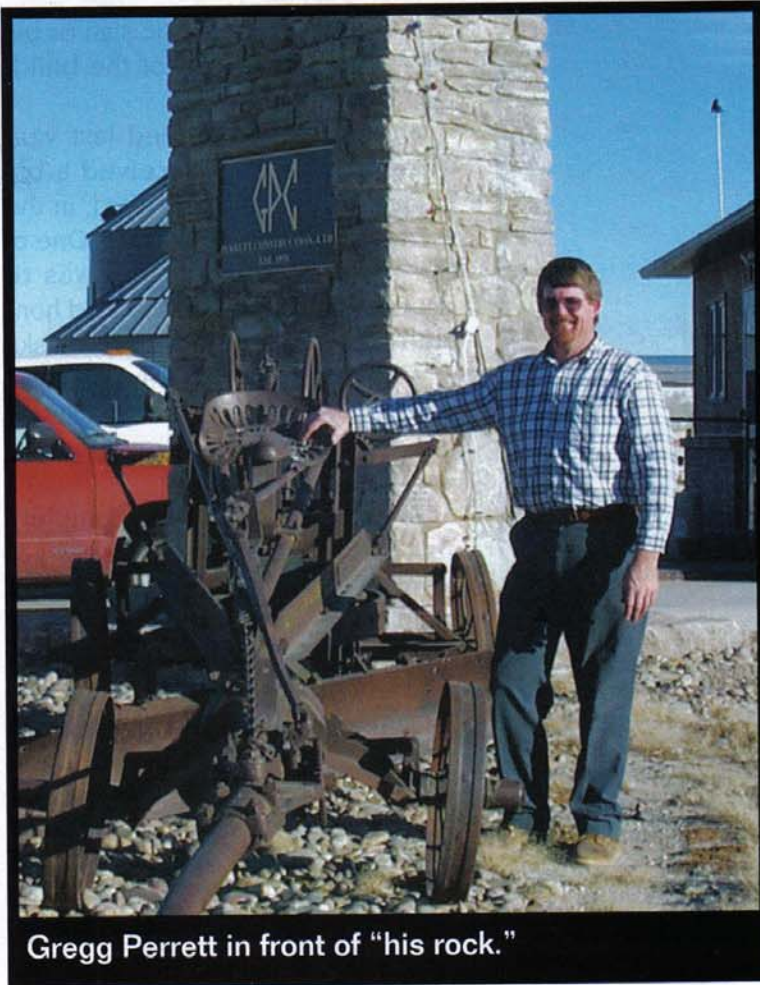




by Marcia Gruver



Gregg Perrett in front of "his rock."

Gregg Perrett

Perrett Construction Valentine, Nebraska

This former ranch kid knew his calling early on and has grown a business he started a year out of high school into a \$4 million grading and bridge operation today.

"I think everyone has a God-given gift to do something in life and mine is to be a contractor."

Gregg Perrett, owner and president of Perrett Construction in Valentine, Nebraska, and former ranch kid, knew his calling early on. In 1976, one year after he graduated from high school, he went to his friendly neighborhood banker to finance the \$5,000 purchase of an American half-cubic-yard crane/dragline.

"He told me to work for someone else in the construction business and then come see him in a few years," Perrett recalls. Looking for ways to overcome the banker's denial, he borrowed money from his father and financed the remainder through an equipment dealer.

The experience stays with him today. "It bothers me that high schools don't talk about financing and how the world works," he says. "It seems I've learned everything through trial and error."

HAVE MACHINE, WILL WORK

With the crane/dragline, Perrett started digging basements, ditching and lifting and "anything else I could do with that little machine," he says.

By the next year, Perrett bought a used truck and low-boy to haul the crane. He then got a dirt hauling job and

put a dump trailer on the truck. Next came a dozer and "it's built from there," he says.

It took less than six years for the company to get its first state highway job, the mainstay of its work today. "We do predominately state and county highway grading, bridge and culvert work," Perrett says, "primarily within a 300-mile radius."

"I've always felt fortunate when we have Gregg on a job because it's one less thing to worry about," says Craig Lind, District 5 construction engineer for the Nebraska Department of Roads. "He really researches projects before bidding them and there are fewer surprises from him versus some other guys."

DEVELOPING A CREW

Finding and developing a crew "takes years," Perrett says, and he's grateful for a ready resource: ranchers and their kids. "With the ag economy so bad, most of the smaller ranchers around here have to supplement their income," he comments. "If you grew up on a farm or ranch you generally have a better work ethic, although I have some city kids who are damn good workers."

Perrett usually runs up to three grading crews and two bridge crews in the summer, with roughly 10 people on

Most of Perrett Construction's work revolves around grading and bridge projects for the Nebraska Department of Roads.



each crew. "We work in a climate that doesn't always allow you to work outside year around," Perrett says. "Keeping good employees during the off season is our biggest challenge."

WINTER WORK

Today, Perrett Construction's list of equipment assets and inventory runs 11 pages long and includes a fleet of Class 8 trucks, a 60-ton crane, seven dozers, three excavators and eight scrapers. A frequent notation on this list is "completely rebuilt in the winter of ____."

"When it's slower in the winter," Perrett says, "we recycle our equipment through the shop, and end up doing rebuilds on some of it." This included redoing the undercarriage on the company's 40-ton American 599C crane and painting it to like-new condition.

Over the years, Perrett Construction shop crews have rebuilt three 1973 scrapers "several times," Perrett says. "In the past five years, I've bought used scrapers for about \$250,000 and put another \$75,000 in them with in-house repairs. I plan to

run them for 10,000 hours without any major repairs."

The firm's remote location near the Nebraska-South Dakota border makes it firmly self-reliant when it comes to equipment repairs, too. Perrett estimates he only sends out about 20 percent of his repair work, with the rest handled by his own in-shop and field technicians. "We have to have our own mechanics anyway in order to keep the machines running and serviced in the field.

Perrett Construction buys any machine it can get eight months use out of, or can put 1,500 to 2,000 hours a year on. The rest is rented, including crawler loaders, excavators and man-lifts. "We primarily use rental to supplement our fleet or if we need a special piece of equipment," he says.

'MY ROCK'

Although Perrett Construction has had facilities located at its present site in Valentine since 1980, when the firm built its new office and rebuilt its shop facility Perrett started looking for something unique to announce his firm's presence. "I did-

n't want a neon or plastic sign or big letters across the end of the building," he relates.

His sign search ended last year when the company received a big grading job south of Crawford, in the northwest corner of the state. One of the bid items on the job was to remove a stone marker that had honored a former governor of Nebraska at a since-abandoned wayside area. "It was built in the 1930s by what we think was a Civilian Conservation Corps crew," Perrett says.

Perrett had found his company sign and promptly made arrangements for the 68,000-pound monument to be placed at the corner of his office/shop facility. The original plaque remains on the back of the monument and Perrett put a brass company sign in front. "I call it 'my rock,'" he jokes.

In front of the stone marker is an additional piece of nostalgia – a Fresno pull-behind scraper that's identical to the one Perrett used to operate at the age of 10 on his father's ranch. (His father still has the machine he used.)

The Fresno is also indicative of another passion: restoring historical construction equipment. A quick tour of his facility reveals a variety of restored or waiting-to-be-restored antique machines, including a selection of Caterpillar Tens, Twentys and Thirtys.

A FORM OF ART

If you get into construction, plan on working long hours, Perrett advises. "You can't survive even working 50 hours a week," he says.

You know talking to him it's a price he's willing to pay. "I think construction is a form of art," he comments. "For instance, you have to be able to visualize what a slope will look like before the first blade of dirt is turned. It's very rewarding to see the finished product. I think if you don't do it for that reason, you're in the wrong business." **EW**