

Iron Horse Contractors invests in Bell B30Es

Despite only having a few years under its belt, Iron Horse Contractors, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the USA, has rapidly grown into one of the most recognised construction companies in the greater Raleigh Durham area.

John Santoro, owner of Iron Horse Contractors, has been in the business a bit longer. “My father was a farmer in upstate New York. He had tractors, backhoe loaders and bulldozers, so I’ve been around heavy equipment pretty much ever since I can remember,” said John. “I started working for my father when I was in third grade. My summers were spent on the farm. At first, I started out driving a farm tractor, hauling stuff from the buildings down to the fields and from the fields back to the buildings. Then, I began using his bulldozer to clear the land, and I dug ditches with a backhoe loader.”

Later, in high school, a visit to Raleigh would determine where he would eventually put down roots and start his business. “As a senior in

high school, I came down and visited, and I really loved the area,” he said. “I went back up and went to school for a couple of months and told my parents that I was going to move down to Raleigh. I had to wait tables at Applebee’s and a couple other restaurants to get myself finished with school.”

After finishing high school, John started building decks, often in 90+ degree weather. “I remember working in the heat and watching this guy in a dozer go back and forth grading,” John said. “I thought to myself, ‘those hydraulic muscles don’t get tired no matter how hot it is. He doesn’t look like he is in there sweating very bad. He’s got his air conditioner on.’ I said, ‘I am done with building decks.’”

Shortly after, John applied for a position at Brinley’s Grading in Raleigh and went to work for the company in August of 1998. He worked for the company for a few years and eventually moved on to CC Mangum Contractors, now known as Fred Smith Company, installing utilities. Within a few days, he was appointed the utility foreman for his crew. He worked for them for a couple years, then worked for Blue Ridge Site Development for several years.

His time working with other contractors in Raleigh, John said, honed his skills — from estimating to project managing, to the day-to-day business. He worked for seven different contracting firms during this time. However, he spent most of his

career working at Blue Ridge Site Development, under the direct supervision of Ron Biggers, the owner. This provided him with the experience he needed to start his own business, Iron Horse Contractors.

“I wanted to dabble in the land development side,” he said. I tried it but didn’t care for that side of the industry. I wanted to be the contractor moving the dirt. There is nothing I enjoy more than getting a set of plans and going and building a project. I like being the one doing the work instead of being the one telling them to get the work done.”

“I always said I wanted to start a company and do my own thing by the time I was forty. I was always in a foreman position or a superintendent. I have worked for everybody else and it has always ended in me going somewhere else or me going back. It was just the same result every time. So, I figured the only way to change that result was to just jump in with both feet. I sold my house and started Iron Horse with the \$100 000 profit from the sale.”

John brought in a business partner not long after - Jim Lindsley, a friend from upstate New York where John is from. Lindsley owns one of the largest roofing companies in that area.

Iron Horse Gets Started

Iron Horse Contractors’ first project was a pond conversion for the Halle Building Companies. These ponds are used for temporary sediment basins during construction as a collector for all the storm runoff from the jobsite.

Later, the company won larger bids, including one for the Riverstone sub-division project. “It was seated on 100 acres, and it was a right-of-way job,” John said. “We only did the streets and the storm drain because it was a well and septic job.



equipment that was bought and paid for which he sent down to help along with the cash from the house sale.

“May Heavy Equipment stepped up even when I told them that I wouldn’t be able to pay them right away. I told them, ‘look, it is not going to be 30 days by the time I can pay you; I need that money for payroll. It is going to be 60 to 90 days or maybe even longer before we can pay you to get this thing going.’ They stood right there with us, hand-in-hand. Those guys were amazing.”

So far, the company has purchased five 30-ton Bell ADTs, two 330 Hyundai excavators and a 740 Hyundai loader along with two trench rollers from May Heavy Equipment. John said that an in-house mechanic does some of the service, but they also call on May Heavy Equipment for some of their service needs.

“If it’s anything that is electronic and digital, May comes out and handles that,” he said. “They also service equipment that is rented or leased. May offers great service; they have done a great job for us.”

In total, the company has a fleet of more than 40 pieces of machinery. These are used for what John calls ‘turn-key’ site development services. The company performs grading, erosion control and utilities but sub-contracts out other work. Iron Horse Contractors has an unlimited license for Highway and Public Utilities.

Article and photos courtesy of Construction Equipment Guide.

It was a job just under one million contracted, but after all the change orders and field adjustments, it ended up coming just over a million dollars for our very first project. It was pretty sweet to start out the gate with a job that had 70 000 cubic yards of dirt on it.”

John rented Bell trucks and Hyundai excavators for the job from May Heavy Equipment. “Getting started in this industry is hard. It is capital intensive,” he said. “The \$100 000 I started with was used to market the business, as well as acquire the office space and get things going. \$100 000 in this industry is not very much by any means. It wasn’t like I had \$100 000 to put on equipment. I had to have some of that for payroll to be able to get our guys going. We were building up. Jim had some

