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NICHOLSON BUILDING COMPANY & EXCAVATING

Home contractor transitions to full-time excavation



Randy Nicholson,
Owner,
Managing Member



Levi Nicholson,
Project Foreman

No two projects are ever exactly the same, but they often have similarities. Then there are the truly unique ones, like the new residential subdivision Nicholson Building Company & Excavating recently completed in Wellington, Colo.

As part of the two-phase assignment, crews overexcavated and reconditioned hundreds of thousands of yards of unsuitable soil before putting it back in one-foot lifts. “As we placed and compacted the dirt, soil engineers tested it,” said Owner and Managing Member Randy Nicholson. “We do some one-off custom home sites that require overexcavation, but nothing on the scale of what we did for that subdivision. There were 75 lots in phase one and a little less than 100 on the second. It was our largest project to date.”

Once the Severance, Colo.-based firm reached final grade with the reconditioned soil, it began more traditional operations such as digging and backfilling house foundations, installing water and sewer lines and finish-grading lots. Its services also include some minor clearing and grubbing, septic system installations and retaining-wall construction as well as traditional mass excavation.

“Typically, we provide full site packages to general contractors, including both local and national homebuilders,” said Randy. “That comprises about 75 percent of our total load. The rest is made up of site work for multifamily structures and commercial sites such as restaurants. In addition to water and sewer installations, the commercial projects often include installing fire sprinkler systems, hydrants and mains. We have completed a few municipal utility contracts here and there as well.”

Adds earthwork

Nicholson Building Company & Excavating primarily operates in the residential marketplace because Randy has a strong history in that arena. He founded Nicholson Building Company in 1986 as a subcontractor to homebuilders and focused on project management and framing as well as exterior and interior trim work.

Three years later, Randy teamed up with a partner and opened a general contracting business known as Elk Ridge Design Builders. It specialized in the design and construction of six to 10 custom and traditional log homes per year, ranging in price from \$300,000 to more than \$1 million.

“In the mid-1990s, I started doing excavating work as well with a rubber-tired backhoe and a skid steer,” Randy recalled. “Eventually, Elk Ridge took care of everything from site preparation to the finished home. We branched out and began offering dirt work and utility installation for other contractors and developers as well as other types of businesses and municipalities in Colorado.”

In 2005, Elk Ridge Design Builders closed. Randy decided to “retire” from homebuilding and concentrate on earthwork and related services as Nicholson Building Company & Excavation. He also expanded his territory to include Wyoming.

“There are a lot of variables that go with building homes; excavation is a more controlled environment, so I chose to focus all my efforts on that,” Randy noted. “I believe the knowledge and skill I gained in housing construction provide some advantages with



▶ VIDEO

Project Foreman Levi Nicholson digs and backfills around a house foundation with a Komatsu PC138USLC excavator near Wellington, Colo. “The zero tail swing is ideal for jobsites with limited space, which is often the case on subdivisions where the houses are close together,” said Nicholson. “It’s maneuverable and powerful. Having the blade on the front assists with backfilling; it’s a great added feature.”

the contractors and developers who I do business with. They know I understand their visions and will shape the landscape as best I can to make those a reality.”

New generation learning from experienced staff

Experience and a strong penchant for always delivering quality results on time and on budget have earned Nicholson Building Company & Excavating a solid mix of repeat and new customers. It usually has four to five projects in process at any one time – typically two larger endeavors like the subdivision in Wellington – with the balance being similar jobs on a smaller scale or a custom-home site.

“Traveling long distances for jobs used to be common, but today, we try to stay within approximately 100 miles of Fort Collins,” shared Randy. “Fortunately, there is enough activity within that radius to keep us busy. My guys like that a lot.”

Nicholson Building Company & Excavating employs close to a dozen people, including many who have been with the firm several years such as Project Foreman Ryan Selander. “He started here in 2007, and there are a few others who have five to eight years with me,” mentioned Randy.



Project Foreman Ryan Selander digs and loads a truck with a Komatsu PC290LC excavator on a residential project. “It has good power and reach,” said Selander. “I’m digging more than 10 feet deep, coming up out of hole to dump in the trucks, and it helps that it has good speed through the entire cycle. It has increased production.”



“I have a couple of newer employees just starting out as laborers and learning the trade. Some very experienced and knowledgeable people on our staff are teaching them.”

Randy’s son, Levi, is among the younger generation, although he has assisted his dad on a part-time basis for many years. Levi

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Komatsu CARE 'is a fantastic program'

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graduated in May 2017 from Southwestern Oklahoma State College. He has a bachelor's degree in Business Management and a Master's in Business Administration.

Trading Komatsu for Komatsu

Nearly two years ago, Randy traded his first Komatsu machines – a WA200 wheel loader and PC200LC and PC158USLC excavators purchased in 2007 – for updated Tier 4 equipment. Within the past few months, he has added a PC290LC excavator to a fleet that already included PC240LC and PC138USLC models as well as WA200 and WA270 wheel loaders. All were purchased from Power Motive with the assistance of Sales Rep Jeremy Griebel.

"The fact that we got a decade of solid production and durability from the first pieces says a lot about Komatsu's quality," noted Randy. "The operators have always had confidence that every time they get in a Komatsu, it will run all day long, no matter the conditions or the application. The loaders give us versatility to move materials with buckets and forks. They are highly efficient."

(L-R) Nicholson Building Company & Excavating's Levi and Randy Nicholson meet with Power Motive Sales Rep Jeremy Griebel on a jobsite in Wellington, Colo. "We consider Jeremy and Power Motive vital to our success," said Randy. "They take the time to understand our needs to ensure we acquire the right equipment and provide outstanding service to back it up."



A Nicholson Building Company & Excavating operator loads a truck with a Komatsu WA270 wheel loader. "The loaders give us versatility to move materials with buckets and forks. They are highly efficient," said Owner and Managing Member Randy Nicholson.



Nicholson Building Company & Excavating utilizes Komatsu excavators for a wide variety of applications, including trench and foundation digging, mass excavation and hammering rock. "For its size, the PC290 is one of the smoothest, fastest excavators I have run," said Levi of the 70,000-pound-plus machine. "We had another brand that was the same size, and the Komatsu outperforms that, hands down. It hogs a lot of dirt very efficiently. The PC240 does, too.

"I especially like the PC138," he added. "The zero tail swing is ideal for jobsites with limited space, which is often the case on subdivisions where the houses are close together. It's maneuverable and powerful. Having the blade on the front assists with backfilling; it's a great extra feature."

The Nicholsons appreciate the value-added service Komatsu and Power Motive provide, including Komatsu CARE that covers routine scheduled maintenance and is complimentary for the first three years or 2,000 hours. "It's a fantastic program," said Randy. "Power Motive lets us know when an interval is due and takes care of it after hours to limit downtime. Jeremy is helping us really dig into what KOMTRAX offers so we can better track items such as production, idle time and utilization. We consider Jeremy and Power Motive vital to our success. They take the time to understand our needs to ensure we acquire the right equipment and provide outstanding service to back it up."

Staying in the comfort zone

Plans are in the works for Levi to take over Nicholson Building Company & Excavating one day. He sees the business diversifying in the future and is taking an active approach to implementing new construction technology into the estimating and bidding process.

"I believe growing the commercial side would be ideal, so that we don't have too many eggs in one basket," Levi noted. "More infrastructure development is a good area to explore, too."

Randy agrees, and says he would like to continue the company's steady growth pattern. "Our size has increased the past few years, and that has allowed us to do a variety of new things. However, we are not really interested in going into other markets such as heavy highway. I think we will stick to our comfort zone." ■