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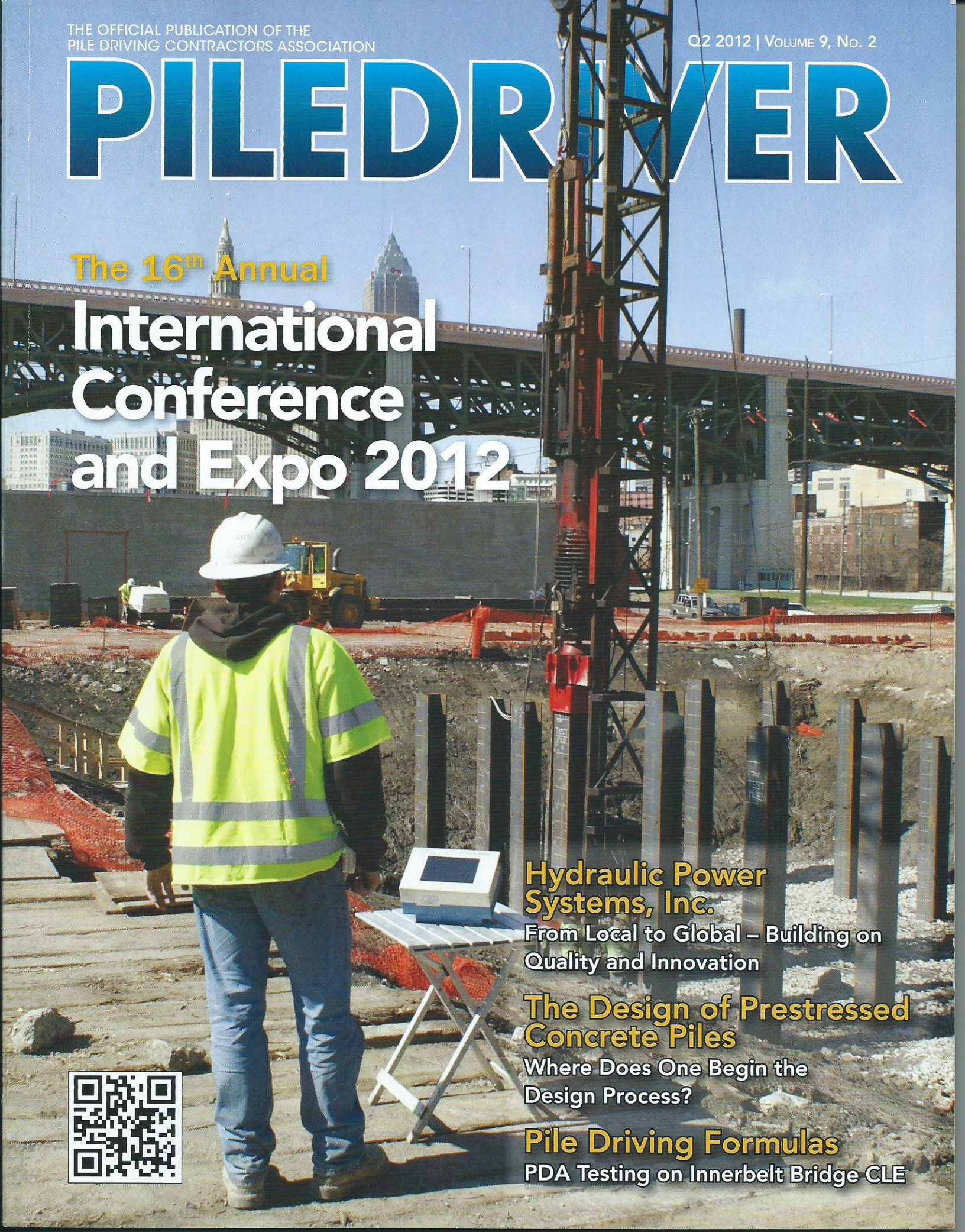
PILEDRIVER



The 16th Annual International Conference and Expo 2012

Hydraulic Power Systems, Inc.
From Local to Global – Building on Quality and Innovation

The Design of Prestressed Concrete Piles
Where Does One Begin the Design Process?

Pile Driving Formulas
PDA Testing on Innerbelt Bridge CLE

Contractor Member TX-Pile **Finds Real Benefit in PDCA Membership**

By Rusty Signor, President TX-Pile (formerly Signor Enterprises)

A friend has a picture in his office of some vultures in a tree. They are just sitting on a limb and one is starting to fly off and says "Wait, hell, I am going to kill something." I hate to admit it, but for over a decade, before I joined PDCA, I was one of the ones waiting for "road kill" piling jobs. Looking back, it is hard to believe that I felt justified in doing nothing proactive and relying solely on marine construction to make ends meet. Most of my monthly piling work is now equal to what I did totally in the past year. Even in this recession, last year was one of our best in 30 years of business, all thanks to PDCA. At the onset of the recession we started "lunch and learns" with geotechnical and structural engineering firms along with contractors. Armed with a BBQ lunch and certificates of completion for PDHs, we primarily showed a PDCA based presentation entitled "Benefits of Driven Piles." This presentation put together by the Communication Committee was a Pile Driving 101 course that we supplemented with local war stories of difficult underground conditions like developmental fill, expansive soils, and high water table. Combining the average cost per person at $12 (think BBQ, good sides, and desserts) and a $800 projector, having one-on-one interaction with 200 engineers was a little more than a yearly Yellow Page advertisement. One job easily paid for these 34 presentations. The down market was actually beneficial because people had time to listen and were more willing to look at a money/time saving alternative to drilled shafts. Central Texas has been called by some "the heart of drilled shaft country," where driven piles were rarely if ever used for deep foundations. These "lunch and learns" definitely resulted in additional work, but our first major advance was to be recommended in a geotechnical report which is proudly framed in our office. While a few structural engineers would recommend driven piles, quite a few will never design outside of geotechnical recommendations. Jobs soon followed and with additional local history, more conservative engineers are starting to recommend driven piles too. Along with our presentations, we have put on dynamic pile test demonstrations and branched out to the pile driving community to bring in guest speakers.

During the decade of "resting buzzard" years we would have a couple of engineering students from Texas call for help on a school report. As undergradu-

ate students, most who came to visit our jobs told us that they would get one lecture that would mention pile driving. Now we have a site visit with an entire graduate class several times a year and have made presentations at classes at two universities. I like to think of this as an investment in the future, much like the Professor's Institute sponsored by the PDCA Educational Board.

While I am a member of several other trade associations, there is no comparison to the educational opportunities from being a member of the PDCA. I have a hard time justifying being absent from the two annual meetings. Every time, I come back home with several points that help my business through selling points, new uses, or best practices of driven piles. For example, at last year's annual convention, a legal seminar offered some incredible advice to add to our contracts to protect against unknowns that have previously have cost us more than the profit on projects. Also, I believe I avoided several lawsuits by being educated on the perception of vibrations, vibration monitoring, and what to look for in adjacent structures pre-construction. On these projects, the general contractor appreciated our educated viewpoint and gladly paid for the vibration monitoring. A contractor friend shared with me a term he uses that comes from costly construction mistakes, "dumb tax." Through the PDCA I have made friends from all over the country who have always given me valuable technical advice to reduce this dumb tax. These friends have given me some unbiased, practical advice on use of certain equipment which salesmen have a hard time providing.

Recently my son completed his second engineering master's degree as a geotechnical engineer. We are now going back to all the engineering firms we previously presented to and educating them on the results of our dynamic pile tests in expansive clay. We are showing them that driven piles are 3 to 5 times faster than drilled shafts, cheaper, and higher quality controlled. Providing empirical data on a time and cost savings alternative is very attractive, especially in a down economy. Through this process, we are breaking open a market for driven piles that has been written off as solely drilled shafts around the world. Alternatively from having a son to obtaining a geotechnical degree, hire a full time or part time engineer who can help with marketing, as they can provide the technical information that will change engineers' minds. If you cannot talk the talk or have the time to continually address them, geotechnical and structural engineers simply will fall back onto what they have been recommending and designing for years locally--drilled shafts.

Even in the current down market, you should only consider renewing your PDCA membership, attending any of the conferences, and educating your local engineering community on the benefits of driven piles. Otherwise, dumb tax and lost opportunities will far exceed the time and money spent on representing driven piles. ▼

Photos courtesy of Rusty Signor