

Exeter Co. Comes Full Circle

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By Reggie Ellis

A few years ago, Frank Palmer decided that his company, Van Cleve Construction, was paying too much for natural gas to fuel its steam-curing process for concrete. So he decided the best way to make concrete was to go back to the way it was done more than a century ago.

Instead of using steam to harden the mix of water, cement and hard rock, Palmer decided they would go back to pouring the concrete mixture into forms and letting them cure in the sun. The longer concrete sits, the stronger it becomes.

The sewers in Rome were made of concrete more than 2,000 years ago and they are still curing today," Palmer said.

The same can be said of Van Cleve Construction Co.'s reputation for making reliable concrete that has been used to build city sewer systems, freeways and infrastructure for more than a century.

John Van Cleve, Jr. founded Van Cleve Construction Co. in 1906 on Road 210 (just north of Highway 198) where it remains today. The area, known as Merryman, was part of the land owned by the Merryman family, which were Van Cleve's in-laws after his marriage to Louise Merryman.

The principal products were irrigation pipe and irrigation appliances to supply the vast acreage of wheat and cattle raising land surrounding Exeter that was now being planted with citrus and grapes. Much of the land remains citrus groves today. It was Van Cleve's suggestion that his college friend, W.A. Waterman, pack up his sheet metal shop in San Jose, Calif. and move to Exeter. Once there, Waterman Company began producing irrigation control gates and eventually incorporated as internationally known Waterman Industries, Inc. in 1951.

Van Cleve Construction held its first stockholder meeting on Feb. 8, 1911 in Marinette, Wisc., where the Van Cleve's had moved from working in the banking business. John Van Cleve, Jr., his father, John Van Cleve, Sr. and his brother, Ralph Van Cleve were the only stockholders. The following year, the company began holding director meetings at its office at Merryman, the area surrounding the former Merryman Railroad Station (now Orange Blossom Junction Restaurant), near Exeter, but continued to return to Wisconsin for its annual meetings. In 1912, minutes from one of the directors meetings talk about the approval of a shower-bath for the bank-house - where sand was dredged from Yokohl Creek to mix with concrete - as long as the men were willing to donate their time for the labor. The entire project cost the company about \$100. Profits that year were about \$1,300. In 1917, the minutes recorded that John, Jr. gave himself a monthly salary of \$175. By 1924, his salary jumped to \$7,200, so business was good.

Another entry in the 1912 minutes talks about equipment failure”:

A survey of the other fixed assets of the company showed that the livestock equipment had suffered by the perhaps permanent disability of two of the best mules. There is still ground for hope that one of the animals, lamed by a strain and large swelling at one of the knee joints, may recover, but the other one which has been in pasture in the mountains for the past six months shows no improvement.”

They decided not to do anything until early winter when the price of hay is high and horses and mules can be bought at a discount.

Mules were the engine of transportation from the businesses to farmers or the railroad. Exeter's crops and products went all over the Valley because it was situated on both the Sante Fe and Pacific Union railroads. In the early days, Van Cleve's large 18- and 24-inch pipes required at least 1 mule to pull every 1,000 pounds. Concrete pipes weighed about 350 pounds each, so a standard cart of 12, 24-inch pipe took four mules to move it at a snail's pace. Between 50-100 mules were stabled at the company's plant at any given time. In later years, a portable pipe machine mounted on skids was towed to large jobs and pipe was made onsite. Power for the machine was supplied by a portable steam boiler, also on skids. Prior to the evolution of the forklift, concrete pipes were moved by a team of four men rolling them up planks and onto carts and later trucks.

Louise died in 1921 and John remarried soon afterwards. John died in 1943, but was preceded in death by his brother Ralph, so the company was operated as a trust for the benefit of John's second wife, Gertrude, and his three daughters Eugenia, Margaret and Louise. After Gertrude died several years later, Margaret and Louise took over and continued the business with hired managers.

Pre-cast concrete products from Van Cleve has been used for projects essential to California's infrastructure, including Interstate 5 from Wheeler Ridge (where it splits with Highway 99) to just south of Los Banos; Highway 41 through Fresno; and major development projects in Bakersfield, Temecula and Buena Park.

After a review of the business in 1968, it was determined that the company should focus on commercial concrete and specialty items, a practice that turned the business around. The sisters hired Frank Palmer to run the business and take it in the new direction.

After taking over, Palmer decided to return the company to its roots using the dry-cured method of making concrete. Instead of using steam to hydrate the water, the concrete is premixed and poured into a cast that sits for several days until it is cured. By not using gas to operate the steam process, the company saved money to compete on a smaller scale.

Van Cleve then specialized by primarily manufacturing curved concrete pipe for storm drains and manholes for sewer systems. Manholes from Van Cleve can be found in cities throughout the Valley. At one time, Van Cleve was shipping out more than 600,000 pounds of concrete per day.

He soon became a partner in the company and purchased the balance of it after Margaret's death in 1990. Louise retired to Lemon Grove, Calif. near San Diego where she still lives. Today, Palmer, 77, has handed the business over to his son-in-law, Bill Clower, 59, to spend more time with his wife, who is suffering from cancer.

Clower said Van Cleve ships about 100,000 pounds of concrete pipe each day. While the technology and equipment has improved, the basic mix of water, cement and hard rock remains the same. The concrete plant looks much the same way it did over 50 years ago. The office was built around a safe that was installed in 1919 and the stables where mules were kept are still there, slightly hidden by the overgrowth of trees and shrubs.

With more than 100 years of experience, it's nice to know that Van Cleve's products are making our city stronger every year.