

A CUSTOMER'S SUCCESS STORY

Volvo Construction Equipment

DOING IT THE RIGHT WAY

"I've got 15,000 hours on a single (Volvo) excavator undercarriage. That's unheard of."

— Jimmy Harper

As the economy has spun downward during the past several years, the all too common story has been of the contractor who couldn't make it. But that's not the universal story. All you have to do is look at Jimmy Harper.

He's a humble man. He likes to work hard at his Little Rock, Ark.-based excavation company and make sure his customers are getting the service they need. But what the owner of Harper Construction Co. is reluctant to tell you is that he's a survivor. He took all the blows that the Great Recession had to offer and — thanks to some good planning and some good heavy equipment — he's emerging from the other side of it in fine shape.

"We've been fortunate, I can tell you that," Jimmy said simply, closely watching one of his Volvo EC210B excavators lay 8-foot lengths of pipe in a residential subdivision near Little Rock. The excavator took turns digging a trench and then easing each piece of 24-inch pipe into place. The Volvo excavator never stopped moving, always pressing ahead.

In a way, it's a symbol of Jimmy's work ethic. But to him, it's just a good machine. Like his other Volvo excavators — he has 12 of them — it's never suffered a major breakdown, something that figures into any equation of Harper Construction's success. "It's less downtime. It's a major cost-savings," Jimmy says.

Building a business

Harper started his business in 1979. He already had been working for his father-in-law for 14 years in the construction



Jimmy Harper says he's been pleased with the longevity his Volvo excavators have provided to his equipment fleet.

industry in Arkansas. But Jimmy is an entrepreneur. So when his father-in-law quit leasing one of the scrapers he'd been using, Jimmy bought it and began renting it out himself. He later traded it in for a trackhoe and did the same thing.

Eventually, he started getting jobs on his own. "We just kept accumulating work," he says. Today, Jimmy's firm does site and utility work for residential and commercial developers — sometimes as many as 15 to 20 a year. Harper Construction also does utility and highway work for the government.

When times were good, there was as much work to do as a man could put his arms around. "We just kept going," Jimmy says. "We would work six days a week, 12 hours a day — and sometimes seven days a week. Everything was booming with all the housing. They couldn't get enough lots."

The reason for the company's success is pretty simple as far as Jimmy is concerned: "We're all good folks, and we treat people in the right way. We do a good job with everything that we've done, and that's our main thing. We could always go back to the customer after a job because we did it well."

That belief is an outflow of Jimmy's low-key demeanor, along with his up-by-the-bootstraps mentality.

"He's worked hard for all that he has over the years. He started out with nothing," says Brian Harrington, safety director for Harper Construction and one of Jimmy's right-hand men. "He's also put in the hours on the machines like everyone else. He's been in the ditch — both ends of it. He appreciates both ends of it and he understands it."

Surviving the downturn

Of course, as Jimmy puts it, things got "tight" about three years ago. The housing slowdown forced developers to cut back. "The subdivisions quit," he says. "They dropped in half. We saw it coming before it ever hit. People started cutting back."

This is where Jimmy's story becomes a bright spot in a dark economy. He had the foresight to see the downturn's effects before it was too late. He says he streamlined his company, made sure there always was work in the pipeline and minimized his debt. None of his loans had more than three-year terms.

The blows just kept coming, of course. Fuel jumped at one point, more than tripling Jimmy's annual fuel bill to more than \$1 million. But, he was prepared. "What hurt a lot of good contractors is they were blindsided. No one thought this thing was going to last four, five years."



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Faster, more efficient

But as the recession rolled on, Jimmy discovered he did something else right in preparing his company for the downturn. Back in 2002, he began buying Volvo excavators from Little Rock's Hugg & Hall Equipment Co. Harper has a dozen of them now, ranging from a Volvo ECR88 compact excavator to several Volvo EC210B and some Volvo EC360B machines.



Digging trenches and laying pipe are par for the course for this Volvo EC210B excavator.

At first, the big item that impressed Jimmy about his new steel was the Volvo hydraulic quick coupler system that allows operators to change out buckets in mere seconds. That's a procedure that used to take hours trying to remove the manual pins, which often would be stubborn and require some finagling (and pounding) to remove. On a hot day, or when operators were in a hurry, they often just would avoid changing buckets.

But if you go from digging a trench with a 24-inch bucket to loading a truck — and needing a 48-inch one — the operator needs to get that bucket changed out for efficiency's sake. The same goes when he needs to switch to a hammer or a ripper tooth or some other attachment. "I can't tell you how much our operators like the quick coupler," Jimmy says. "It saves them a lot of time."

Low-maintenance machines

Another phenomenon emerged with Jimmy's Volvo excavator, however. Where in the past he would have to take some of his other equipment into the shop for major overhaul or repair work — like putting in new wire harnesses or computers or replacing engines or undercarriages — Jimmy noticed his Volvo excavator just kept staying in the field, day in and day out, with no breakdowns.

For the record, Jimmy's a stickler for maintenance, even when money's tight. So much so that Kevin Keith, a sales manager with Hugg & Hall, says he usually can get better prices when he resells a trade-in from Harper than he can from other companies in the business. "He's got such a good reputation," Kevin says. "He's just meticulous about keeping everything in good shape."

But Jimmy is quick to point out he picked some quality machines to begin with. He just hasn't had any major problems with his Volvo excavator.

"I've got 15,000 hours on a single excavator undercarriage. That's unheard of," he says. In fact, Jimmy's got several machines that have put in that kind of time with their original undercarriages. Jimmy can tell you stories about competing machines that have required undercarriage replacements at 3,900 and 4,500 hours, costing in the tens of thousands of dollars. Jimmy says he's gotten much the same kind of performance out of the hydraulic pumps and other components that tend to wear out on an excavator.

When it comes to service, Jimmy has nothing but good things to say about Little Rock's Hugg & Hall Equipment Co. But the fact of the matter is he hasn't needed the help that many other excavator owners need.

"At a time when many contractors couldn't afford to buy new equipment because of a lack of work, maintenance bills on older equipment were higher," says Kevin, of Hugg & Hall. "But Jimmy's bills were minimal, which was a huge benefit and another sign of the quality of Volvo."

And here's one more sign: Jimmy recently sent Hugg & Hall an order for a new Volvo EC160C excavator. Apparently, things just keep getting better at Harper Construction.



This Volvo EC360B easily maneuvers a 60-inch pipe into place during a street project near Little Rock.

