

Iowa Trenchless business feature

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IOWA TRENCHLESS PROVIDES LARGE-SCALE BORING FROM A SMALL TOWN

By Susan Thompson & Rich Wicks

Iowa Trenchless is a full-service boring and tunneling company that has been located on the southeast edge of Panora since 2004. From their first job in 2002, owners Jason and Shari Clark have grown the company into a respected nationwide leader in the boring and tunneling industry.

They met at Iowa State University, with him majoring in business and her in forestry. Shari grew up in Rochester, Minnesota. Jason grew up in small towns in central Iowa, from Earlham to Creston to Adel.

His grandparents, Don and Mickie Stephen, owned a home in Hughes Cove beginning in 1981, and operated Stephens Cleaners, a dry cleaning business in Adel for many years. "I spent a lot of time at Lake Panorama," Clark says. "I loved to fish and I learned how to water ski there."

Jason got his start in the industry as an 18-year-old student at Iowa State. A company named Westcon Microtunneling was doing a sewer project in Ames, and he got a job working as a laborer on the project. The next summer, he worked for the same company in Chicago, doing 48-inch diameter bores. "I decided then I wanted to be a tunneling contractor when I grew up," Clark says. "I spent the rest of my college summers working in this industry."

After graduating from Iowa State in 1999, Jason took a job with Midwest Mole in Indianapolis. He and Shari married in 2000. Jason's trenchless career took him all over the country, and the couple moved several times.

"We were living in Wisconsin and decided we wanted to move back to Iowa," Clark says. "In 2002, I quit my job, we rented a house north of Ames and started Iowa Trenchless. We bought just enough equipment to complete the first contract. We had to park the equipment at a family friend's construction yard outside of Earlham."

"In the company's early years, it was just me and a couple of guys on the road running projects, while Shari managed the office, accounting and contracting paperwork," Clark says. "This was more than 20 years ago, in a time where no one emailed job proposals and bids. Everything was done by fax. Shari has been there every step of the way, sending bills, collecting bills, booking hotel rooms for out-of-town jobs."

As Iowa Trenchless grew, the Clarks starting looking for a home base somewhere in west-central Iowa. "We were looking for a landing spot," Clark says. "My sister was in Waukee, my parents in Adel, my grandparents at Lake Panorama, our equipment was in a friend's pasture in Earlham. We settled on a house in Panora."

In 2004, Iowa Trenchless became the first business in the Panora Fiber business park on the southeast side of Panora. The Clarks now live next to their business, and have continued to grow, purchasing additional land and buildings when Brokers International closed.

"We're constantly expanding," Jason says. "After outgrowing our first office, we built our second office with 2,000 square feet of space on each of two floors, and that has already been added onto once. We're just about out of room, and need to add on again. We also just finished building out our third shop."

Besides the buildings, the Iowa Trenchless property includes an impressive array of equipment used for tunneling and excavating. "We have a lot of equipment," Jason says. "We have nearly every size of tunneling machine Akkerman Manufacturing makes. We've got rock machines. We probably have 15 excavators, and 20 semi-trucks. We take pride in using the newest technology and equipment to get the job done right the first time."

"But we're more about people. Anybody can buy equipment. I'd put one of my crews with a 1992 boring machine up against some other guy's crew with a 2022 boring machine anytime," he says. "We have a lot of good people at Iowa Trenchless, more than 40 employees. We consistently run five crews that work on the various jobs we get, plus eight people in the office, and numerous others in our shop who handle equipment preparation and maintenance."

Jason Clark oversees the operation, and Shari Clark manages the office. "I get out on some of the jobs, mostly when there are problems," Jason says. "I also get out sometimes in advance of big jobs."

"In the early days of the trenchless industry, it was mostly installing utility pipes underground without having to dig a trench," Clark says. "Now there is a lot more to the underground industry. We can do any size of pipe from two feet to 20 feet in diameter."

The company offers underground utility installation services nationwide that include guided auger boring, rock boring, pilot tube boring, microtunneling, pipe ramming, pipe jacking, pipe bursting, railroad crossing, and bore bit design. Some of the more visible projects done by Iowa Trenchless include railroad culverts and bike trail or pedestrian tunnels.

Clark says there are about 100 companies in the United States that do the same work as Iowa Trenchless. He's constantly bidding on jobs anywhere in the country, and sending crews to work on jobs that can last two to three days, two to three months, or even a year. Iowa Trenchless operates year-round, seeing only a slight slowdown in winter due to weather conditions. When things do slow down, crews spend more time in southern states.

Family is important to the Clarks. Their two children, Ashley and Wyatt, both are students at Iowa State University's College of Business. Ashley is in a pre-law program, while Wyatt is has a double major, and works summers for Iowa Trenchless.

The Clarks also consider their employees family. "We want the guys and gals who work here to be paid well, to have a full benefit package and to work with good equipment," Jason says. "I like the fact so many of our guys grew up in this area, and have been able to stay here with their wives and kids. We've also brought quite a few people here from other places, even other states. They like it here, and like raising their kids in a small town."

"We take pride in getting things done, when other contractors may not. We've finished lots of jobs other contractors were supposed to do, but no one ever had to finish one of ours. The

most important thing for me is our people," Clark says. "At the end of the day, that's where the credit needs to go. We want our employees to be as proud of Iowa Trenchless as we are."

Clark also gives credit to his parents, Randy and Linda, who he says taught him to work hard, and who invested in the business to help get it started. Randy passed away in 2010, and Jason honored him in a eulogy. "Who would sign everything over to a kid who just turned 26, so we could get a loan to get into the boring and tunneling business," Clark asks. "There was a lot of risk involved, and yet they believed in Shari and me. Since then, we've been able to buy out a lot of other businesses."

Iowa Trenchless supports the local community in every way they can. Clark said he deals with local companies as much as possible for the goods and services to keep his business running. He also coaches football and supports local sports and activities.

The Clarks say they have no plans to leave Panora. "This community is a good one," Jason says. "We like being in a small town, where people support each other. That's what I grew up in, small towns. Things are going well. We continue to have growth, and we like what we're doing."

Photo captions:

JasonShari.jpg: Jason and Shari Clark, owners of Iowa Trenchless in Panora, are shown with an American Augers boring machine. (Photo by Rich Wicks)

KansasCityProject.jpg: This Iowa Trenchless crew worked on the Lower Connor Creek Interceptor project near Kansas City, Kansas. It was a joint project with Midwest Mole, where 17,500 linear feet of casing and concrete sewer pipe was installed. The project was awarded the 2021 Top Job for Trenchless Technology award by the National Utility Contractors Association. (submitted)

BeaverdaleProject.JPG: This photo taken in 2022 from a drone shows an Iowa Trenchless job site on the Close's Creek Interceptor project in Des Moines. Two cranes were required to pick up the company's Akkerman tunneling machine from a semi-trailer, then set the machine in place to install a 72-inch storm sewer across Beaver Avenue in the Beaverdale area. (submitted)