

MIDWEST **CONTRACTOR**



Mies Construction **Masters the Growth Curve**

Family-Owned Mies Construction Finds Success Through Diversification

By Julie Knudson



It all started on April Fool's Day in 1988. "I had a Ditch Witch trencher, a pickup and a trailer," recalls Earl Mies, President. "It was just me by myself. I wasn't even married at that time." So began Mies Construction. Today the Wichita firm has 115 employees and works throughout the state of Kansas and areas of northern Oklahoma. But back in 1988, after 10 years working for a contractor who is now a competitor, Mies was on his own.

The early days were worrisome and Mies decided to hedge his bets. "I was scared of starving to death, so that first winter I worked two jobs," he says. After a full day of construction, he'd catch a few winks at home, power through a quick supper and head to the night shift in a plastic plant, where he made gallon pickle jugs.

"Then I'd be off at seven in the morning to crawl on the trencher," he remembers. That first winter was mercifully mild and Mies lined up enough work to leave his jug-production gig after only three months. Steady growth followed. "In our second year we bought a rubber-tire backhoe to join the trenching machine," Mies says. Each year he added more business, more equipment and more employees.

Underground utility services provided the launch pad for Mies back in 1988 and the pipe division is still a mainstay for the company. Mike Dandurand, Rehab Superintendent, outlines a current water pipe rehabilitation project at a subdivision near the company's Wichita location.

"We're directional drilling the pipe itself in, but before drilling, we have to dig up all



No foolin': Launched on April 1, 1988, Mies Construction is helmed by husband and wife team, Earl and Kathy Mies.



Abigail Mies, Earl and Kathy's youngest daughter, is a photographer.

the existing utilities and services just so we don't get into them with the drilling process," he explains. The three Komatsu excavators Dandurand's team uses for the project – a PC78 midi excavator and two PC35 mini excavators – make installation of the 8-inch pipe straightforward and efficient.

Continuing on its growth path, Mies added a dirt division in 2005, relying at first on just a CASE 1150 Dozer, a John Deere 862 Scraper and a Champion motor grader to gain a foothold among the local customer base. "Today we're running five dirt crews," Mies says. "We have a fleet of about 14 scrapers and several blades and dozers."

The division, headed up by John Reed, takes on anything from small building sites up to highways for paving contractors. Following his drive to ensure a healthy and diverse business, Mies again expanded operations just three years ago with the addition of a concrete division. Capabilities include pre-cast or cast-in-place box culverts, weir walls, retaining walls and stone-block bridge.

The Family Business

There's no doubt the Mies operation is a family affair. Two sons, a daughter and his wife are all involved in making the company a success. "There's a sense of pride there," Earl says. But though Mies likes seeing his kids follow in his footsteps, he says he and Kathy were "brutally honest" with them about the challenges that come with being a construction business owner. "I always told them when they were kids that there were easier careers out there than what dad's always done," Mies recalls.

Having developed a strong work ethic during his childhood on a Wichita dairy

farm, Earl instilled the same values in his children. "You've got to wake up and be ready to pull your boots on every day," Mies remembers telling them. Though he knows construction can be a tough industry, he stresses it's also a good industry with real staying power. "I keep telling them there's always going to be work – pipe and highway and road work – but you've got to be willing to put in the time and the effort to succeed in it."

Kathy Mies, Co-Owner and Earl's wife, says she loves working with her family. "It's much better now that the kids are in it. It's a whole new ball game." Kathy was instrumental in working through the tough times as the business was growing its employee and customer bases. "It's all kind of a blur," she recalls with a laugh. While Mies Construction was steadily expanding, so was the Mies family – Earl and Kathy welcomed four children in five years. "Raising the kids at the same time we started the company, it was tough on both of us," Kathy says. "But we got through it."

Though Kathy shares Earl's pride in having their children closely involved in



Johnathan Mies, Earl and Kathy's younger son, is an Operator in the dirt division.

the company, she says that discussions around the Thanksgiving table aren't all about business. "It's just the three older ones that are in it. The youngest one is a photographer," she explains. Between sharing news outside of work, catching up on hobbies and the addition of friends and significant others, Kathy says, "The conversation's pretty normal."

But just because your parents own the company doesn't mean you're on the fast track to the top. In fact, at Mies Construction, the opposite is probably true. "My very first day on the job, I was 20 feet down in a ditch putting pipe together," recalls Dallas Mies, Pipe Foreman and oldest of the Mies children. "I started from the bottom up." Though he has some big shoes to fill, Dallas enjoys working alongside his family and couldn't imagine having it any other way. "They're teaching me every single day and helping me grow in my profession," he says.

Success Through Diversification

Construction is a difficult sector when it comes to long-term survival. The market has suffered some tremendous downturns over the years, but there have been upswings, too. Mies has an edge when it comes to surviving tough times. "I had a father who hammered into our heads not to reach too far," he says. "Always



A Komatsu PC218-LC

keep the end in sight where you can manage through it. That's what we've done through the years." Branching out has also helped the firm weather the storms. "Diversifying into dirt has helped a lot," Mies says. "What we've seen through the years is that it seems like, when one division was slowing down, the other one would pick up."

The range of equipment that moves the company forward has also grown. "I remember the first Komatsu they purchased back in 1993 or 1994," says Atlee Preheim, Sales Rep at Berry Tractor and Equipment Company in Wichita, a long-time partner of the Mies team. "It was the PC220LC-6." Berry Tractor has been there for Mies Construction at every step along the way, helping the firm with its equipment needs and ensuring that service and support were always available as the young company gained traction.

"Our flagship excavators are Komatsu PC360 machines," Mies says of the nearly 40 excavators now in the Mies Construction fleet. "We like them because they're solid. They stand up and they do their job." In a company as busy as they are, the Mies crews don't have time to deal with equipment problems. The Komatsu quality and Berry Tractor's service capabilities mean that every machine is ready to go no matter the job. "We just don't see a lot of issues with them," Mies says of Komatsu machines. "I know we've got some right now with 20,000 hours on them and they're still running strong every day."

Preheim also works with Mies to determine where technology fits into the company's portfolio. The team already runs GPS on most of its motor graders and

several of its dozers. A self-described old-school guy, Mies says, "They're having to show me that it's worth having it and paying for it, but we are seeing the benefits." He worries that technology sometimes brings its own set of problems, such as operators who become lax because they expect the tech to carry some of the load. "You still have human error with it," Mies explains. Helping to combat potential issues, Berry Tractor is working closely with the Mies team to provide training so operators can better use the technology while still ensuring the systems are fed accurate and reliable data.

Always Looking to the Future

Developing three bustling divisions from a single trencher hasn't prompted Mies to sit back on his laurels. "We're always looking," he says of the company's stance on growth and diversification. It hasn't escaped Earl's attention that the dirt division is seeing an uptick in the need for crushed concrete sub-base. "We may look at some crushing opportunities in the future," he muses. "We'll just see how times go."

Though technology is moving forward and the next generation of the Mies family is primed to grow the company into the future, the team's core vision remains the same. "We've always built on the concepts of pride, excellence and honesty," Mies explains. The firm prides itself on completing projects fairly, on excellence in its work, and on its honesty in dealing with customers. "We just try to take care of people and treat the client right," Mies says. "And if we can save them money we'll do that, too."



Oldest of the Mies children, Dallas Mies is a Pipe Foreman in the family construction business.



Kathryn Jost, Accounts Receivable at Mies Construction, is the elder daughter of Earl and Kathy Mies.