



Destined to Design Irrigation Systems

By Lori Ward Bocher

Beginning at age 16 when he dug his first trenches and laid irrigation pipe, it seemed that Tom Emmerich was destined to work in the irrigation business. Oh, he strayed during those first few years after college. But he jumped back into irrigation the same year he turned 30. And today, at the age of 40, he's a private irrigation consultant with his own firm, T.J. Emmerich Associates, Inc., out of Hartland, Wis.

Tom, who was born in Milwaukee, grew up in a typical middle class family with three older brothers and an older sister. He paid attention to his older brothers, especially Bob, who was eight years his senior.

"While he was in high school, Bob got a job with the Acme Lawn Sprinkler Company," Tom explains. "At that time, residential systems were all Goodyear rubber pipe and everything was glued together." When Tom turned 16, he, too, went to work for the Acme Lawn Sprinkler Company, digging holes and putting in sprinklers.

When that job wasn't available the next summer, Tom again looked to his older brother, Bob. "When Bob graduated from college he went to work as the assistant manager at R&S Parts which was the Toro Irrigation distributor at the time," Tom explains.

When he was 17, Tom was hired as the "counter guy" at R&S Parts. "I stocked shelves, filled orders and did some field service, and I worked there through high school," he recalls, adding that he graduated from Messmer High School in 1973. "When I went to UW-LaCrosse to study business administration, I continued to work for R&S Parts."

Tom's older brothers greatly influenced his choice of majors at college. "One of them studied history, one studied sociology and one studied political science, and they all ended up in the business field," he explains. "It just seemed kind of obvious to me that



Tom Emmerich

some where along the line I'd end up in business, so I decided I'd might as well major in it."

During his junior year at UW-LaCrosse, Tom had a business internship with Tri-State Turf in Davenport, Iowa. "They were a complete line Toro distributor," Tom points out. "I helped them set up their irrigation division."

The summer of 1977 he worked for Milwaukee Lawn Sprinkler Company as a crew foreman and serviceman. "That's when I did my first golf job at Westmoor Country Club," Tom recalls.

Tom graduated from college in December 1977. "Up until my last semester, I had intentions of sending my resume to irrigation distributors and golf course contractors — anywhere in the country where I could work on golf course irrigation," he recalls. "But that summer I met the young lady who was to become my wife. So I was in a situation where I wanted to stay in Wisconsin." At that time, Reinders Brothers had just bought R&S Parts, so there was no job for him there. So he took a job with a Waukesha company, Portec, Inc., selling the structures

and equipment for concrete batch plants. His territory included Washington D.C., Maryland, the Virginias, the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama. He was gone all week and home on the weekends only. "I didn't like the traveling much," Tom recalls.

About one year later he took a job with AKO Manufacturing in Butler, Wis. "They made induction heat treating equipment," Tom explains. "If you were a company like Black & Decker that made drill bits, you might buy a machine from us that would automatically harden, or heat treat, those bits as part of the production line."

About three years later a better job opportunity came along with Metal Treating in downtown Milwaukee. "We would do batch heat treating work for manufacturers who didn't have enough volume to own their own equipment," Tom points out. "I ran the induction department and did some sales." He worked there about three years.

"All the time I was working these other jobs, I was keeping up on what was happening in the turf irrigation industry," Tom recalls. So when a sales job opened up at Reinders, he took it. "Dick (Reinders) hired me in May of 1985. And I finally realized that I was back in the business that I loved, that I enjoyed.

"I like being outside. I like the people who are involved," he says of the business. "Growing and maintaining high quality turf is more of a technical field than most people realize. I like to listen to the superintendents. I'm not an agronomist. But in 11 years I've learned a lot about the agronomy side of the business from talking to superintendents."

Tom worked for Reinders for seven years. "I started out as a territory salesman. And then I was a sales manager while still covering nine counties in golf sales," he recalls. "And I was doing irrigation design."

While working at Reinders, Tom completed the certification process with the National Irrigation Association. He's a "Certified Irrigation Designer" for residential, commercial and golf.

"What I know about irrigation design I learned through self education, reading whatever books I could get my hands on, the certification program, and from looking over the shoulder of Dick Reinders," Tom continues. "I learned a lot from Dick Reinders."

In January of 1992, Tom left Reinders to start an irrigation consulting business. In explaining why he became a consultant, Tom discussed the history of golf course irrigation. "In the early years, golf courses just had a hose bib system — a network of underground piping that had a hose bib at every green and tee," he says. "You put a sprinkler on a stand, hooked a hose to it, and moved it around the green. And that's how the greens were irrigated.

"Then quick coupler systems became popular in the late 50's and the 60's," he continues. "The hoseless watering system."

"When golf courses began to install automatic irrigation systems, the equipment manufacturers did the design," he points out. "That service then evolved to the distribution level and finally to professional design consultants.

"Today you have an irrigation system — especially a double-row golf course irrigation system — that is a major investment," Tom continues. "You can easily spend \$500,000 to \$600,000. You wouldn't put up a \$600,000 building without hiring an architect. I'm basically an architect for the irrigation system. I'm also kind of like an insurance policy.

"The other thing is that the demands on the golf course superintendent are much higher than they used to be," Tom adds. "He does not have the time to sort through all the elements involved with the design, budgeting, bidding and construction of a new irrigation system. This is a project that he may do once or twice in his career. I do it every day."

Tom says that irrigation systems have become so sophisticated over the years because the demands of the golfer are greater. "Years ago the only thing that was watered were the greens and tees," he relates. "Now golfers want to play on lush turf from tee to green and beyond. Center row fairway systems used to be good

enough. But now double and triple row systems are becoming the rule rather than the exception."

"Irrigation consultants have always been present on the east coast, west coast, in the sunbelt and in the south," he says. "I could see that consultants would become acceptable in the mid-west. So I decided I'd give it a shot."

As a consultant, he offers a full service from the initial planning to the actual construction. "I look at and evaluate the system that's there and see if any of it can be used again," he explains. "And then I design the new system in terms of the placement and number of sprinklers, the pipe sizing, the control system, the wire sizing, etc."

Then he helps his clients go through the budgeting process. If they decide to go ahead with a project, he'll help them through the bidding process — writing bid specifications and providing the contractors with plans, bid specifications and bid forms.

"That way the client is going to get three or four bids from different contractors for the same set of plans and under the same installation method and materials specifications. So they're comparing apples to apples," Tom emphasizes.

"Part of the potential problem of having contractors do a design/build bid is that you get three different plans from three different contractors at three

different prices. Well, which one is the best? It's hard for someone unacquainted with the industry to decide what's best," Tom says.

Once a bid has been accepted, Tom helps his clients get the contract documents squared away. "And then I actually stake the sprinkler locations, inspect the materials, and make sure the contractor is doing the work according to specification," he explains. "And then I'm usually involved in doing the programming of the system. That's all part of the service."

Tom sells no equipment with his services. And he remains neutral on the brand of irrigation equipment his clients want to use. Clients may choose one brand over another because they're more familiar with it or because they know they'll get good service from the distributor. And Tom sees these as legitimate reasons.

He thinks too much emphasis is sometimes put on the brand. "There's a lot more to a golf course irrigation system than the sprinklers and controls," he points out. "You've got pipe, wire, fittings, a pump station, the right water source. But everyone labels the irrigation system based on the brand name product."

In the past four years, about 85 percent of Tom's work has been with golf courses. He's worked in Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Iowa. And most of
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his work has been renovation. But he has designed the irrigation system for some new courses—Thornberry Creek near Green Bay, the Green Bay Country Club, the 9-hole addition to Ives Grove Golf Links in Racine County, and The Highlands at Grand Geneva Resort.

Since he's a self-employed businessman, Tom has to think of things besides designing irrigation systems. Competition is one. "There are other irrigation consultants," he points out. "I don't think there's anybody in Wisconsin at this time who's actively doing designing, other than the distributors. But there are a number of consultants in the Chicago marketplace. And there are guys in Indiana and Michigan. One in Iowa. A couple in Minnesota. One out in the Dakotas."

"I'm very fortunate in Wisconsin," he continues. "The members of the WGCSA have been very supportive of my efforts and I'm very appreciative of that. I'm working on getting better known in other markets so things can grow."

To date, Tom hasn't done much active marketing. "Right now I'm doing the business that comes through the door," he explains, adding that he gets clients through word of mouth.

Since he still has a one-man operation, Tom is as busy as he can be. "I need some help," he points out. "Somewhere along the line I've got to find somebody to do the design work so I can be in the field marketing. Or I need somebody to do the marketing so that I can do the design work and the construction observation work."

Before he can do that, he needs to move his office out of his home. "It's difficult to hire somebody and chain them to my CAD system when it's in my basement, against a cement block wall, with the laundry on the other side of the room," he says. "The working conditions aren't the greatest."

While he's watching his business grow, Tom is also watching for changes in the irrigation industry. "I think we'll see radio controlled sprinkler heads so you won't have any wire," he says. "You'll just have a radio

transmitter at the computer in the office and that will send a signal to tell what sprinkler to turn on and turn off. The technology exists now. It's just not cost effective and reliable."

To keep up with his profession, Tom is a member of the National Irrigation Association. And he's an associate member of the WGCSA, the Northern Great Lakes GCSA, and the Wisconsin Turfgrass Association.

"I play golf when time allows," he points out. "It's an interesting hobby, but it sure doesn't get me away from work all that much. I walk around the course looking at the irrigation system."

Tom also spends his free time with model railroading, taking care of the home and serving as a "soccer chauffeur" for his three sons, ages 10, 8 and 5. He and his wife, Barb, also are active in a local community theater group, the Lake Country Players. But he's no actor. "Barb is a producer, choreographer and past president of the group. I design the sets on my CAD system and then help build them," he explains. ♣

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