

Selling quality work

by Peter Darbshire

"Our farm customers are businessmen. Ninety five percent of them want a drainage plan with a written proposal, they want a contractor they trust to come in, get the job done and move out," says Roger Ellingson, who operates Ellingson Drainage at West Concord, Minnesota with his brother Kevin.

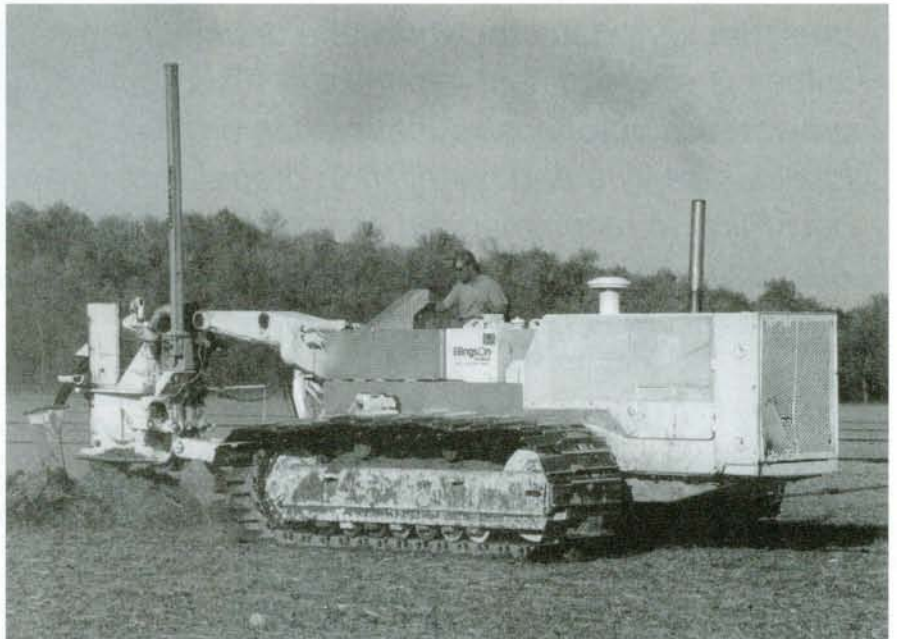
Their business has flourished since it was founded by their father, Eldon, in 1970. "He started with a Parsons trencher and two man crew," says Roger. Since then, this drainage contractor has grown to an operation that installs four to five million feet of drainage tubing each year using three trenchless machines.

What makes this possible is a good organization with well qualified employees who take pride in their work, according to Roger. He and Kevin started in the business in 1973 and 1980, respectively, and bought out Eldon in 1996. Their workforce includes 12 men and a secretary who are employed year 'round. Each drainage crew includes three to four men: "The lead hand/foreman runs the plow, plus one who strings tile, one who runs the backhoe and makes lateral connections to mains, and the fourth who operates a pull-tractor and helps with connections."

There are two survey crews, each with two men, who use backhoes to locate



Roger Ellingson keeps his employees working year 'round.



The customized Badger plow is one of three that are central to installation productivity, which reached five million feet in 1995.

(Photos courtesy of Leonard Binstock executive director, Minnesota LICA.)

existing tile, survey and stake each job using a total station survey system. They shoot all junctions and ends of laterals, field boundaries, high spots and low spots. All data is collected in a hand-held computer, "So there is no place for error," says Roger. They keep a few days ahead of the drainage crew, which is provided a complete drainage design layout for each job. This plan includes all pertinent information, with grades, locations, pipe sizes and other work that needs to be done. Plans are plotted at the office using color codes for different sizes of pipe. "If the job is installed differently, the crew documents any changes on the folder and the final plan includes these," he adds.

Roger's responsibilities include overall management, which he shares with Kevin, and selling the company's services. Steve Craull is a key employee, who co-ordinates the crews and job sites, orders pipe, schedules work and arranges permits and so on. He also helps direct the survey crews. Kevin is responsible for bookkeeping and invoicing as well as looking after the operation's 'filler' business of installing septic systems.

1995 was the biggest volume year for Ellingson Drainage, at five million feet of pipe from three to 12 inch diameters. That total was reduced to 4.2 million feet in 1996. "We average 32 to 34 weeks of field work and do 70 to 80 percent of our work in April, May and from mid-September to mid-December," says Roger. Septic installations help to fill the summer months, while repair and machinery overhaul work keep the employees busy in winter. "We rebuild engines and transmissions if we sense they may have trouble," he adds.

Maintaining year 'round work for their employees has many benefits, the Ellingsons have found. "It's expensive to put employees on unemployment, plus it takes people a month to get into the groove again when they return," he says. All employees benefit from a medical insurance program, a pension scheme and profit sharing plan as well as two weeks of paid vacation, taken in slack periods. Roger believes that proper compensation for the work done helps keep good employees. "If you don't treat a guy right, he'll become a competitor and he'll only do that if he loves what he is doing, so we want to keep him."

CONTRACTOR AT WORK



Kevin Ellingson at the controls of a small excavator.

"We provide our employees with a sense of ownership," says Roger. "And the best employees available want to work full-time. By offering this, we attract them."

What also attracts good employees is the Ellingsons' professional attitude and their ability to instill this in their employees.

"We want to promote people from within as much as we can. This means we must hire the right kind of people at the start," he stresses. "We need self-motivated people who can deal with diversity and adversity on a daily basis, using common sense solutions."

"Good people want to come to work in good conditions with modern equipment, and will take pride in their place of work if it is one to be proud of," he says. This is what has motivated the company to build a new shop, measuring 80 by 205 feet. It has 3500 square feet of offices, a break room and a 10,000 square foot heated shop area. Also, there is a 4000 square foot drive-through storage area for fittings and supplies. "Our crews can drive through and load up in any weather."

Ellingson believes the industry has to elevate the level of the value it provides in the minds of its customers. "Our industry has never gotten credit for what it does. We're not just ditch diggers," states Roger.

As well, the industry is very competitive and the Ellingsons try to sell the quality of their work and service, but, he adds, "There is a limit to what the customer will pay." Selling to farmers is done on-site, never on the telephone or at a local farm show, where Ellingson Drainage has a display. "We bid every job based on its merits." ■

Grading up

"A fourth of our drainage footage is for customers who we have educated to install total systems and do away with existing tile, which are often rundown and not deep enough," says Dick Oberlander of Oberlander and Sons at Wolcott, Indiana. "Some of those existing tiles have been in the ground since the turn of the century," he adds.

It has been these old drains that have kept the Oberlanders working with open trench machines, until recently. In the fall of 1996 they leased a trenchless machine, then took delivery of a new self-propelled Wolfe 250 plow in August 1997.

Though plows are new in the area, Oberlander sees the demand continuing. The notion of a customer not wanting a contractor to make too much in a day is no longer a problem. "Our bigger, more progressive farmers are all for the plow," he says. These landowners prefer a contractor to arrive, get the job finished and leave, so they can get on with field work as soon as possible. Also, the plow leaves less subsoil on top - and rocks!" he adds.

Many of these same customers are now equipped with global positioning yield monitors and they can really see the value of drainage. "Yield monitors are the best thing to happen to drainage for 80 years," says Oberlander. "Poorly drained areas really show up." Now they have the evidence in front of them, they are more willing to have Oberlander install drains in standing crops too. ■



Dick Oberlander says his larger landowner customers are all for the plow.

HAVING TROUBLE KEEPING YOUR FIELDS DRY?

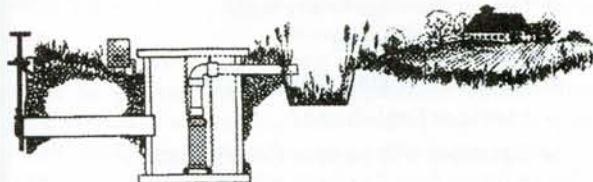
Is your tile outlet below the ditch level? Is the ditch too shallow to allow proper drainage?

Maybe it's time to look at a Drainage Pump.

A drainage pump can keep your field drier than draining it naturally. With a drainage pump YOU can CONTROL how low or how high to keep the water table in your field.



For more information, contact your local Tile Contractor or Call Carry Pumps direct at: 1-800-492-2779.



Our Stainless Steel Submersible drainage pumps are just right for the job. Pumps are available in a variety of horsepower to suit your field application. From 1.5 HP for 20 acres up to 10 HP in applications of 100 acres plus. Carry Pumps are available in single or three phase power, 208, 230 or 460 Volts, with pump capacity from 50 to 1450 GPM with 2 to 25 feet of lift.