

FLANAGAN'S CONTRACTING GROUP COMPLETES 40 YEARS

BY: ZOE BALDWIN

In 1978, Bob Flanagan was just a young man with a healthy drive and a good head for business. He had worked a few jobs throughout high school but knew that owning his own business and being his own boss was what he truly wanted in life. He started a small business while still a student, and right away knew that he had a good thing going. As soon as he graduated in 1979, Bob jumped in with both feet and formed Flanagan's Lawn and Garden Service.

I sat with Bob Sr, his brother Roger, and son Bob Jr., to talk about the past four decades of success, and a clear picture emerged of a firm that found its niche building projects that enhance communities across the state.

"I started out doing landscape design-builds, retaining walls, sidewalks, the whole nine yards," Bob tells me. "From there, my wife Christine and a lifelong friend worked together to add a maintenance division that maintained seventy-five accounts a week, both commercial and residential, while still running the construction division. We were known for developing great work and providing good service, but if we were going to continue to grow the business, we needed to make some investments. So after our wedding, we used the wedding gifts to purchase our first backhoe and trucks to do just that."



Liberty Field Athletic Complex
North Caldwell, New Jersey



"In progress" Dundee Island Park
Passaic, New Jersey

A few years after its founding, Flanagan's rounded out its capabilities with the addition of Bob's brother Roger. When he came on board in the late 1980s, the firm updated their competencies and their name, adopting the new moniker Flanagan's Landscape-Irrigation Inc. "Roger was a machinist and decided he wanted to get out of the machine shop, so he brought a tandem dump truck and eventually expressed an interest in formally coming into the company," Bob says.

Roger brought to the firm his own specialties, taking on the role of Chief Estimator. Initially, Roger was out in the field running projects before transitioning to the office full time. As Roger explains, "I was an operator and I worked directly with the crews building the projects while also handling cost estimations"

Flanagan's Contracting Group started out as many in our industry with a home office and a small yard. "We worked out of our home in Bound Brook for a long time," Bob says of the early days working with his brother and his wife, Christine. "We started out in one room and eventually took over the whole basement. It was good for a while and worked well for everyone."

As for the yard, "A friend of ours had a farm in Warren and we started there. Then we moved to a small garage next to the Chimney Rock Inn on Chimney Rock Road in Bound Brook, which we outgrew quickly. We knew we needed to find a place where we could store our quickly growing inventory of equipment, so we purchased our current location in Hillsborough in 1994."

Early on, the firm focused on projects in the residential and commercial sectors, but like any industry construction is not immune to the broader economic climate. "The economy really drove where we were going," Bob tells me. "Residential construction in the 1980s was booming, and then it just went to nothing."

As Roger puts it, “the recession in the early 1990s really changed the direction of what we were doing.”

“We knew we had to adapt,” Bob adds, “so we pivoted into the public sector and started bidding public work. In the beginning we worked into smaller jobs to get our feet wet, but eventually we knew we were ready to take on the next challenge and go for bigger jobs with several different specialties. That is what makes us unique”



*Mulberry Commons Park - Fountain
Newark, New Jersey*

The first public project, however, was no walk in the park. The brothers won a bid to build a retaining wall on a small brook between houses in Garfield, NJ. At one point, Roger found himself standing knee deep in icy winter waters, loading gabion baskets with stone. But Flanagans aren't easily deterred; Roger and Bob finished the job and knew they had found a new market for their growing capabilities.

“We grew throughout the nineties and it was fun again” Bob remembers. “Back then you would bid three jobs and get one, now you bid twenty jobs just to get one. The playing field was a lot smaller at the time, especially for companies like us that have many specialties. We've built some really neat projects throughout the years, like Southwest Block 12 Park, Berry Lane Park, Peter's Brook Pedestrian Bridge, Picatinny Arsenal Golf Course Irrigation, Shoreline Stabilization and Colgate Clock Rehabilitation, Woodcliff Lake JJ Braddock Park Wall Replacement, Millburn streetscapes, North Caldwell Athletic Complex, and Mulberry Commons Park, just to name a few.”

Roger shows a quick flash of pride as he notes, “We watch something done once, and then we teach ourselves to do it. For example, on an early job we had a sub that was going to do some paving for us, but then they backed out, so we did it ourselves. From that point on we decided that we were going to be in control of our own destiny and do all of our own work.”

That incident in the early nineties spurred the purchase of the

first paving equipment, building mostly tennis courts, basketball courts, and running tracks. As Roger puts it “We're the odd ones out in that way. If we were paving, we dove right into it, we weren't getting into any roads or parking lots, just kept it to fine-tuned paving projects.”

“That's the way we learned,” Bob adds. “We are where we are today because we know how to build, and at this point, we've built it all. Our work is constantly shifting and diversifying from parks, streetscapes, and small bridges, etcetera - that is what makes our days exciting and the projects interesting for the crews.”

By the early 2000s, Flanagan's Landscape-Irrigation, Inc had grown again to become the more robust Flanagan's Contracting Group, Inc.

Bob and Christine's son, Bob Jr., joined his family full time in 2011, just after graduating from Penn State with a degree in Civil Engineering. Much like his uncle Roger, the family didn't ease him in either - his first project was a tricky one, even if it didn't find him grabbing gabions in icy waterway. This was the 32nd Street Pedestrian Bridge over JFK Boulevard in Union City, an intricate project in a densely populated area with very little room for error.

“There were a lot of unforeseen items,” Bob Jr. recalls. “It was an enclosed bridge that had two elevator towers inside a brick façade with cast all masonry. It was a really unique project, but we learned a lot, in a good way.”

The addition of Bob Jr. as Project Manager not only brought the second generation into the firm, it brought the firm into the 21st Century. “It just seemed to me that we didn't have to do it the way we had always been doing it,” he starts “I met with vendors, looked through social media and watched videos, and realized it was worth taking the risk.”

Bob Jr.'s efforts to update the firm's technology started with the office. “Roger's software interfaces with the GPS machine control, and I saw a real value in having the connectivity. Over the past several years we have been leveraging the power of GPS equip-



*Mulberry Commons Park
Newark, New Jersey*

ment on all of our site work projects. It just makes everything so much more efficient, especially as our projects get more complex. There's a lot more that goes into a full park project compared to a single athletic field. We're now utilizing technology in all aspects of our workflow to increase quality and productivity." As part of this effort, Bob Jr. also worked to update all reporting to an electronic format and to streamline many processes to make the company more efficient.

Flanagan's Contracting Group has a true passion for projects that give back to the community, including a current one for the City of Passaic on Dundee Island. "It was an existing park that was pretty run down," Bob Jr explains. "We went in and stripped everything out, put in a new road, soccer field, amphitheater, and Analemmatic Sundial" What is an Analemmatic Sundial you ask? "It is a human sundial where every month has a tile and when you stand on it, the numbers are around you, so your shadow goes to the correct time.

"It's also going to have a large playground, small spray park, and concession stand with bathrooms. The field house is pretty intricate — it's actually on an elevated platform so it's kept out of the floodway. There is stamped concrete around it and a brick façade." After about a year of work, Flanagan's expects to complete the project by the end of this summer.



Flanagan's Annual Fishing Trip, check out their latest projects on Instagram @flanagans_inc

When it comes down to it, Bob is humbled and proud of the legacy built over the past 40 years and that shows as he reflects on the familial bonds of the firm. "Family business is not a simple dynamic to navigate; it's great some times and tough at others, but it's all the best parts of my life. I enjoy coming to work every day, and there are not too many people who get to work with their wife, brother, and son, and my father is retired so we get to see him every day too. And although Bob Jr. formally joined the business, we can always count on our children, my daughter Kelly, Roger's daughter and son Kristi and Josh, Roger's wife Candy, and our parents to jump in to help whenever needed."



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Flanagan's Contracting Group isn't just a family run operation; it prides itself on extending that atmosphere to the workplace. "We're a very family-oriented business," says Bob. "We see the whole person not just the employee and we run the business accordingly. We really value that, especially recently with the difficulty of COVID-19. We spent much time and effort to keep the crews safe during this tough time. We're very appreciative of all of our dedicated employees and we want to make sure they feel that."

Bob's wife and company CFO, Christine, walked into the conference room with a project list adding, "We have a lot of long-standing people who have been with us for a long time, some for twenty or twenty-five years! I feel blessed to be able to work with my husband, brother in law, and son. We continue to learn through the years with the challenges we face."

Christine herself has been with the company from the beginning. She and Bob are high school sweethearts and she started working with him early on. "I was actually out there working with him in the field in the beginning. I started with running the maintenance division and then took over the Landscape Design Division. It was a big part of our lives, but after I had our children I transitioned into the office. I was out in the field for almost ten years — I loved that side of it!"

"She still does!" Bob Jr. adds. "She landscapes like you wouldn't believe!"

Looking to the future, Bob and Roger have much to be proud of and hopeful for. For the past 40 years Flanagan's Contracting Group has shaped communities across our state and has no intention of slowing anytime soon. "We never know where Roger is going to take us next," Bob Jr. jokes as our conversation comes to a close.

UTCA would like to congratulate Bob, Roger, and the whole Flanagan's Contracting Group team on this incredible accomplishment.