleaning also being done. Customer service and long-term relationships were of the utmost importance.

The company was led for 67 years by Frank Doetsch, who is credited by his family for its long-term vision and ultimate success. Today, the company is run by Frank's daughter, Diann Regelbrugge, her two sons, Joe and Sean Schotthoefer and nephew, Jamie Doetsch — fourth and fifth generation Doetsches — but the plumbing and heating side of things ended more than 30 years ago in favor of its growing industrial and environmental cleaning services.

While technology has pushed Doetsch Environmental Services to the forefront of the sewer cleaning industry, it's Frank Doetsch's business philosophy and work ethic that has kept it there — with its keepers taking the lessons learned at the feet of

this company icon and applying it to their daily lives.

"As a family, we were always taught and saw all the hard work, dedication, strong will, compromising with each other in decision-making and believing if there is a problem, we can come up with a solution," says Diann Regelbrugge, president of Doetsch Environmental Services. "We have always been proud of our employees and hold the belief we will succeed no matter what life throws at us."

"Our grandfather instilled upon us a work ethic like none other," says Sean Schotthoefer, Doetsch finance director. "He expected that at the end of the day that every job was completed and done to our clients' expectations. It was this push for perfection that we learned and currently expect everyone today to follow. For 113 years, when our customers have been calling Doetsch, they have expected a certain type of work quality. As the fifth generation now, it is our job to continue this excellence. Our grandfather, just as his father and his grandfather before him strived for perfection. As the fourth and fifth generation, we must do the same. If we do not live up to our family's expectations, we would not only be letting down our customers, but the generations before us."

Company History

Doetsch Environmental Services started out as Doetsch Bros. in 1898 by Joe, Sean and Jamie's great-great grandfather Frank Sr. The company was a plumbing and heating company that ser-



vised the residential, commercial and industrial markets in southeastern Michigan. "They basically fixed sinks, bathtubs and steam boilers and the like," says Jamie Doetsch, project manager. "Along with that, Doetsch Bros. always cleaned sewers."

Little did the company founders realize that this small facet of their business would become its foundation 100 years later — large diameter sewer cleaning. "Back then, you would place a man on an archaic skateboard and he would push himself down the pipe with a bucket and a shovel to where the clog was and he would pull it out," says Joe Schotthoefer, vice president of field operations.

Today's technology is a far cry from that manual and potentially dangerous method. Vac trucks, pipeline inspection cameras, high-powered hoses and jetters and safety are keys to sewer cleaning in 2011.

Doetsch Bros., which eventually changed its name over the years to Doetsch Environmental Services to better reflect its repertoire of services, ended its plumbing and heating services in 1980 to concentrate on its large diameter sewer cleaning that was growing in the industrial market. "Sewer cleaning was in our roots and we had a reputation for cleaning," Joe Schotthoefer says. "As technology on the cleaning side moved forward, we were doing more and more of that work. That's why the decision to end our plumbing and heating work was made."

When the company started in 1898, it was a two-man operation. Over the years, many family members joined the ranks as the business grew. Today, just four Doetsch family members remain with the company: Diann Regelbrugge, Joe Schotthoefer and Sean Schotthoefer and Jamie Doetsch. All attribute the long-term success of the business to Frank Doetsch who ran the business for more than 67 years, beginning his tenure before World War II. They say it was Frank's ability to evolve as technology evolved and adapt to the changes necessary that allowed the business to succeed.

"Adaptability is an important reason this company has been so successful for the past 113 years," says Sean Schotthoefer. "Every

company should have a short-term and long-term vision if you wish to survive. Sometimes your short-term and long-term visions are nothing alike. This may be because your clients' needs have changed or the industry in general is demanding a new direction. If you are not willing to accept this and make changes when necessary, you will never make it. Technology is a driving force behind the world as it stands today. There is no reason technological advancements cannot be made in sewer cleaning, whether it be small pipe or large diameter. Technology makes us more efficient."

Expanding Its Services

Large diameter sewer cleaning has been a staple of the Doetsch company since it opened its doors; it evolved into its primary service over the years as the industrial market flourished. Key to its success is that Doetsch does the cleaning live — meaning no bypass of the line is needed, keeping it in service. "We've taken 100 years of knowledge and we are putting it into a safe and efficient process," says Joe Schotthoefer.

In the late 1920s, Doetsch Environmental Services revolutionized Michigan's sewer cleaning industry by introducing the electric sewer machine. As jobs became more demanding, Doetsch automated its sewer cleaning system by attaching a bucket to a cable and anchoring it in the manhole, automating the pick up and removal of debris. This new system significantly increased the amount of debris removed from a line and perhaps most importantly, eliminated the need for crews to go down into the manhole.

In the 1970s, Doetsch introduced to Michigan hydraulic sewer cleaning by use of its jet/vac combination machines. The technology dramatically elevated sewer cleaning to a new level and made cleaning sewers efficient, fast and safe. Doetsch quickly identified many other applications for jet/vac technology and began expanding its services to industrial applications that could benefit from high water pressure and vacuum.

The company's large diameter operations take on jobs all over

the United States. Its other specialty services are maintained in the state of Michigan.

The use of trenchless technologies such as pipeline inspection has only enhanced the services that Doetsch provides, which has been a boost to the company during the recent economic upheaval — especially in Michigan, whose industrial base of steel and automobiles were hit particularly hard. The effect on the municipal tax base has been devastating, resulting in fewer dollars available for infrastructure work and companies scrambling to get what's available.

"In the late 1990s, as we saw the industrial base begin to sour in Michigan, we decided that in order to survive, we needed to expand in to different areas within the industry," says Sean Schotthoefer. "But since we made this dedicated effort to survive, the company has expanded into hydro-excavation, large diameter cleaning and inspection, pneumatic conveyance, 360 digital pipe scanning and countless other applications where we have had to adapt our methods and equipment to tailor our customers' needs."

Also key to the company's success is the long-term relationships it has formed with its customers and suppliers. One such relationship is with Jack Doheny Supplies as Frank Doetsch's and Jack Doheny's friendship over the decades cemented its professional relationship.

"Jack Doheny and my grandfather had been doing business forever and that relationship has helped us become the company we are," Joe Schotthoefer says. "Because of that relationship and being loyal Vactor and Jack Doheny users, it was very easy for us to try different markets."

Doetsch has been a longtime customer of Vactor's vacuum trucks and hydro-excavation systems, as well as RapidView IBAK North America's conventional CCTV and Panoramio inspection systems and high-pressure water blasting systems from NLB Corp.

Despite the tough economic times facing cities today, the infrastructure cannot be ignored as the water and sewer pipes continue to age and decline. "What we are fighting are budgets," Joe Schotthoefer explains. "We have interceptors that were put in the ground over 70 years ago. The cities haven't spent a dime on rehab and cleaning all this time. And now there is a cost associated with it and it's typically much larger than a regular CCTV and cleaning because of the amount debris in the pipe."

"The work is there, but you have to go and find it," Jamie Doetsch adds. "The work doesn't call you on the phone anymore... That's the bottom line."

An area where Doetsch Environmental believes it outshines its competitors is in its commitment to providing high-quality customer service. "It is a very exciting time in the industry because the industry is demanding more," Joe Schotthoefer says. "While the industry is down, quality customer service is coming back to the forefront. Back in my grandfather's day, that was important. They would call up Frank [Doetsch] because he can get the job done... We are relentless in retaining [that reputation]."

All in the Family

For Diann, Joe, Sean and Jamie, Doetsch Environmental Services has been a part of their blood for as long as they can remember. Joe, Sean and Jamie started working for their grandfather while in high school and working summers, learning the business from the ground up. Diann went to work for her father more than 30 years ago, working the financial end; she became company president in 2006. None of them use the word "destiny" when explaining how they came to be entrenched at Doetsch but their description comes pretty close.



"This company has been in my blood since the day I was born," Regelbrugge says. "I remember my grandfather Clarence talking to my Dad [Frank] all the time about the business. My Dad was my mentor and taught me how to run a business through tough economic times, as well as the good times. Working with Joe and Sean, it is a wish come true as one of the last things my Dad told me was, 'You have no idea what a relief it is to leave the company in such good hands.'"

It's that family bond that has solidified the company's success over the years. "We are a family-operated business and we understand the opportunities that the previous generations have given to us," Joe Schotthoefer says. "Being a family-run business, you develop a passion about the work and it's not something you lock the front door at 5 p.m. and worry about it in the morning. There's always that exchange of ideas among family members, always a topic of conversation and always an interest in furthering the company."

Joe and Sean reflect on how their grandfather ran the business ("He always did business on a word and a handshake," they say) and his quest for perfection when it came to dealing with the customer is something they strive for as well. "We have a reputation for completing the job... Being in the service industry, we are only as good as our last job. We are continually working to build on that reputation," Joe Schotthoefer says.

Though Frank Doetsch stepped down from the day-to-day operations late in his life to care for his wife Pearl, he never lost interest in what was going on. He started with the company before World War II and didn't step away until 2003. "My Dad came in to work for over 67 years, but due to the illness of my mother, he started staying more at home to take care of her. However, during the next five years, he was still active in the company but more from home. Every night either one of my sons or myself would stop by and tell him what was going at the company," says Diann.

Frank Doetsch passed away two years ago at the age of 90 but his legacy lives on through his business, his principles and his family. He lived to an age where he saw the generational transition succeed — which is something that Diann hopes to see as well.

"I have had the unique experience of seeing the company's future through the eyes of an older generation — my father's — the baby boomer generation — mine — and a younger generation — my sons' and nephew," she says. "I believe the success of the company is a team effort. How about being interested in your company for over 72 years and teaching your daughter and grandsons how to be a leader in the industry?"

Sharon M. Bueno is managing editor of *Trenchless Technology*.