

A SALUTE TO A CUSTOMER



MINNOWA CONSTRUCTION, INC.

Harmony (Minnesota) bridge contractor specializes in “difficult” projects



Al Thorson, co-owner, Minnowa Construction.



Steve Thorson, co-owner, Minnowa Construction.

Al and Steve Thorson, founders and owners of Minnowa Construction, Inc., are choosy when it comes to the projects they bid on for their Harmony (Minnesota) bridge contracting company.

“We like the ones where the degree of difficulty is fairly high,” said Al, president of the firm he founded with his brother, Steve. “We seem to do well on those. Some jobs are harder than others, and some people don’t like to do the hard ones. We do.”

“We do a lot of work that apparently is not that desirable to other contractors,” agreed Steve Thorson, Minnowa’s vice president. “But those jobs bring a better profit. We’ve been doing difficult things for so long that we’re capable of figuring out how to handle them.”

After working for another contractor, the Thorsons started Minnowa Construction in 1984 with 12 people. “When we started out, I was pretty much doing the operating and field work,” said Steve, who now oversees the company’s operations in the field. “We were a smaller operation then. As we grew, I was taking on a lot of our larger projects. I like the field work, so I stayed out here.”

Experience is Minnowa’s strong suit. “We were doing bridges for the other company, and when we started our company, we learned and grew with it,” noted Al, who has an engineering degree and runs Minnowa’s office. “And we have good people, eight of whom have been with us since 1984. We also acquired some good employees over the years who’ve worked elsewhere.”

All aspects of bridge work

Today the Thorsons and their 60 employees tackle “bridges, culverts, small grading, mostly in conjunction with bridge work, bridge concrete and precast concrete culverts,” listed Al. “We work year round except for extraordinarily cold days. We find projects in which we can work on the substructures, setting beams and forming bridge decks during the winter for early spring deck pours.”

Minnowa Construction also handles bridge demolition, reconstruction and widening projects. “We also do coffer dams where we drive sheet piling prior to excavating it, digging it down, de-watering it and building the piers,” explained Al. In addition to its five bridge crews, Minnowa also has two crews that concentrate on culverts and small grading work.

The Thorsons took their company name, Minnowa, from their location in Harmony, “right on the border between Minnesota and Iowa,” Al noted. The name also describes the firm’s territory. “We are pre-qualified in Wisconsin and South Dakota, but we mostly, if not exclusively, work in Iowa and Minnesota,” said Al. “We prefer to stay within 200 miles of home, if that’s possible. Crews basically spend the week on the road unless they’re close to home. We have people who live all over the territory.”

Jobs span wide range

The Thorsons estimate they have built or worked on 400 or 500 bridges during their 17 years in business. “We’ve done everything from 18-inch



Minnowa Construction headquarters in Harmony, Minnesota.



A Minnowa operator puts this Komatsu PC400LC-6 excavator to work at a jobsite located on County Road D16 in Buchanan County, Iowa.

culvert up to a 720-foot-long bridge with five piers in Peterson, Minnesota,” commented Al.

“It does make you feel good to go over your own work,” he added. “But we’ve done so many, we honestly forget sometimes.”

Factors that make a project more difficult — and more appealing — to Minnowa include “the type of stream a bridge crosses, ground conditions, and whether we have to maintain traffic or not,” Al explained. “The tightness of quarters relative to nearby businesses or houses is also a factor. If the bridge is up against a hill on one side and maybe not on the other side of the stream, that too affects the complexity of the project.”

The largest project Minnowa Construction has worked on is a recent job for the city of Albert Lea, Minnesota. “It was two bridges, approach grading, paving, curb and gutter, lighting and other ground work,” said Al. “We subbed out the underground, paving and curb and gutter.”

Unique covered-bridge job

Al Thorson called an unusual job refurbishing and moving a historic covered bridge for the city of



Operator Bill Steele uses a Komatsu PC200LC-6 during a recent Minnowa job entailing the demolition of a sewer plant.

Zumbrota, Minnesota, one of his company’s most interesting projects. “We moved an old covered bridge that was sitting in a park,” he explained. “We placed it over a river and made it part of a trail system for bikes.

“It was challenging and different from anything we had done,” continued Al. “We repaired this bridge on site because some of the lumber had rotted out. Then we used two cranes to actually pick it up and move it a quarter of a mile to a framework we had assembled for it to sit on, which was going to be left in place once we got it over the river. It’s believed to be the only covered bridge in Minnesota.”

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Minnowa thrives on hard work, good people

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Excavators replace cranes

Cranes used to hold exclusive sway over the heavy lifting required in bridge construction, but excavators are replacing them in many bridge-building tasks. Al and Steve Thorson are enthusiastic about the efficiency and speed of their Komatsu hydraulic excavators — two PC400s and a PC200LC-6 — from Road Machinery and Supplies Company. RMS sales representative Ron Carothers services the Minnowa account.

"We use excavators for footings for the abutments, shaping the slopes, placing riprap," explained Al. "Years ago, you would have used clamshell and drag buckets on cranes for a lot of the work. But now excavators are more efficient and faster."

The Thorsons turned to RMS for Komatsu excavators "because we like the people, service and sales," Al emphasized. "Ron Carothers and I have known each other for about 28 years now. He takes care of us very well. Komatsu excavators are outstanding machines. They're reliable and productive." Minnowa also has seven Link-Belt cranes from RMS.

"We're pretty loyal to RMS," continued Al. "They're treated us well. They have a serviceman who lives in Decorah, Iowa. And when RMS moved into Iowa, that was a big plus for us, because we can draw service from their locations when we're working down there. And it's a lot handier for short-term equipment rental."

Minnowa Construction employs a mechanic who travels from jobsite to jobsite in the summer and works on each piece of equipment during the winter months. "We try to bring each piece into the shop to go through it and make sure it's ready to go, to help eliminate as much downtime as possible," said Al. "We can't afford downtime. We don't have a lot of replacement machines."

The Thorsons occasionally call on RMS for service work. "They respond very well when we need them," commented Al. Minnowa also bought a Tramac hydraulic hammer from RMS to break concrete on bridge demolition jobs, "and we have several dump trucks and belly dumps that we purchased from RMS," Al added.

Good people essential

Tackling difficult jobs and successfully completing them has allowed Minnowa Construction to make its reputation in the bridge industry, but the Thorsons also credit their employees with Minnowa's steady growth and success over the last 17 years.

"It boils down to good people and a lot of hard work," said Steve. "Many of our key foremen and operators have been with us since we started in 1984. We work well together and respect each other. We're open-minded about any job and possibly a better way to do it. Everybody has an opinion and an idea, and it may be a better one than we have. These guys are professionals, and we value their opinions and ideas."

As for the future, Steve noted that business will remain steady. "There will be lots of jobs out there," he said. "Roads aren't capable of handling all the people who are driving today, so more highways means more bridges: new ones and reconstructions."

The Thorsons plan to go after some of that bridge business, but not all of it. "We either have to grow and be really big or stay where we are and have pretty good control," Steve observed. "We're comfortable with our current size. We just want everyone to be happy and prosperous."

"We're pretty happy where we are," agreed Al. "We want to stay manageable, and we want to stay really good at what we're doing."

That's good news for customers of Minnowa Construction, Inc.



Minnowa Construction crews put the finishing touches on a recent bridge construction job east of West Concord, Minnesota.



Using this Link-Belt crane, a Minnowa operator drives a pile at a bridge job near Highway 63 in New Hampton, Iowa.