

85 Years and Four Generations Later...

“Don’t chase the pack doing ‘run of the mill’ type work.” By Joanne Ray

These were the words that Rocco Zoppo lived by. It is this philosophy that has led this 85-year-old company into the 4th generation as a full service general contractor.

It was in the year of 1895, that Rocco Zoppo was born in a small town in the Italian Province of Abruzzi. One of six children, he immigrated to America from Italy at the age of 18. Rocco worked at various construction jobs and then joined the Navy during the First World War serving as a carpenter’s mate aboard the U.S.S. Leviathan. After WWI, he went back to his Italian hometown, married, and returned to the United States.

He settled in Roslindale and worked for the John Bowen Construction Company. At the time, John Bowen Construction was involved with building telephone exchange buildings.

The telephone buildings required connections to the water and sewer mains in the street, and being an enterprising fellow, Rocco would work out a fee with the owners to perform the water and sewer connections.

By 1925, Rocco decided to go into business for himself and founded the R. Zoppo Company in Roslindale, Mass. The company soon began constructing water and sewer jobs for the City of Boston.

With the inception of Roosevelt’s WPA Program, Rocco conceived the policy, “Don’t chase the pack doing ‘run of the mill’ type work”. In keeping with this policy, the early 1930s brought a concentration on blasting contracts with the Federal Government taking the company all over New England. Difficult sewer and water main installations soon became the company’s specialty.

In the late 1930s, with the nation preparing for WWII, the company was awarded its first one million dollar contract for utilities at a military base being developed in Kittery, Maine. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the company also began to get involved in the construction of sewage treatment facilities and pumping stations. The company’s first treatment plant was constructed in 1939 for the Town of Kingston, R.I.

In the late 1940s, Rocco sons, Bill and Tom, joined the company on a full-time basis. The company moved from Roslindale to Norwood, Mass.

Over the years, Bill and Tom worked through the ranks and took control of the company in 1965. Bill Zoppo was appointed president and Tom Zoppo appointed executive vice-president/treasurer. Rocco Zoppo remained an active participant and frequently visited job sites until his passing in 1985 at the age of 90.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the company continued to concentrate on water and sewer work. Much of the work centered on difficult underground utility projects that included large diameter pipe and deep trenches.

One of the larger projects from this period, was the construction of a major portion of the original Deer Island Sewage Treatment Facility in Boston. The facility was built between 1964 and 1968.

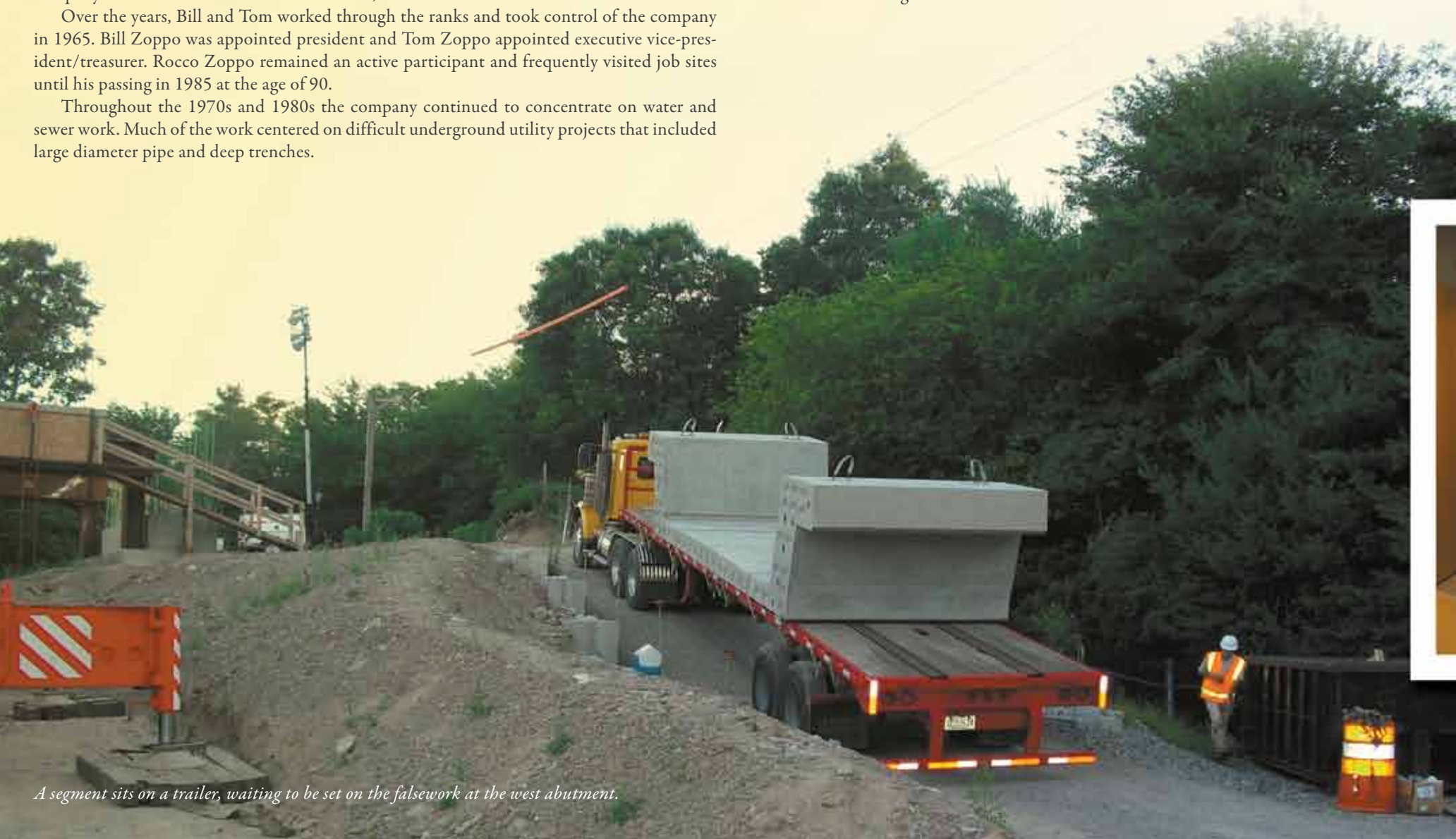
In 1982, the company moved to Avon, Mass., and in 1989, relocated to its current location, a 12,000 sq. ft. facility in Stoughton, Mass. The facility sits on a ten-acre lot that also houses a 7,200 sq. ft. maintenance garage.

In the mid 1980s, with the Federal Grant Program for water and sewer projects all but eliminated, combined with a slowing economy, resulted in very intense competition for the company’s mainstay of sewer and water utility work. This intense competition forced the company to diversify into road and bridge construction. The company again recognized the wisdom of Rocco’s statement, “Don’t chase the pack doing ‘run of the mill’ type work”.

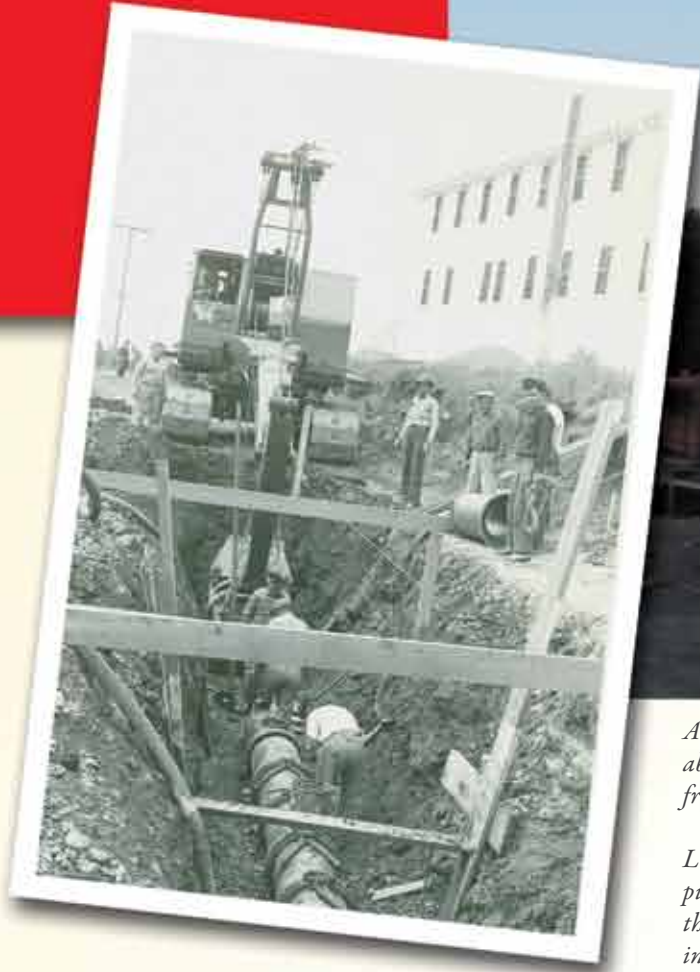
During the next 15 years, the company reaffirmed itself by targeting the jobs that attracted limited competition. These jobs had technical difficulties associated with performing the work, or work that other contractors were precluded from bidding on due to pre-qualification or insurance requirements.

As an example, R. Zoppo Corp. was involved with the construction of the new Deer Island Treatment Facility in the 1990s. Rather than concentrate on the multitude of very large contracts, for which there was a great deal of competition, Zoppo chose to target the jobs in the three to \$30 million dollar range which drew very limited attention from the competition.

In the mid to late 1980s the Federal Government also embarked on a program to clean up contaminated and hazardous waste sites. Zoppo was able to tap into this remediation market early on and constructed numerous groundwater treatment facilities, a PCB Confined Disposal Facility, and many other clean-up projects. Zoppo continues to operate in this market and actively pursues projects that have an odd twist and can utilize Zoppo’s years of heavy construction knowledge.



A segment sits on a trailer, waiting to be set on the falsework at the west abutment.



A 250-ton hydraulic truck crane from Crane & Rigging Service setting the next to last precast bridge segment at the west abutment. The 300-ton lattice-boom crawler crane from Hallamore, that was used to set the majority of the segments from the median, is in the background.

Left: This picture from the early 1950s shows the installation of a sewer pipeline as part of a project to construct sewers, pump stations and an outfall pipe at the Navy Base in Newport, Rhode Island. In the mid 1990s, Zoppo would return to the Newport Navy Base to construct a major upgrade to the sanitary sewer system working on some of the same facilities installed back in the early 1950s.

In 1993, R. Zoppo Corp. was formed as the successor company to R. Zoppo Co., Inc. Ownership of the new entity was evenly divided between the third generation members, David Zoppo and Richard Zoppo, the sons of Bill Zoppo and Tom Zoppo, respectively.

David Zoppo presently holds the position of president and treasurer and Richard Zoppo holds the position of executive vice-president and secretary.

Today, Zoppo specializes in heavy construction, treatment plant, utility, and environmental projects, and takes great pride in the ability to accomplish unique, one of a kind projects. Zoppo puts emphasis on the company employees and their diverse backgrounds in a purposeful effort to meet their clients' needs.

Presently, the company employs 35 full-time supervisory, management and administrative people, and during the peak season, will employ 50 to 150 crafts people. The company has annual revenues of approximately \$30 million dollars and a bonding capacity in excess of \$100 million dollars.

A key player in the Zoppo family is CFO, Stanley Sylvester who has been employed there since 1976.

"I worked for all three generations," Sylvester said. "I have seen a lot of changes. When I first started here everything was done with a pencil and paper. Things are more complicated

today. The equipment has changed and the compliance has become more complicated. You always have to keep up to date. If you don't adapt you pass away."

Other key employees in the company include: vice-president, Andy Greenlaw; accounting department manager, Janice Kinsler; project manager, Robert DiGirolamo; vice-president of field operations, Frank Monahan and project engineer, Nick Zoppo (Richard's son and the fourth generation to work in the business).

Keeping in line with Rocco's philosophy, David Zoppo talks about how the company remains a niche type of contractor.

"We like to take on projects that have a unique aspect to them – something with an engineering challenge, something that makes a project different," David Zoppo said. "We don't care what sector it is in, if it has a challenge to it, and we can bring some competencies to the project, we will take a run at it."

Today, Zoppo can be seen constructing a match cast, segmental pre-cast bridge over Route 24 in the Randolph area. This type of bridge is usually found in the southeast or southwest corners of the country, is a one-of-a-kind in this area, and is being constructed under the Mass Highway accelerated bridge program.

The \$3.86M post-tensioned, segmental concrete superstructure contract includes the demolition of the existing bridge superstructure, partial demolition of the existing bridge substructure, and the construction of a new bridge with reinforced concrete abutments, wingwalls and pier. The reinforced concrete abutments and wingwalls are supported on steel piles consisting of many existing steel piles as well as new steel piles.

The pier consists of two reinforced concrete columns supported on a spread footing. The 200-ft.-long by 20-ft.-wide bridge is brought to the site in 31 pieces and put together with a 2250 Manitowoc, 300-ton capacity crane rented from Cranes and Rigging Services. The pieces are manufactured in Pittsfield, Mass. by Unistress and each piece weighs 36 tons.

"It is like a big jigsaw puzzle," said project manager Robert DiGirolamo.

Also included in the project are full depth construction with hot mix asphalt, removal of fencing, installing and subsequent removal of temporary precast concrete barriers and installation of new bridge guardrail and fencing.

"This has been a team effort on all accounts and is an especially difficult job with the work being performed at night," said DiGirolamo. "Our crews are sometimes switching between day and night shifts and have done a really good job performing the work required."

DiGirolamo pointed out that the Zoppo crew worked with the temporary steel designer for constructability issues and fabricated the steel at their garage facilities. The temporary steel was fabricated from the existing bridge girders.

"We had several planning and design meetings before the project started so we were ready to go," DiGirolamo said.

A look into the future has Zoppo growing steadily while not losing focus on operational efficiencies and continuing to seek new and interesting opportunities.

"We want to concentrate on continuing to develop our staff to meet the future challenges of this industry and also ensure the successful transition to the fourth generation," David said. "As long as we stay pro-active and smart about business, we will always be pursuing future opportunities." 🛑



The dedicated staff of the Zoppo family: (left to right) vice-president Andy Greenlaw; project engineer, Nick Zoppo; executive vice-president and secretary, Richard Zoppo; president and treasurer, David Zoppo; CFO, Stanley Sylvester and accounting department manager, Janice Kinsler.