

PIPELINE PROBLEM EXPERTS

GREAT LAKES PIPE SERVICE SPECIALIZES IN CLEANING MUNICIPAL AND COMMERCIAL SEWER SYSTEMS IN NORTHERN WISCONSIN AND MINNESOTA



PHOTO BY STEVE ISOLA

Dylan Sigfrids



PHOTO COURTESY OF GREAT LAKES PIPE



David Sigfrids

Superior native David Sigfrids is in the movie business, sort of. He streams his “pipeline movies” live, capturing his videos for limited distribution to an exclusive audience.

The filming takes place in the subterranean areas of towns and cities across the Northland, and he’s been making a living at it for a long time. His equipment is state-of-the-art, and he’s even analyzing Wi-Fi potential for the future, so his clients can interact directly with his camera operators as they’re filming. The business has grown to the point where one son is involved, learning the tricks of the trade under his watchful eye.

Sigfrids is the president and owner of Great Lakes Pipe Service, which specializes in cleaning municipal and commercial sewer systems in northern Wisconsin and northern Minnesota. He and his employees are experts in removing grease and mineral deposits from lift stations and pipes as well as tree roots, rocks and debris, which leads to the reduction of clogs, backups and overflows.

“THEY KNOW THEY CAN CALL ME 24 HOURS A DAY IF THEY HAVE A BACKUP, AND I WILL GET IN MY TRUCK AND DRIVE DOWN AND OPEN IT UP FOR THEM.”

– OWNER AND PRESIDENT DAVID SIGFRIDS

As a part of regularly scheduled maintenance cleanings for clients, the company provides truck-mounted camera inspections of sanitary systems, televising and documenting the interior condition of the pipes and searching for defects, cracks, breaks or anomalies. The recorded video is stored and used by clients for their annual budget and maintenance planning purposes, in addition to serving as proof of regulatory compliance.

Before he starts recording, Sigfrids does his prep work – cleaning up his “sets” so that his customers will see everything he films in the best light. This usually involves a lot of flushing with high-pressure water, routing out blockages with state-of-the-art, European-made nozzles and other finely tuned instruments. He’s the go-to guy, even during the holiday season. And when the COVID-19 pandemic began, production never stopped, because his work is always in demand. Great Lakes Pipe Service is the No. 1 commercial sewer cleaning and inspection business in the area, thanks to customer satisfaction.

THE LAUNCH

Sigfrids began his career in the late 1970s, when he took a seasonal job in the sign department for the City of Superior. As fall came around, he learned of some full-time job openings, one for a dog catcher and the other in the sewer department. Not wanting any part of catching stray dogs, he chose the sewer department. And it turned out to be a good move, because after seven years he was promoted to foreman, running the entire department. During



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his overall 20-year career with the city, Sigfrids was witness to a changing industry, and he developed a knack for following the trends, yearning to use new innovations in the workplace.

By the turn of the century – the year 2000 – many were worried about the impact of Y2K, as it was called, on computers. But Sigfrids remained focused on the potential for innovation and decided to strike out on his own. He went to work temporarily for a company on the Iron Range, at the same time investing in a used city sewer truck – a 1979

Vactor 810 unit, parking it until he could decide which direction this change in his life would take him. He could already see that living in Superior and commuting to work on the Iron Range would not sustain him or his family. So he consulted with friends, colleagues and family before making the decision to launch his own business.

Starting a business is easy; however, keeping it alive and going after a year is a challenge. Economic developers will often say that if you look back through a city directory, most of the businesses listed about 20 years ago are no longer around. Sigfrids can certainly attest to that, because he knows how hard it is to run a small business.

But he took that leap of faith, starting out by printing some business cards on his home computer. Then he got in his car and drove around to different towns, passing out his cards to public works engineers, city clerks – anyone who would listen. Sigfrids explained that he was starting his own sewer cleaning business and offered to clean a lift station, a single sewer line and to televise it for free, just to prove what he could do. “A lot of times they wouldn’t let me leave. They’d ask ‘How long can you stay?’ And that’s what happened,” he said.

THE PROCESS

Today, Sigfrids has a small core staff consisting of his son Dylan (the camera operator) and some seasonal help. “Mainly, what we do is we clean and televise sewer systems right to the lift stations – junctions where the water ceases to flow by gravity. Then the sewage is pumped, or lifted, to the point where gravity will continue doing its work moving the water,” Sigfrids explained of the process. Prior to sending in the camera, Great Lakes Pipe Service employees will jet out clogs with their high-pressure water vacuum trucks. Afterward, they send their camera down the line, recording and televising to get a close look at the physical pipe. No two sewer systems are the same; many are a combination of materials depending upon their age, ranging from old clay-tile pipe and ductile iron pipe to modern PVC material.



“HE’S PROBABLY THE PREMIER EXPERT IN THE WHOLE AREA. SO THAT’S THE GUY YOU WANT ON YOUR SIDE WHEN YOU’RE HAVING A PROBLEM.”

– FOREMAN AND PARKS SUPERVISOR RICK LALONDE
– CITY OF PROCTOR



The vacuum trucks are highly sophisticated and expensive pieces of equipment, and the process of cleaning a sewer is known as sewer jetting. Sigfrids says his trucks usually run between 2,000 and 2,500 psi (pounds per square inch) at about 80 gallons per minute. The trucks use a combination of water pressure to flush lines, lift stations and manholes and utilize vacuum power to suck up debris like sand, rocks and bottles. However, that’s not the only debris the process reveals and removes. Great Lakes Pipe Service has also encountered things like golf balls, cell phones, pop cans – and one time, even a large plastic Santa Claus.

Unfortunately, it has also dealt with the growing problem of those “flushable” cleaning wipes. “Flushable” is a misnomer if there ever was one, for several reasons. First of all, the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District (WLSSD) warns residents and businesses that they must be disposed of in the trash. While they might go down the drain, they don’t break up like toilet paper does. Instead, they bind with grease, oils and fats and build up to block pipes. And that creates very expensive headaches for the sanitary district and homeowners, due to sewer overflows, blockages and sewer backups into homes. This problem has been exacerbated during the pandemic because of toilet paper shortages, prompting WLSSD to issue a news release to reinforce its warning. The sanitary district also reminded the public that no type of wipe is flushable (including baby wipes, tissues, disinfecting wipes and paper towels).

WORKING FOR PUBLIC WORKS

Keeping sanitary sewer systems clear of debris is critical for public works departments. The City of Proctor was Great Lakes Pipe Service’s first customer, and it hasn’t been disappointed with its decision.

“We’re a town of about 3,000 people and we don’t have our own sewer treatment plant, because all of our sewage goes down the hill to the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District plant at Duluth,” explained Foreman and Parks Supervisor Rick LaLonde of the City of Proctor. “The discharge from the WLSSD is monitored by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, to make sure that they’re not putting any excess or bad stuff into Lake Superior, which leads directly back to the municipalities along the system.” Following the rules and keeping up on maintenance is a regular part of annual compliance reports.

“Dave knows our system as well as we do; he’s just got so much knowledge and expertise. He’s able to give us advice or help us troubleshoot problems,” LaLonde said. “The other big thing is, whenever we’ve had an emergency in that 20-plus years, they’re right here to help. You can always count on them – and that’s when you need them most. It’s good to have the customer service and the experience. Those are two big things.”

LaLonde also cites customer service and experience as critical factors for the City of Proctor. “You can’t beat the knowledge and you can’t beat the fact that they care. If you call them Saturday at 11 o’clock at night and you got a problem, they’re there,” he said. “I’ve been dealing with these guys since the ’90s, and there’s never been one single time when they let me down. They’re always there to help, and they have the knowledge to get you through those problems.”



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"I KNOW THAT IF I CALLED DAVE RIGHT NOW, HE'D BE HERE WITHIN ... AN HOUR WITH ONE OF HIS RIGS. HE SERVES HIS LONG-TERM CUSTOMERS VERY WELL."

- PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR PAUL SENST
- CITY OF HERMANTOWN

"I'd probably say, in this area of northern Wisconsin and Minnesota, that I can't believe there's somebody out there that's got more knowledge of sanitary sewers than he does," added LaLonde. "He's probably the premier expert in the whole area. So that's the guy you want on your side when you're having a problem."

While preventive maintenance is really the heart of the work for Great Lakes Pipe Service, for Sigfrids and his clients, good customer service is equally important to accomplishing the job.

"I know that if I called Dave right now, he'd be here within an hour," said Public Works Director Paul Senst of the City of Hermantown. "If I had a problem, he'd be here within an hour with one of his rigs. He serves his long-term customers very well."

Servicing the sanitary systems of Hermantown and small municipalities is right within the company's niche. "For the City of Hermantown, it is too much to handle," Senst explained. "We don't have the crew or the equipment to be able to do it. Being fiscally responsible to our residents, we're better off subcontracting this work to Great Lakes Pipe - to use their services instead of us



having to have the equipment, maintain the equipment and know how to run the equipment.

"He's just an all-around good guy," added Senst. "You can't help but like the guy."

When Sigfrids began his company, the relationships he built with cities like Hermantown, Proctor and Two Harbors in Minnesota and Chetek, Washburn and Bayfield in northern Wisconsin have led to lifelong customers and friendships. He explained that in the early days, he created his own "pipeline" of small towns and municipalities up and down State Highway 35, from the Village of Superior all the way to St. Croix Falls. And his hard work and honesty paid off.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GREAT LAKES PIPE

"I ended up getting in a situation where the people in Webster told the people in Siren, and the people in Siren told the people all the way down the line to Luck," Sigfrids said, noting that as his reputation grew, his business grew along with it. "They know they can call me 24 hours a day if they have a backup, and I will get in my truck and drive down and open it up for them."

Village of Superior Clerk-Treasurer Marsha Wick says the village has relied upon the company to clean its sewers and lift stations for as long as she can remember, "which means a long time," she said. "We try to do as much locally as possible – just try to keep it at home. I highly recommend Great Lakes Pipe Service for just



about anything they offer. They're reliable, trustworthy and treat you like a long-lost friend and family. It's a great all-around company; we've never had any issues."

In addition to his municipal clients, Sigfrids serves a number of small commercial customers including Miller Hill Mall in Duluth, Black Bear Casino in Carlton, Minnesota, and several car washes. The hospitality industry uses a lot of water in its facilities, restaurants and businesses, so keeping their lift stations and sewer operations clean and running without clogs is critical to the bottom line.

TECH ADVANCES

Great Lakes Pipe prides itself on keeping up with technology advances. Sigfrids and his staff attend industry trade shows annually to stay abreast of trends and advances for everything from vacuum trucks and remote camera systems to hoses and nozzles. That includes the Water & Wastewater Equipment, Treatment & Transport exposition held in Indianapolis – the world's largest annual trade show for wastewater and environmental service professionals.

"It's a highly technical industry. I bring the guys with me to look at the new, innovative products that are out. It gives us some ideas and keeps us ahead of the curve when something new comes out," said Sigfrids. "Everyone in the world is at the trade show. We can see what's out there, what's going on and what the rest of the world is doing; this is big time."

"THEY'RE RELIABLE, TRUSTWORTHY AND TREAT YOU LIKE A LONG-LOST FRIEND AND FAMILY. IT'S A GREAT ALL-AROUND COMPANY."

– VILLAGE OF SUPERIOR CLERK-TREASURER MARSHA WICK

Since he began working for the City of Superior in 1980 and through today, with his own business, Sigfrids says the vacuums have gotten better as well as the jetters and nozzles. And he believes that right now, the Europeans are making the best cleaning nozzles in the world. "Everything I have is basically European as far as nozzles go," he said. "The technology has advanced to where these rotating nozzles, driven by water at 10,000 psi, will cut roots." He added that it's a great tool, because a saw blade can get caught on an offset joint, whereas if it's a water jet that is spinning, it will jump around the offset joints – which is usually caused by the roots to begin with.

Robotic cameras have also come a long way; Sigfrids recalls working with the technology as early as 1980. "The city had an old one [back then]. It was a black and white cable machine. You

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were lucky to do two blocks in a day, because you'd have to run a line through and then you'd drag a cable with a camera that's on a skid plate," he explained. "Everything was put on a Beta II recorder [Betamax was an early competitor of VHS]. Then, as you pulled the camera through, you'd look at the broken pipe or cracked pipe, and you wrote it down on a sheet of paper. You had a log, and the machine had a dial on it where you could read how many feet you were out or how many feet you were in." Compared to today, the technology of several decades ago seems rather primitive.

Sigfrids' son, Dylan, handles most of the camera work for Great Lakes Pipe Service and has come of age in the "modern world" of technology, his father noted. "We sat in on some seminars down in Indianapolis with a couple of camera companies," he said, adding that "now it's all going to Wi-Fi" at some point in the future. Sigfrids says the time is coming when Dylan "will talk to the engineer or talk to the power that be for the city or municipality and tell him what he's doing, while the client is able to watch him televise what he's doing from his office."

That's a powerful tool.



GOOD ADVICE

At the start of his business, Sigfrids recalled some advice he received from a business associate that has stayed with him: "He said to me, 'Dave, you're going to be okay, because as long as you're honest and don't cheat anybody, you're going to be just fine.' And that was the truth." Sigfrids has stayed the course ever since through this simple, effective approach to his business and customer relations.

"I took something from nothing, and that's what I'm proud of. I'm proud of this business," Sigfrids said. "My dad told me a long time ago that when you give someone your word, that's worth more than any money in this world. You can't go back on that." **PS**

Patrick Lapinski is a freelance writer who grew up in Superior.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GREAT LAKES PIPE



Dylan Sigfrids reviews pipeline inspection footage

