



Rail unloading facility
Background: Installing sheet piles for a 40 foot deep excavation.
Foreground: Static compression pile load test setup for foundation bearing piles.

American Deep Foundation and Shoring, Inc.

Slow and steady approach to success pays off for pile driving company

By Heather Hudson

Building a business from the ground up is a lot like driving a pile. You've got to make sure you've got the right equipment, the right people to do the job and the guts to drive it forward like there's no tomorrow.

It can be tough to strike the right balance between calculated risk and blind ambition, but the management of American Deep Foundation and Shoring Incorporated (ADF) has made it work for them.

In fact, operations manager Jon Beck credits their focus on sustaining the business in the long-term with their ability to avoid the pitfalls found in a booming economy that recently went bust.

“We’ve got titles but we don’t feel like we need to live by them.”

ADF OPERATIONS MANAGER JON BECK

“There were a couple of years around 2005-06 when there was a lot of work but we never allowed ourselves to get out of control. We were pulling people to build our crews but we were careful never to take on more work than we could perform and maintain the quality that we assure our clients. We’ve always taken a more conservative approach and we don’t overload ourselves or our crews. But that hasn’t kept us from doing some very large jobs for demanding clients such as The Southern Company.”

Based in Georgia, ADF’s slow and steady approach can be traced back to its origins in 1996 when president David Johnson and his roommate began installing light capacity pin piles with jackhammers. Reluctant to put all his eggs in one basket, Johnson kept his night job as a bartender at Red Lobster until he could be sure this business was going somewhere.

Things took a turn when the duo landed a job at Georgia South East Regional Medical Center in Brunswick, Georgia, installing 1,279 three-ton capacity steel pin piles. After bringing in an additional, experienced friend, the crew of three installed every last one of those piles themselves.

In time, ADF bought its first crane, a two drum Link Belt LS98. But ever the frugal businessperson, Johnson rented the crane to other companies in order to make the payments until he was able to keep it busy on his own. It wasn’t until he drove a rented truck from Atlanta to Canada to buy three hammers: a Delmag D-5, an MKT #7 and a MKT #2 that Johnson felt he was truly in the pile driving business.

A couple of business partners felt the same way. In 1999, vice-president Patrick Ecklund, Johnson’s cousin and an estimator/project manager for a pile installation contractor, added his talents to the business. Two years later, Beck, Johnson’s uncle, brought his 25 years in the pile driving business to the team.

“At that point, we really started to grow and started to also get into auger cast piles, which gave us a broader spectrum of jobs to bid on and helped us expand,” said Beck.

Beck also owns half of Geotechnical Foundation Systems in Winter Park, Florida. Business partner Harry Sommer’s

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crew does both driven and auger piles and the two companies often share crews and expertise.

In 2003, ADF built a new office building in Statham, Georgia with a shop large enough to accommodate their crawler cranes and that offers four acres of storage space.

Todd Saint, a third-generation pile contractor with 33 years of experience in pile driving, has recently joined the team. He's been pushing west as the ADF regional manager, acquiring and managing work in the mid- and south-west from his office outside of Kansas City.

"We have gone as far north as Virginia, but we would go further north if we got a job there. We'll go across Kentucky and Tennessee and we've been as far west as Nebraska and El Paso, Texas. Having Todd join us has been a plus so we can cover a larger geographical area," said Beck.

Today, ADF owns seven pile driving rigs and has amassed extensive experience installing driven, augered and micro piles. They also install excavation bracing and shoring on a design/construct basis.

Beck says moving into other pile types has allowed ADF to keep crews busy when steel pile prices were high and the driven pile work was slim. However, given the opportunity, most of the company's crews would choose a driven pile project any day. "There's just something about having several days' worth of material on the ground and knowing that when the hammer hits its last blow, the pile will be accepted."

From all the splicing and cutting in the karstic limestone of Tennessee and North Georgia and Alabama, to the relative consistency of driving piles in the piedmont and coastal plains, ADF has worked hard to earn its reputation as a knowledgeable company that works closely with clients to ensure piles are installed on time and in accordance with contract documents and industry standards.

One other thing that gives ADF an advantage over a lot of other medium-sized companies is the fluid nature of its management. Beck says he joins Johnson and Ecklund for lunch every day and, though they each have distinct



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Sheet piles and interior bracing for rail unloading (left) and conveyor tunnel (right).

roles, they are essentially interchangeable because of the constant communication.

“We’ve got titles but we don’t feel like we need to live by them. I’m the old guy with an MBA and a thousand tricks of the trade to share. Patrick [Ecklund] is in charge of estimating and is our technical guru. David [Johnson] is the construction manager. He’s the one who talks to the guys every night and gives them their pep talks.”

With experience like that and a fleet of heavy machinery at the ready for any job big or small, the slow and steady business approach looks like it might win the race after all. ▼

Photos courtesy of Jon Beck, ADF Operations Manager




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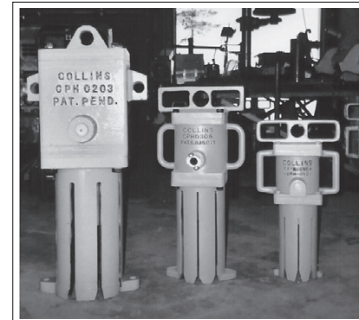
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