

digDIFFERENT

Think outside the bucket

SAFETY FIRST:

**BEING SAFE
REQUIRES
ACTIVE EMPLOYEE
INVOLVEMENT**

18

FINDING A NEW LOVE

**Wisconsin contractor learns that
hydrovac work is his true calling**

12

SMART BUSINESS:

**BEST WAYS TO HANDLE AN
EMPLOYEE RAISE REQUEST**

22

PRODUCT FOCUS 24





FINDING A NEW LOVE



Louie Kelly, Poseidon Hydro Excavation hydrovac operator, potholes for utility lines on a city street in Milwaukee. Kelly is using one of the company's Westech Vac Systems hydroexcavation units.

WISCONSIN CONTRACTOR SHIFTS INDUSTRIES, GROWS A RESPECTED AND DIVERSE HYDROEXCAVATION AND UTILITY CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

STORY: SUZAN CHIN-TAYLOR PHOTOS: MICHAEL MCLOONE

Like the lyrics of the chart-topping Beatles hit, *All You Need Is Love*, Bill Lietzke's almost instant love for hydroexcavating has provided the answers to his dream of making a great living doing something he enjoys, creating a family-first workplace culture and securing his family's future.

After suffering an accident and needing to get out of the housing construction industry, Lietzke found his way to hydroexcavating, doing small jobs for a local company until he got the chance to jump in a truck and operate it.

Today, Lietzke owns Poseidon Hydro Excavation, a hydroexcavation company based in Glendale, Wisconsin, near Milwaukee. The company provides an extremely diverse set of services centered around Lietzke's great love and operation of hydrovacs.

A TOUGH START

Lietzke had always been involved in the construction field, initially in housing construction and roofing, but an accident that left him seriously injured for a long while prompted him to seek a new direction for his career. He began asking a good friend and then-owner of Hawk Construction, a local hydrovac firm about potential opportunities with his firm. The only position available was for the daily cleaning of the fleet trucks.

"It was a tough pill to swallow, and I had to suck up a lot of pride taking such a significant pay cut, but I knew it was an excellent opportunity to get in and learn something new and I was confident I could work my way up quickly," Lietzke says. "It didn't take long after working with the trucks to know I had to get on one of them and run it."

Fate smiled upon Lietzke not long after he began his new job. An operator failed to appear for work and there was a critical job scheduled. He was the only one in the shop, and when asked if he could handle it and pitch in, he didn't hesitate to accept the challenge and chance.

"That day sealed my fate: I dug a hole to set a new telephone pole for one that had been struck in an auto accident," Lietzke says. "Once I did that, it was love at first sight — I was addicted."

He continued to work slowly and diligently, biding his time to get a truck he would call his own. Being someone who enjoyed working outdoors, hydroexcavating offered a chance for year-round work, unlike his previous construction positions where he would find it necessary to take on factory work in the off-seasons rather than be on furlough with limited financial resources from unemployment compensation.

Poseidon Hydro Excavation LLC Glendale, Wisconsin

OWNER: Bill Lietzke

EMPLOYEES: 8

SERVICES: Potholing and location, directional drilling support/drill head recovery and mud removal, trenching and slot trenching, splice pits, subsurface utility and test hole work, piling holes, manhole clean-outs, light pole and signal base excavation, remote excavation, culvert cleaning, elevator shaft excavation, silt removal from ponds, petroleum tank/line assistance and core drilling

SERVICE AREA: Wisconsin

WEBSITE: www.poseidon-hydrovac.com



Louie Kelly potholes for utility lines at a Milwaukee intersection, where street work is occurring. The company marks off an area where they are working and has a crew member directing traffic for further safety.

“YOU CAN HAVE A GREAT OPERATOR BUT A TERRIBLE TRUCK AND YOU’RE GOING TO BE HAMSTRUNG AND VICE VERSA. BUT YOU PUT A GREAT OPERATOR AND A GREAT PIECE OF EQUIPMENT TOGETHER AND THERE’S NOTHING THAT CAN’T BE ACCOMPLISHED.”

Bill Lietzke

Accepting that first entry-level position opened many doors, and after approximately seven years, Lietzke accepted a position as an operator at another firm and was quickly promoted to management within a year. He was responsible for a fleet that was challenging to keep operational due to its age and constant maintenance issues; however, he persevered until it became evident it was time to move on.

Lietzke learned quickly that due to his quick career rise, he would be considered “overqualified” for operator positions and managerial opportunities were simply nonexistent in the area at the time. There was only one option available: Take a leap of faith and strike out on his own.

USING LESSONS LEARNED

His prior experiences at other hydrovac firms helped Lietzke create a business model and modus operandi that would incorporate the best practices observed and set a new standard in the area for how hydroexcavating service firms should deliver client services and the type of fleet they would operate.

Lietzke had learned in all too painful a way what having the wrong truck for your environment could do to a firm and its effect on operating profitability.

“You can have a great operator but a terrible truck and you’re going to be hamstrung and vice versa,” he says. “But you put a great operator and a great piece of equipment together and there’s nothing that can’t be accomplished.”

This approach and belief are what drove the firm forward. Trucks being the lifeblood of the operation, he decided that as a startup, leasing would be the best option, having new units every two years. He believed this would enable the firm to provide the excellent service and dependability he had promised when his former clients gave him a chance.

It was good in theory, but what his new firm could afford through leasing was problematic — the units were not capable of withstanding the punishing climate of Wisconsin winters. Brand new, they broke down, making the firm’s debut with an important new client not as smooth or impressive as Lietzke had hoped. Again, his love for the work got him through, and he and his team found ways to “make it work” until a better, more sustainable solution could be found.

NORTH OF THE BORDER

Lietzke began to demo numerous trucks from various manufacturers, carefully exploring all his options until he settled on Westech Vac Systems, a Canadian manufacturer affiliated with Federal Signal. Westech became the obvious choice for Lietzke’s next truck since the manufacturer is based in an

Keeping tech simple

With all the office software and enterprise tools available, Bill Lietzke, owner of Poseidon Hydro Excavation, has opted to keep things lean and mean, yet still highly efficient, with a somewhat unusual tool from a fuel card company.

WEX GPS, a telematics and GPS fleet tracking system has proven itself to be a powerful ally in making Poseidon's service scheduling and equipment maintenance more efficient.

The GPS tracking features allows Lietzke's dispatcher to see where everyone is working, so as project orders arrive, they can readily determine who is closest and available to deploy and serve the client the fastest. The vehicle routing feature can also track the crew's location in real time on interactive 2D, 3D or satellite maps. This allows them to use live traffic data to find faster routes for the fleet, which saves Poseidon time and money.

In addition to the GPS tracking, the system also provides a number of variables that can be customized such as maintenance schedulers that can read hours on each hydrovac truck and alert Lietzke when service items may be due, like oil changes and brake and fluid checks, all of which help Poseidon keep its fleet in top condition — essential in a tough climate like Wisconsin.

extreme climate and designs units for firms that must work under the same conditions as Lietzke and the Poseidon team.

The switch from leasing to purchasing took place, and Poseidon now runs a fleet of exclusively Westech hydrovac units that includes two Western Star 4900s and two Western Star 4700s, with a fifth unit on order. The fleet also encompasses support trailers for remote hose and smaller pickup trucks.

LIGHTENING THE LOAD

One challenge facing hydroexcavating operators and other related hauling contractors are the new weight restrictions imposed by the local department of transportation. Hydrovac trucks are a target for monitoring by state law enforcement of late. Although a weight maximum of 73,000 pounds sounds like a lot, once the truck chassis, tank and water are factored in, the amount of debris that can be hauled becomes quite limited.

To comply and still be profitable and extend its hauling capacity, Poseidon has switched its units' cross cabinet that houses the hot-water burner for wintertime production and the pump to one made of carbon fiber.

"Anywhere we could get rid of steel and replace it with aluminum, we did," Lietzke says. "By doing this, we were able to curb about 10,000 pounds. Our trucks are some of the biggest, baddest trucks in the state, and it was a big surprise to find we were hauling loads that were pushing the envelope of the weight limit, so these little changes have made a big difference in efficiency and capacity."

By consistently looking for and implementing ways to make the fleet more efficient and extend capabilities, Poseidon has been able to enter interesting markets and become involved in some very specialized projects, which Lietzke enjoys taking on. One such application involved excavating vertically to a depth of 175 feet for a construction project in downtown Milwaukee. The prime contractor, Michels, called Lietzke in need of a truck to help them with creat-

ing space to pour concrete in for footings surrounding pilings that had been driven down in sandy soil.

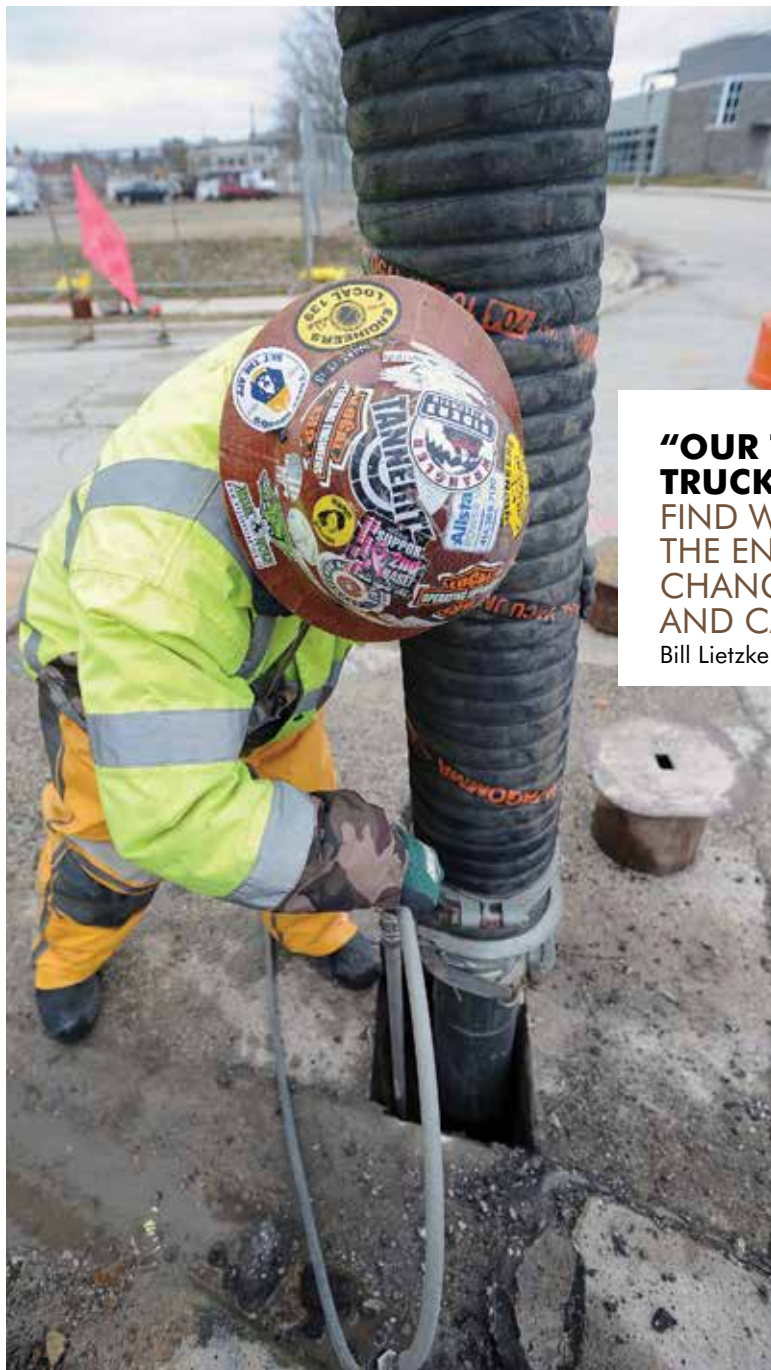
The Poseidon team had never tried a vertical this deep. Being unsure it would be possible, they relayed that to the client but indicated they were willing to try if the client was open to the experiment. Knowing that sand and water from such a depth would be more demanding than typical mud, it would be a chance for Lietzke and his team to see just what their unit could do.

"We have one of the biggest blowers and truck models available on the market so I felt pretty confident that if a truck could do it, our unit and team could make it happen," he says.

The project required all the remote hose that Poseidon had available, along with the strength and willpower to handle it. The hose was triple-lashed to structures for added control and safety, and the crew also used a large track-hoe to hold part of it so if the hose went down, they wouldn't lose it into the hole. On projects like this, the Poseidon crew understood that nature and physics will shoot the remote hose straight down until the operator throttles down



Ben Horaitis, left, hydrovac operator, and Bill Lietzke, company owner, get the hydroexcavator ready for a job near Milwaukee. Lietzke still enjoys getting out and working with his crews as often as possible.



Louie Kelly holds the dig tube with his shoulder as he gets the digging wand in place to break up more soil while potholing for utilities. The Westech Vac Systems hydrovac units allow the company to work year-round, even in Wisconsin's winter months.

and turns the vacuum off and that they wouldn't win the battle with the hose. Knowing this and when to let go ensured a successful and safe completion of the job.

HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL — LOVING IT ALL

Poseidon's variety of services includes potholing and location, directional drilling support/drill head recovery and mud removal, trenching and slot trenching, splice pits, subsurface utility and test hole work, piling holes, manhole clean-outs, light pole and signal base excavation, remote excavation, culvert cleaning, elevator shaft excavation, silt removal from ponds and petroleum tank/line assistance. This gives Poseidon's crews the opportunity to broaden their skills with applications that require both horizontal and vertical methods.

The team has been contracted to tunnel underneath residential housing, often working blind, using the exterior of a building to line up and gain a sense of direction. One such project involved a mobile home that had a sanitary line made of Orangeburg, which was backed up and failing.

The crew tunneled horizontally nearly 35 feet to locate the line using remote hose technique. It was an arduous task, requiring the hose to be fed in slowly, retracted and then taken a little farther until hitting the target utility. But to Lietzke and the Poseidon crew, the challenges make the work more rewarding.

PAIRING TECHNOLOGIES

Always one to keep learning, the addition of core drilling to Poseidon's portfolio of services was a natural progression.

"OUR TRUCKS ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST, BADDEST TRUCKS IN THE STATE, AND IT WAS A BIG SURPRISE TO FIND WE WERE HAULING LOADS THAT WERE PUSHING THE ENVELOPE OF THE WEIGHT LIMIT, SO THESE LITTLE CHANGES HAVE MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE IN EFFICIENCY AND CAPACITY."

Bill Lietzke

"One of the things I've always enjoyed doing is subsurface engineering," Lietzke says. "These specialty projects give us a chance to utilize both our core drill and hydrovac trucks and make a real impact in the success of a project and its planning."

Lietzke performed a lot of due diligence prior to making the decision to add core drilling as a service and invest in the needed equipment. His goal was to bring the service to his clients in a more efficient and effective way than it had been available in the past. He and the team spent extensive time configuring the support truck and tools, as well as the SIMCO Drilling Equipment PTC 255 core drill itself, to give it the capabilities of coring deeper and larger-diameter core than other firms in the market.

These extended capacities have made using Poseidon's core drilling service another option for utilities to mitigate cross bores. Utility locating and marking allows for inaccuracy, as the pinpointing will be only as good as the utility locating technician and the equipment used. This can be critical with fiber optics, and core drilling provides project engineers a physical, visual method for calculating and knowing exactly what is buried and how deep.

FLOWING FORWARD

With its growth, Poseidon has extended its staff of operators and Lietzke spends more of his time in the office these days, but he's structured the operation so he still has the opportunity to be out in the field, running a rig and doing what he loves.

Although the opportunities are there to add more services, Lietzke plans to stay focused on his true love.

"I believe we've been successful and profitable because we stick with what we know and do that to the best of our ability," he says. "Looking back, starting a business like this from scratch with no help was an unbelievable task, but the dedication and having my heart full-in with everything on the line just kept me going. When things were tough, I'd remember that tomorrow was another day. So, if you love it, you'll make it if you keep your heart in the business and your business in your heart." ▼

Featured products from:

Michels Corporation
920-583-3132
www.michels.us

SIMCO Drilling Equipment
641-642-2166
www.simcodrill.com

Westech Vac Systems, Ltd.
780-955-3030
www.westechvac.com

WEX, Inc.
207-773-8171
www.wexinc.com