

NATIONAL DRILLER

Michigan Drilling Company Going Strong for Six Generations



From left, Mick, McCoy, Wyatt, Coady, Jim, Ted and Tim, the fifth, sixth and (soon to be) seventh generations of Denton Drilling. Source: Denton & Sons Well Drilling



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In 1860, the United States population was 31½ million, the Pony Express made its first run to California, Abraham Lincoln was elected the first Republican president, and South Carolina seceded from the union — putting America on the fast track toward the Civil War. On the western side of

Michigan, which had only been a state for 23 years, the Denton boys were installing wells.

They've been working there ever since.

“That was actually back when they were originally digging wells by hand and shoring them up with rocks, with a pail and rope down it, like the old Western days,” says Jim Denton, president and owner of Denton & Sons Well Drilling.

“Then they evolved from there to jetting them in. Then we went from jetting to cable tooling, and then from cable tooling to rotary drilling.”

Today, 156 years later, the small company based in Sand Lake, Mich., a small town a short drive north of Grand Rapids, keeps almost a dozen people employed and hundreds of customers coming back. The company mainly does residential well installation and service, but dabbles in irrigation, municipal and light commercial work.

Coady Denton, like several generations of Denton boys before him, grew up around drilling rigs punching holes in the sand, clay and light gravel earth of west Michigan.

“Some of my earliest memories are, probably, every day after school I couldn't wait to get off the bus and run up over the hill to the shop,” he says. “Whether we were sweeping the floors, or acting like we were doing something important — anything to be at the shop and around the guys. I mean, that's just where I wanted to be. I would have rather been there than at school all day, but my mother said I had to go to school.”

Coady Denton took his place in the family business after he finished school, and is now lead driller and vice president. “I fulfilled my duty and kept my promise to my mother and my father, and told them I would graduate high school and get my diploma. The minute I did that, I was born to be a well driller.”

For a lot of businesses — from well drilling to agriculture — that span several generations, getting the next generation to follow the family path isn't always easy. But, for Coady Denton, it wasn't a tough sell.

“When you're a kid, all you like to do is go outside and play in the mud. I figured, if you never want to grow up, well drilling is the perfect job for you. You get to go out every day, and play in the mud.”

Staying Power

Jim Denton is the fifth generation in the business. In addition to Coady, Mick, Ted and Tim make up the sixth generation. All live within 10 miles of where they grew up.

So, what does it take to make a business that lasts for more than a century and a half?

“We use nothing but the best material we can buy,” Jim Denton says. “We’re probably the highest priced driller in our area, but it’s because of our service and the materials we use. I would say that 90 percent of our customers, we’ve either done work for their fathers or mothers, their grandpa or grandma, or generations before that.”

Denton & Sons prides itself on stellar service for that price for the customers lucky enough to be within a 30-mile radius of their shop.

“We usually get a chance on every job that’s done and, the ones we lose it’s usually because of price. They’ll find somebody cheaper. But usually the time to have it done again, then they call us.”

Ted Denton, service foreman and lead hookup, chalks it up to quality.

“People are paying for good quality, and that’s what we want to give them. ... Because, at the end of the day, up here where we’re at, as long as you have good quality and when they call you answer ... they’ll take care of you.”

Denton & Sons takes — and responds to — service calls 24-hours a day.

Advice for Other Contractors

Getting past one generation is tough for any business, let alone making it to the sixth. Jim Denton has advice for other contractors in it for the long haul.

“The main thing would be to get a good price for what you do,” he says. “Be honest with your customers. Pay your supply bills when they’re due, pay all your bills when they’re due — that’s most of the downfall of any of my competitors. They don’t pay their bills on time and they get behind, then when it comes time to do the job, they got to get the money from the homeowner and he can buy the materials.”

Good equipment is a must and, for rigs, the Dentons use Versa-Drills.

“We just purchased a new Versa-Drill,” Jim Denton says. “I actually liked them back when I bought the first one. Then, when it came time to replace it ... I debated which to get, and they brought one up and showed it to me. It just happened to be what we wanted, you know. We had pretty good luck with the first one, so we’re hoping for it to be the same with this one.”

Good relationships with suppliers are key.

“I got one supply house that I buy supplies from that my great-grandpa had been buying supplies from,” he says. “Just about every place that I do business, my dad did, or my grandpa did or my great-grandpa did.”

And, of course, cultivating repeat business helps. Jim Denton shares a customer story that’s not uncommon for their business.

“I got one farm not too far from us, my son was there probably two months ago and done some work for the lady. ... She’s in her late 90s, and she said my grandpa had been in that well pit, my dad had been in that well pit, I had been in that well pit, and now one of my sons has been in that well pit.”

“There’s been four generations of you here working on my well,” the customer told him.

Family Affair

Every business has ups. You get the big contract and use the revenue to ride out the month. Every business has downs. The Dentons, like a lot of business this old, struggled through the Great Depression.

But through 156 years, the Dentons have used family ties to bind the business together.

“We’re a really close-knit family,” Ted Denton says. “You have your disagreements, your times when you don’t want to see your brother or your dad, but we’re so close and we do so much together. It’s kind of odd in a way that we can deal with each other like we do. But I wouldn’t change it and that’s the best part about it.”

Coady Denton weighs in. “If you can find a family that works as good as we do together — I mean there’s days where I’ll just tell my brother what I think of him, but two hours later we’re fine and working together again. You just don’t see that anymore.”

Ted Denton says the way the duties are doled out helps. “What makes it a whole lot better is we all kind of do separate roles at the shop, too. None of us brothers per se work side by side with each other at a jobsite, unless we’re called to help or something like that. We all have different roles.”

They all help each other help the customers, but all work together to not get in each other’s way as they’re getting the job done. That’s important for any company to survive and thrive, whether it’s family owned or not.

After six generations, with a seventh waiting in the wings, the Dentons expect their family to be synonymous with well drilling in west Michigan for a long time to come.

“It’s like a pride thing,” says Ted Denton. “We’ve been in business for so long — me and Coady and my other brothers were the sixth generation — so it’s just one of those things that had to be taken on, a role that has to be done. ... In this area, I’m going to say 99 percent of the people know of our company just because of how long it’s been in business and the quality of work that we do.”

Recent Articles By Jeremy Verduco

Jeremy joined BNP Media in late 2012 as editor of *National Driller*. In addition to that role, he now also serves as editorial director of *POB* and *GeoDataPoint*. He’s worked in publishing since 1997, including stints as a reporter, copy editor, page designer and technical writer.

