

GOING UNDERGROUND

Contractor embraces technology and initiates transformation

When his father Ed spotted an old D7 for sale in a field in Dubuque 52 years ago, he went to the bank and secured a loan to buy it. No one knew what would transpire when the bank gave his Dad the \$2,400 to purchase the tractor.

As Rod Tschiggfrie will tell you, the rest is history.

Tschiggfrie Excavating, Dubuque, Iowa, has grown to become one of the largest underground contractors in the Midwest. They currently have some 25 projects underway in three states—Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois—ranging from a new regional airport in Dubuque to the complex Bee Branch Watershed Flood Mitigation Project beside the Mississippi river in Dubuque.

The company grew to be one of the largest limestone, sand and gravel operations in Iowa with 23 pits and an asphalt division with four plants, but in recent years has transformed itself into a major underground contractor.

Tschiggfrie (CHIG-Fry) sold off the bulk of the limestone, sand and gravel business and the asphalt division, plus much of its equipment, and has become a smaller, leaner company. It now targets difficult projects like the Bee Branch Watershed Flood Mitigation Project; and all the underground work, surface preparation and grading for Dubuque's new regional airport facility, including its huge parking area and access roads.

With jobs ranging in size from \$12,000 to \$12 million, Tschiggfrie counts on Altorfer Cat and Cat Financial for seamless machine acquisition when they need a new machine.

“An important ingredient in our recipe for purchasing equipment is to buy and keep Cat machines at the forefront of our operation,” says Rod Tschiggfrie, vice president/general manager of the company. “For acquiring Cat products, Cat Financial makes it so seamless to do business with them that I do use them 100 percent of the time.”

Scope of work

With a fleet of over 100 Cat machines plus other equipment, Tschiggfrie handles a broad range of work including:

- Concrete paving
- Site grading
- Sewer/water line installation and repair
- Catch basins
- Curb and gutter installation
- Excavating
- Trucking
- Structural Concrete (reinforced box culverts)
- MSE (Mechanical Stabilized Earth) retaining walls
- Commercial building site prep

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— ROD TSCHIGGFRIE
Vice President
Tschiggfrie Excavating



TSCHIGGFRIE EXCAVATING

Vice president/General manager:

Rod Tschiggfrie

Location: Dubuque, Iowa

Established: 1963

Employees: 100

Services: Concrete paving, site grading, sewer/water line installation and repair, catch basins, curb and gutter installation, excavating and trucking

CAT EQUIPMENT:

Over 100 pieces including compactors, excavators, dozers, track loaders, motor graders, backhoe loaders, wheel loaders, compact track loaders and multi terrain loaders



Technology offers a path to the future

“Technology is important for a couple of reasons: It helps avoid human error—people can forget things; and it keeps a valuable digital record of events,” Rod says.

Several years ago, Rod realized that digital technology was transforming the construction business. To ensure the longevity and long-term success of his company, the company made a substantial commitment to technology, ordering GPS on many of their dozers, and placing Cat Grade Control on their excavators.

Technology now drives everything on the jobsite, from initial drawings and site prep, through underground installation work and final grading.

Tschiggfrie plans to double or triple the number of machines in the fleet using GPS thanks to greater efficiencies.

“Equipped with GPS and Product Link™, our 329E and 336E excavators work well as our primary anchors on our underground work,” Rod says.

The company’s D5 and D6 dozers are also equipped with AccuGrade, making them more efficient and productive.

According to Rod, the biggest benefit of using the GPS technology is that equipment operators don’t move dirt twice anymore. Company managers are able to peer into any job at anytime in real time.

“Having all the information at your fingertips whenever you want it—that’s what makes technology a smart buy for us,” Rod says.

On the Dubuque airport job, project specifications require substantial contouring of the site. The precision contouring has become a far easier task with machines guided by GPS and AccuGrade technology.

Integrity

Rod manages with sound operating principles, tempered by a sincere regard for the well being of his employees and their families.

“We like to stay within about a 100-mile radius for our jobs,” he says.

“The purpose is to keep our guys in their own beds every night. Our tools are important, but our employees are most important of all. We have some people with more than 30 years with the company. We even have the children of some of our original workers coming in and joining the company now.”

Safety paramount

With a full-time safety director on staff, Tschiggfrie conducts weekly meetings in an open forum format that yields good ideas for safer jobsites. The company also works for some Fortune 500 companies who demand strong safety records. Safety ratings are also a factor with the insurance companies, and Tschiggfrie’s rating is strong.

To illustrate Tschiggfrie’s focus on safety, not long ago, the company had just purchased another brand of excavator when equipment operators brought it to management’s attention that the new machine was so noisy that it created a safety hazard on the jobsite. The machine was traded for a new Cat excavator that was much quieter to operate, and therefore, safer.

Many times, machine preference can be a personal choice for comfort or other reasons. With that in mind, Rod solicits input from all of his equipment operators before making a purchase decision.

“We are seeing more of a commitment by Caterpillar to build machines that are safer to operate,” he says. “We’ve noticed that Cat machines overall just seem to be designed with a greater concern for safety, and that aligns well with the long-standing safety policies of our company.”

Fleet management

Two shops (20,000-sq. ft. & 5,000-sq. ft.) enable Tschiggfrie to perform much of their own maintenance work. However, when necessary for certain types of larger component repair, Tschiggfrie calls upon their local dealer, Altorfer Cat.

“One of the biggest ingredients for success in a large company like

ours with enormous overhead is to understand the value of the equipment, depreciation and equipment utilization,” Rod says.

Tschiggfrie faces a special challenge with equipment utilization, since the winter weather in northeast Iowa limits the work season to about nine months, forcing them to carefully scrutinize any new equipment purchases and exercise a bit more conservative approach to adding machines to the fleet.

Cat Financial adds value

Tschiggfrie has discovered greater efficiencies working with Cat Financial because they offer such a wide range and variety of financing options from RPO to lease, outright purchase or even a trade.

“Cat Financial is always there for us and working with them is simple and seamless,” Rod says.

Tschiggfrie likes to operate their compact track loaders and multi terrain loaders for 3,000 to 5,000 hours before trading them.

“I do all the purchasing,” Rod says, “and when we need a new machine, we can have the value within a day or so. We already know the cost advantages/efficiencies that the new unit will add to the project, so it’s easy for me to quickly calculate the benefit and make a decision. Once again in this process, Cat Financial makes it seamless and easy for me.”

Product support from Altorfer Cat

“It’s no secret in this business that Caterpillar is the hardest brand to beat for machine uptime,” he says. “They do a great job. Cat dealer stores are located everywhere so there’s always one near our jobsites.”

Being so close to Altorfer, the Cat dealer is able to do anything and everything Tschiggfrie needs. However, on machines outside of warranty, Tschiggfrie performs a lot of the maintenance work in their shops.

“Whenever Altorfer does any work for us, we get the machines back the



next day or even the same day,” Rod says. “You’ll never do any better than Caterpillar when it comes to parts and service support.”

With so many regional branches and parts locations, Altorfer can respond within a day.

“I’m not confident that any other brand would be able to do that—have the parts, the technology, the trained and skilled technicians to maintain that level of support,” Rod says.

“Product reliability is important,” he adds, “and no one can promise a machine will never break down. But the trick is how fast the supplier can get that machine back into your fleet and making money for you. And Altorfer does it better than anybody.”

Rod appreciates the relationship he has with his Altorfer sales representative, Marc Bierman.

“He’s here consistently, and he’s available anytime. If I need something, I get it that same day from Marc. We have built an excellent relationship with Altorfer through years of working together. That’s important, because sometimes things just can’t wait.

“That same dedication to customer service extends through the entire Altorfer organization and carries through to the Cat brand,” he says. “There’s no weak link in the chain.” ■

TSCHIGGFRIE TACKLES THE TOUGH ONES

Just two of Tschiggfrie’s many current projects illustrate the complex projects entrusted to the company that they complete with skill and efficiency.

Bee Branch Watershed Flood Mitigation Project

This \$200 million multi-phase canal project in downtown Dubuque consists of infrastructure improvements such as detention basins, creek restoration, impervious surface reduction, storm sewer improvements, flood gate replacement and water plant flood protection that will reduce the volume of stormwater, slow the rate of stormwater through the upper watershed, increase the safe conveyance of stormwater through the flood-prone area, and provide floodwater protection to the city’s water treatment plant.

Dubuque Regional Airport

Tschiggfrie is performing all underground work on the \$40 million expansion of the Dubuque regional airport passenger terminal—including excavation and earthmoving for utilities—plus final grading for the new parking lot and taxi runways and extensive contouring of the surrounding grounds.