

*Distribution Construction Co. Brings  
New Technology to an Old Tradition*

BY JASON MORGAN, EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

While many attempt to beat the clock with deadlines and schedules, time always seems to have the last laugh. But if there is anything to be learned from tests of time, it's that adaptation is the key. It allows companies the freedom to expand and provide new services to customers as they are needed. And it allows the integration of new technology to provide faster, more efficient services.

For Distribution Construction Co. (DCC), the ability to adapt has allowed it to maintain a high level of quality services, while continuing a tradition of loyalty to its customers and employees alike. For more than 40 years, DCC has been a name that is synonymous with quality installation and maintenance of natural gas distribution systems.

As an industry leader, DCC continues to raise the bar of excellence in the gas industry with investments in technology and safety. Not satisfied with being pigeonholed into gas installation services, DCC has expanded to telecommunications (fiber-optic), underground electrical and pipeline rehabilitation.

"There have been substantial changes in technology in the utility industry," says Fred W. Cripps, owner and CEO. "DCC has evolved with the underground industry, in order to keep pace with our competition while meeting the needs of our customers."

DCC welcomes change with open arms knowing that it will bring more opportunities that allow it to develop and grow as a company. As DCC's maxim states: "Quality has no fear of time."

#### Company History

Emerson Clark, Robert Cooley and Jack Evans, along with Gerald Edmonds and James and Roger Underwood, founded Distribution Construction Co. in October 1964 with the goal of installing, maintaining and reconditioning underground natural gas systems in Tulsa, Okla. These six men held the first upper-management positions in the company, which slowly grew to approximately 40 people by the end of the first year.

"The first several years were spent doing what any startup company does," says vice president David Cheeseman. "It tries to find work that you can make a profit at while purchasing equipment that you need to survive and grow."

Limited to small diameter steel gas mains and services, DCC began with the installation of underground



DCC owner and CEO Fred Cripps (left) recently received the CGA's committee chair award. He accepted the award with the company's safety director Larry Cripps.

natural gas systems. Slowly but surely, full-time operations were established in North Carolina, South Dakota and Minnesota.

The problems of yesteryear were the same as the hardships DCC still faces today — finding, training and equipping qualified personnel while working in an extremely competitive environment. Early on, however, there was little government involvement. The extensive rules of today's federally mandated Operator Qualification Program — OSHA and CDL, just to name a few — were not a factor when DCC first started operating.

Nevertheless, DCC has grown to approximately 350 people working full-time with seasonal increases as the workload dictates. Today, DCC is centrally located in North Carolina with a regional office in South Dakota and still performs work for some of the same companies as it did in the first years — a testament of the long-term commitment to quality. DCC has performed work in half of the United States and is now focused on growing the company in the Southeast and Midwest. Over time, DCC strives to add new customers and services while maintaining the traditional ones. At the same time, however, the company seeks to retain its core beliefs in a changing industry.

#### Technological Advancements

Within every industry, technology plays a large role in the success of individual players. In the natural gas field today, most low-pressure installations are now plastic instead of steel piping, "smart pigs" are used to locate and map pipe weaknesses, and

pipe bursting and horizontal directional drilling (HDD) are becoming more commonplace as installation techniques.

“Technology allows contractors to achieve greater efficiency, while driving costs down and production up,” Cripps says. “DCC has been involved with HDD since it became commercially available. We use it on literally every project we undertake.”

Before HDD was available, each bore would be performed by a jack or auger and, unless soil conditions were perfect, you could only guess at what depth and grade the bore would exit. Now, a small HDD machine with only an operator and a locator can accomplish many of these bores faster, cheaper and with an exact location of the pilot head at all times, explains Cheeseman. Realizing its importance, DCC owns HDD rigs ranging from 11,000 to 140,000 lbs to aid gas system installation.

With the efficiency of new technology comes the spoils of saving time and money. HDD provides the ability to install in wetland areas without restrictions and work under city streets without tearing up asphalt, which makes obtaining a permit much easier while saving money in asphalt or soil restoration. DCC has built its HDD team for mobility and versatility to provide the most accurate and timely services. It is important to DCC that it continues to seek out the latest, most innovative technology to provide any new services that customers may require.

#### Quality and Safety

The more things change, the more they stay the same, and safety has always been on the forefront of DCC’s mind. Since purchasing the company in January 1995, Cripps, who began with the company in its first year of operation, not only has doubled the size of DCC but also has stressed the importance of safety in the workplace. On June 30, 2005, the National Safety Council awarded DCC the 2005 Green Cross for safety excellence, significant improvement and outstanding achievement in the field of occupational safety and health.

Yet, DCC’s focus on safety isn’t meant for winning awards, it is meant to maximize efficiency in services — while keeping employees safe from injuries. There is a corporate officer in charge of safety, training programs for the crews, weekly “toolbox” talks and safety compliance personnel who roam the jobsites to ensure the highest level of safety possible.

“We stress that each employee must be knowledgeable of workplace rules and safety practices and have at least one certified, competent person on each crew,” Cripps states. “Each individual is

responsible for the safety of himself and everyone on his crew.”

Ninety percent of DCC’s work takes place on public streets and roadways digging around existing utilities and handling heavy pipes, which makes safety a never-ending battle. Even so, it is a battle that Cripps will continue to fight.

In January, Cripps took a seat on the Common Ground Alliance’s (CGA) board of directors to represent the excavating community and NUCA. Dedicated to ensuring public safety, environmental protection and the integrity of underground facilities, the CGA gives Cripps the forum needed to express DCC’s views and concerns about the industry. It also affords the opportunity to get valuable feedback from others that have experienced similar issues, in order to create a safety network for the industry.

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**-Fred Cripps, owner and CEO.**

#### On the Horizon

Since 1981, DCC has been an active member in NUCA to make the association one of the most effective organizations benefiting contractors today. “It has the ability to bring contractors from all aspects of utility construction together and give them a voice into making the workplace safer by influencing both national and local legislatures,” says Cheeseman. “NUCA is exactly the source of information for the constantly changing laws that DCC needs in the future.”

According to Cripps, there are two major factors that will bring changes in the industry. First and foremost, increased regulations are needed that require more training, more record keeping and increased scrutiny into the integrity of existing pipes. Second, changes in technology will make equipment easier to operate and more user-friendly, allowing crews to be more productive in the field.

For DCC, education will aid in adaptation. But even with all the new technology, rules and information, DCC will stick to the two basic principles it had since its conception.

“Without quality and safety, there is perhaps a present, but certainly no future for any contractor working in today’s environment,” declares Cripps. “By adhering to these principles, DCC has been able to transition through all the changes in the industry, while maintaining the loyalty of both customers and employees.” **UC**