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PROGRESS



Quite a find

David Van Zelst recalls the discovery of a lifetime.

In spring 1992, Van Zelst Inc. employees in Wadsworth, IL were digging an irrigation pond on the landscape company's property when one of them made a surprising discovery.

"It was the last day, the last hour of the dig, which had taken about three weeks," recalls company president David Van Zelst. "We pulled out an item, and we had no idea what it was. We literally had no idea what it was."

Since the company was situated on a route once used by Ringling Bros. Circus, Van Zelst thought the item might be something from a traveling circus.

But as *Landscape Management* wrote in its June 1992 issue, it turned out to be something far more exotic — the femur bone of a mastodon. Mastodons were elephant-like mammals that roamed North America during the Ice Age. They stood about 10 feet high and weighed up to six tons.

The leg bone the Van Zelst crew excavated was nearly four feet long. And as they kept digging, they discovered yet more mastodon bones and the perfectly preserved remains of an ancient spruce forest.

"We pulled out lots and lots of pieces that we nearly walked right over," Van Zelst marvels.

The identification

After making the discovery, Van Zelst contacted the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, IL. The following day, a team of scientists led by the museum's curator of geology, Dr. Russell Gra-

ham, arrived and quickly identified the bones. The scientists estimated that the bones were more than 10,000 years old.

"We were excited, but not surprised, because it's moderately common to find mammoths and mastodons in old bogs," recalls Graham, now the director of the Earth and Mineral Sciences Museum at Penn State University.

Graham and his team were curious about what caused the extinction of the mastodons. Ten thousand years ago, Illinois was likely a tundra. So the mastodons' extinction could have been caused by global warming or the movement of vegetation in the region, Graham theorizes.

In the limelight

"It was tons of fun," Van Zelst recalls of the discovery. "You know, you get three minutes of fame in your life, and that was my minute-and-a-half of fame."

Indeed it was. In the 24 hours immediately following the discovery, the media swarmed the Van Zelst property. And the publicity continued. "I didn't get anything done for two weeks because we were doing interviews," Van Zelst says. "It was a lot of fun and absolutely fascinating."

A photograph of Van Zelst holding a thick mastodon thigh bone was aired on late-night TV shows. "There are a lot of sexual connotations that came up with the bone," Van Zelst laughs. "You can imagine."

Final stops

Since Van Zelst didn't have the materials necessary to store the bones and logs, the



(Right) Van Zelst in '92, displaying a large ancient log his workers found. (Left) Van Zelst today, with a remnant he saved.

company kept only a few small pieces. It donated some of the logs to Arizona State University and about 70 bones to the Illinois State Museum, which had the means to preserve them.

The bones still are being stored at the Illinois museum today. Jeff Saunders, Ph.D. the museum's current curator of geology, says besides the preserved spruce trees, the Van Zelst dig unearthed bones from two mastodons, including the femur, a tusk, a pelvis, vertebrae and ribs. The dig also uncovered deer and bison bones and a cottontail bunny's thigh bone, Saunders says.

For Van Zelst Inc. today, life — and business — goes on. The company specializes in design/build projects in Chicago's northern suburbs and southeastern Wisconsin. Much of the company's 75-person staff is the same as it was in 1992.

"We're about the same size in number of people, but we have more clients," Van Zelst says. Lately, he adds, "our clients' moods have gotten better and people are starting spend again."

Even as Van Zelst's 33-year-old business continues to move forward, that 1992 irrigation project seems as close to him as yesterday. "It was a ton of fun," he says. "It was a great life experience."



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GUTS-GLORY



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Big Bend provides job
training, education and
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AN UNTAPPED resource

Stan Womble, director of Contract Services with Goodwill Industries-Big Bend Inc. in Port St. Joe, FL, notes that disabled workers aren't given many opportunities. And that's a missed opportunity for the Green Industry.

"Everyone discounts them," he notes. "But they're loyal. We've retained most of the employees we've hired. They show up to work on time, they follow directions, they're excited to work and they're really appreciative of having a position they love. Even their families appreciate it."

Goodwill-Big Bend is much more than a retail store. With a service area that extends from Santa Rosa County, FL to Taylor County, FL, it has a career training center that provides education and job training for people with disabilities, and barrier-free apartment complexes for the disabled to live in independently. It also provides employment to people with disabilities — and is the first in the country to provide landscape services.

Womble was hired to start Big Bend's new Contract Services program in August 2009. Although other Goodwills around the country already had programs for janitorial work, the location of this one, with its long summers and mild, short winters, made it a natural choice for landscaping.

"Landscaping goes hand in hand with where we live," he

There's a labor pool that few landscape contractors have discovered yet: **the disabled.**

BY JANET AIRD

says. "It was a great way to create more jobs, especially for people with disabilities."

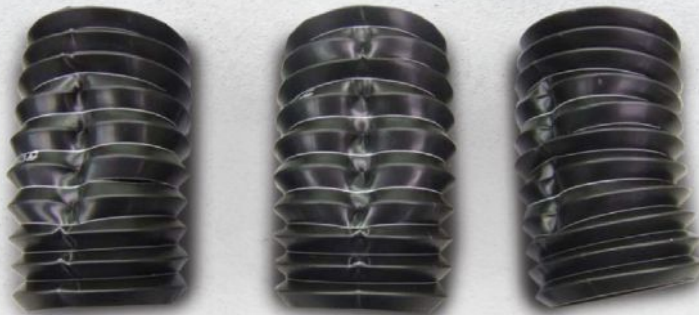
Setting up the program and negotiating the first contract — litter control for the Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) in Bay County — was a joint effort with others at Goodwill. They began with a half dozen employees and had 36 the next year. By 2012, they had seven crews, with a supervisor in each crew. All employees except the supervisors are disabled.

Most of their contracts come from their partnership with Respect of Florida, a state agency that helps non-profits in the state market products and services produced by people with disabilities to government entities. Seventy-five percent of the workers performing the services must be people with disabilities.

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HELPING HAND

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“We go through Respect to negotiate contracts,” Womble says. “We’re a work center for them.” Goodwill-Big Bend gives them prices and an estimate. Respect of Florida negotiates with state agencies on their behalf and handles the contracts. Goodwill hires the workers, performs the work and handles all the insurance.

The workers have either a mental or a physical challenge that prevents them from being competitively employed. They’re screened for disabilities and qualifications and are able to do the necessary work. Many are hearing impaired, for example. Some have autism. One has a prosthetic arm.

“Most are self-sufficient,” he says. “As soon as we get to a jobsite, they really know what they need to do.”

Some are on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or State Disability Insurance (SDI), so they work limited hours. Others have never applied for aid, so they can work as many hours as they want. Goodwill usually pays them a little higher than minimum wage to start.

“The workers get along well,” Womble says. “We really promote a team atmosphere.”

In addition, the work gives them self-confidence and independence. A lot of them are finding out that they can do something they didn’t know they could, he says. Some are living on their own for the first time. Some drive, and most others have another means of transportation.

Two crews pick up litter and trash on certain state highways in Bay and Calhoun counties using side-by-side ATVs that have trash cans on the front. With ATVs, the visibility’s better, it’s safer, more efficient and a little faster than picking up litter manually, Womble says. At the end of 2010, the DOT Bay County gave the litter crew a grade of 100%. In Bay County, a mowing crew that mows with tractors and batwing mowers follows the litter crew. Another crew uses a Bush Hog with a small tractor to mow the grass around 42 DOT holding ponds in Bay County.

Crews use Gravely mowers at a number of sites. On the highways, they mow right-of-ways and around fixtures to cut closely around signs. They also use them to maintain the lawns at the Goodwill store, the donation center and the 11 Goodwill apartment complexes.

One four-man crew uses them to maintain the turf at the Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park in Tallahassee, which is internationally known for its flowers in February, March and April. They use a zero-turn model, a pair of 152 riding mowers and a 48-hp push mower. Maclay Gardens extended its first contract for three years.

Goodwill-Big Bend has begun adding new services now. It’s doing sign replacement for the DOT when old signs are damaged, as well as hedge trimming, turf aeration and fertilization.

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“The workers get along well,” Womble says. “We really promote a team atmosphere.”



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HELPING HAND

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“As new as we are, we’ve promoted manageable growth,” Womble says. “We’re becoming experts in what we do now before we expand.”

So far, all the contracts have been for the state government, but Goodwill could work with privately owned landscaping companies, Womble says.

One key to its success is training. “Training is big for us,” Womble says. “Probably the biggest learning curve was learning how to use the large equipment.”

About half the landscape employees are trained on the Gravelys. Some just aren’t ready to use them, but when they are, the training is available.

Goodwill-Big Bend contracts with AbilityOne, a federal agency that provides employment opportunities to more than 50,000 people with significant disabilities. AbilityOne also offers training courses and provides landscape training for Goodwill-Big Bend’s workers.

It also contracts with National Industries for the Severely Handicapped (NISH), a nonprofit agency that secures federal contracts through AbilityOne, for more worker training.

Goodwill itself provides safety training, stressing the motto “safety first,” Womble says. “All Goodwills have a safety rep. We have two, one for the work we do on the east side of

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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contractdirector@goodwillbigbend.com

Goodwill Industries-Big Bend Contract Services:
GoodwillBigBend.com/contracts-2



the state and one for the west.”

Each crew has a safety meeting every morning before it starts work, where safe work practices are reviewed. There’s also a monthly meeting with all the crews on topics such as safe lifting and awareness of surroundings.

Part of Womble’s job is to visit work sites weekly and do inspections for quality control, making sure the crews are working safely, the equipment is operating well, and the project is in order and on schedule.

“It’s going great,” he concludes. “The disabled are really not different from anyone else; they’re just like you and me. Don’t be afraid to give them an opportunity — they might surprise you.” **LM**

Aird is a writer based in Altadena, CA.

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