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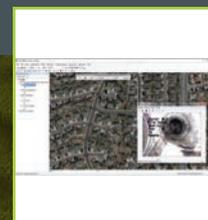
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Foreman Charles Gipson uses a Guzzler Guzzcavator hydrovac to locate utilities on an industrial site in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

Below the **SURFACE**



Industrial sewer cleaning and pipeline inspection are mainstays of the Taplin Group's diverse services

By Giles Lambertson //
Photography by Amy Voigt

Steve Taplin has been cleaning up since he was a kid. His father and mother started a cluster of companies in Kalamazoo, Michigan, under the name of A&B Sewer Cleaning and Taplin was well on his way to learning the ins and outs of the business by 16.

A&B evolved from residential sewer and septic work to municipal sewer cleaning and industrial services and eventually to other related enterprises. For 30 years, Taplin worked hands-on across this spectrum of services. He watched the original company evolve into several successful companies. In the 1990s, he spun off an environmental remediation services company of his own, sold it, bought it back, and eventually reassembled the original mix into a new and expanded family of Taplin companies.

Today, he is satisfied with how things turned out, though he can't say he foresaw all the twists and turns. "I only know I was taught to recognize opportunity and to capitalize on it and have tried to convey that to the people who work for me and with me."

Under a corporate umbrella of Taplin Holdings, he now runs the Taplin Group (industrial services, underground infrastructure, asbestos abatement and energy) and Taplin Enterprises (remediation and civil construction) — five subdivisions in all, each presided over by a vice president. Several Taplin family members (Taplin's brother, Mike, and some nieces and nephews) play key roles. Taplin consults with them in conference calls. "I'm trying to maintain that family-company feel."

DIVERSE SERVICES

About one-third of the 160 employees in the combined companies work in the underground infrastructure division, which encompasses a host of services. They can be broadly grouped into three categories: pipeline location and assessment, maintenance and repair, and cleaning. Utility company projects, both commercial and residential, account for a lot of the underground work, he says. "Identifying conflicts between gas mains and sewers is a big part of the business. Probably 30 guys work on that. And TV work is a major component."



Taplin Group

LOCATION: Kalamazoo, Michigan

OWNER: Steve Taplin

EMPLOYEES: 160

SERVICES: Industrial services, underground infrastructure cleaning, asbestos and lead abatement, oil and gas field operations, pipeline, environmental emergency response and remediation, contractor and commercial services, and civil construction

SERVICE AREA: Principally Michigan, Indiana and Ohio, but periodically in other states

WEBSITE: www.taplingroup.com



« Technician Danny Butterfield cleans a line in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, with the AquaStar sewer cleaner from Kaiser Premier.



Taplin traces a surge in utility inspection work back to 2010 when an explosion in San Francisco killed eight residents and leveled a neighborhood. A federal jury subsequently found a local gas and electric company guilty of violating safety standards. The rupture in the natural gas line occurred in a pipe installed in the 1950s that, after the blast, was determined to be substandard. Subsequent gas-leak



⤴ The water recycling capabilities of the AquaStar is crucial on more remote jobs where city water is scarce.

⤵ Project leader William Hollen inspects and cleans a portion of pipe using a custom CUES truck-mounted inspection system.

explosions in Pennsylvania and New York City ratcheted up public concern.

“Utilities across the country were told to upgrade systems of a certain age. So there is quite a demand to locate, inspect, and upgrade lines and, when utilities put in their services, to be sure they don’t hit sewer connections,” Taplin says. “When you think about how many underground gas mains and sewer connections there are, obviously there is a lot of camera work to be done.”

The division also performs manhole inspections. Therefore, between horizontal pipes and vertical access entry points, technicians constantly call on their GIS equipment to precisely map underground structural components and CCTV cameras to visually inspect them. Sonar and laser profiling hardware and software solutions are utilized to assess the infrastructure’s condition.



“I was taught to recognize opportunity and to capitalize on it and have tried to convey that to the people who work for me and with me.”

Steve Taplin

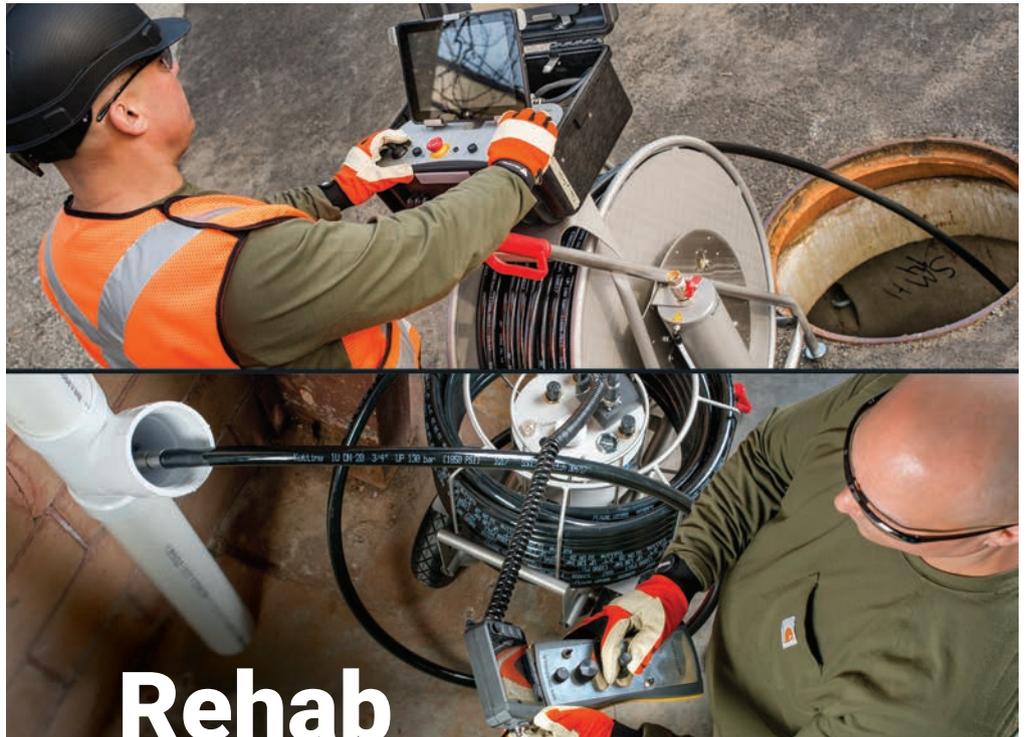
The company depends on cameras by CUES and RapidView IBAK North America. A favorite unit, according to Taplin, is the CUES LAMP II lateral launch model. It’s a self-propelled robotic camera unit that can navigate pipe going with or against the flow and, when encountering a lateral pipe, can launch a second mini pan-and-tilt camera to explore it.

Inspection work often leads to cleaning work, and every underground cleaning company has a favorite story about discovering something that wasn’t supposed to be in a system. Taplin’s story dates from 1977 when the company worked a site in Pennsylvania. Its discovery, however, was with the naked eye.

A dam had broken upstream and overwhelmed stormwater lines serving a community. As Taplin tells it, employees were bucketing out muck from the pipe when, amid the debris, they came upon a hand grenade. “No one wanted to touch the grenade, so a bomb squad was called out and safely retrieved it,” Taplin recalls. “It wasn’t a toy. I don’t think we ever did figure out where it came from.”

CLEANING MACHINES

For cleaning, Taplin’s underground division uses a variety of hydrovac and jetter equipment, much of it from Vactor. “We bought our first Vactor truck in 1975. We’ve known that brand for a very long time,” he says. Vactor combination sewer cleaning trucks are mainstays of his



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» Charles Gipson (left) and senior site supervisor Gary Dixon use a Guzzler Guzzcavator hydrovac to locate utilities on an industrial site.

fleet, including the model 2115, a 500 hp unit with a 15-cubic-yard debris body and 1,500-gallon water tank that rides on dual rear wheels. Some 60 trucks comprise the Taplin underground infrastructure fleet, including support equipment.

Six or eight times a year, the company cleans large-diameter pipe — 48 inches and larger — for one of its clients. The bigger pipe typically is scoured with 200 gpm of water at 2,500 psi. “You need force and volume to convey a large amount of material out of the pipe. The biggest pipe we’ve cleaned to date was 13 feet in diameter.”

But not all of the company’s sewer cleaning machinery is massive. Taplin has lovingly refurbished and restored a 1971 O’Brien trailer jetter, something of a Taplin family heirloom.

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“You wouldn’t be able to tell it goes back to 1971. It’s very unique, and we still use it. We pull it around with a forklift.”

THE BREADWINNER

Taplin’s industrial services division is a key component of the company structure. In fact, Taplin calls it the hub. “It is the only division in the company that provides services to all the others. It is the bread and butter. It is pivotal to my business.” The company began industrial pipeline work back in 1969 when it was still A&B Sewer Cleaning. Today, the division employs 25 people and serves an eclectic mix of Michigan and Ohio industries.

“We are pretty fortunate,” Taplin says. “It’s not like we are in Gary, Indiana, working only for a steel mill.

In the fall of 2017, Steve Taplin traveled to Liechtenstein, a tiny European principality snuggled between Austria and Switzerland. It wasn’t just a pleasure trip. The owner of Taplin Group flew there to check out a sewer cleaning truck.

The truck is a product of equipment manufacturer Kaiser Premier, which at the time did not manufacture its sewer cleaners in the U.S. but now has a plant in Colorado. The company is a respected maker of sewer and industrial cleaning equipment (as well as a one-of-a-kind “mobile walking excavator” that comes into its own on steep slopes and other unstable sites). Taplin was especially interested in the company’s AquaStar truck.

Taplin companies have long utilized vacuum trucks in their cleaning and hydroexcavation work. Yet Taplin decided he should look at additional solutions to job site challenges. “We need efficient means to execute our work,” Taplin says. One of the efficiencies that took him to Liechtenstein was AquaStar’s ability to recycle its water.

“Recycling is important,” he says. “When you think about how much time you spend on a

manhole, periodically stopping to run for water or to set up a hose at a hydrant, you start to see a downside. And then you get in some areas where water conservation is a selling point. Some municipalities, because of the age of their system, don’t want you pulling water from every hydrant, so you find yourself driving clear across town for water.”

The truck’s 755-gallon water tank is recycled through the company’s patented ROTOMAX system and can be jetted out at 132 gpm at up to 2,900 psi. It can carry almost 1,000 feet of jetting hose and 55 feet of suction hose. It is relatively quiet because its vacuum pump is located in the freshwater tank. The AquaStar boasts 25 percent less fuel consumption than other truck units because a Kaisertronic mechanism adjusts suction power to the vacuum rate, easing off when it can do so without impeding flow.

Taplin says the truck is easily operated and has delivered as advertised. “I also would say — Americans don’t like to hear comments like this — they have been cleaning sewers in Europe a hell of a lot longer than we have in the U.S.”

The Lansas 5-Line



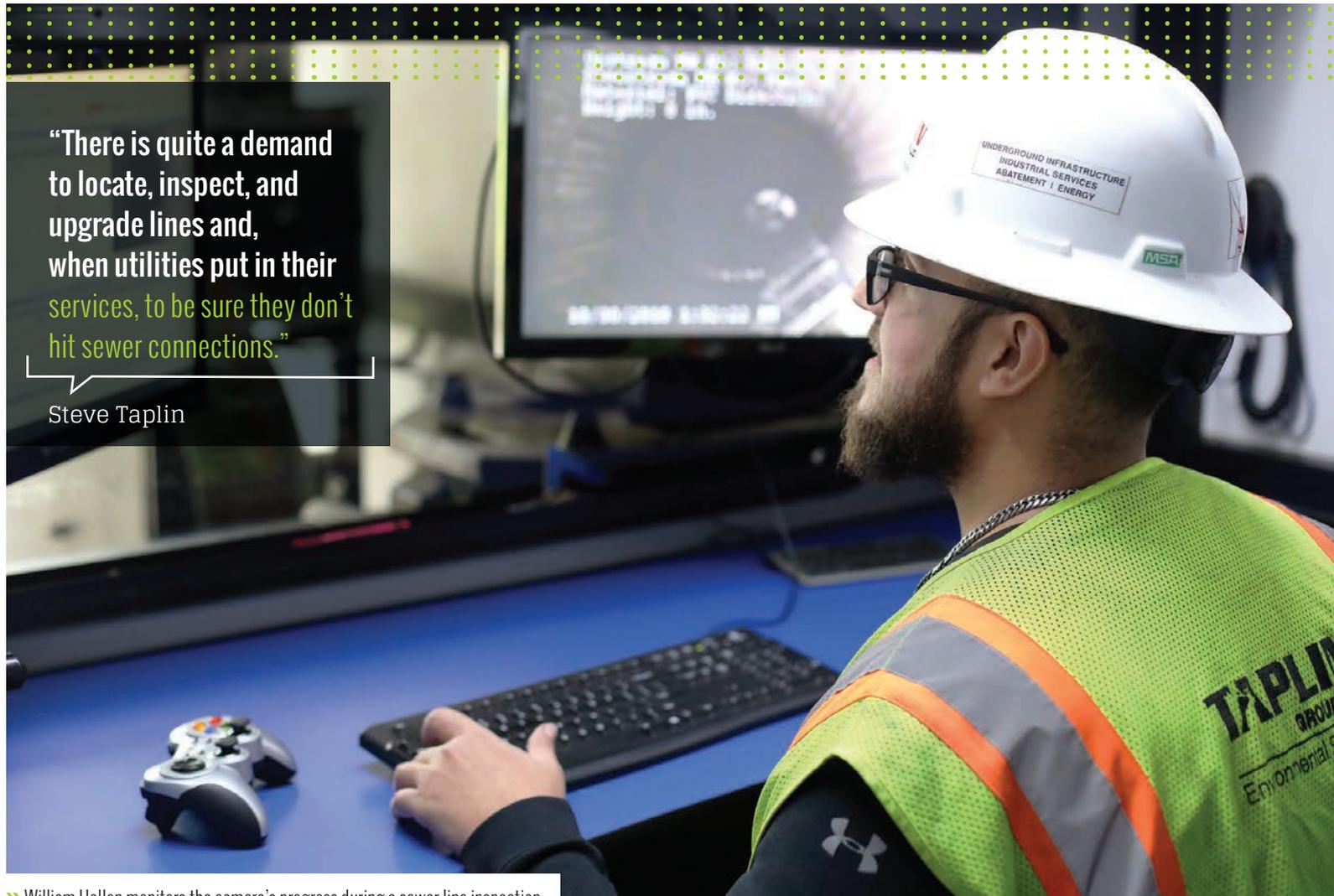
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“There is quite a demand to locate, inspect, and upgrade lines and, when utilities put in their services, to be sure they don’t hit sewer connections.”

Steve Taplin



» William Hollen monitors the camera’s progress during a sewer line inspection.

We work with pharmaceutical companies and automotive plants and petrochemical sites and others.” To meet client needs, the division has its own fleet of equipment, some of it custom-designed to accommodate such diverse tasks as paint shop cleaning and slag removal, hydroexcavation and plant decommissioning, hydroblasting at up to 40,000 psi, and turbovacuuming. Truck-mounted Guzzler industrial vacuum systems play a big role in the division’s day-to-day work.

Though his company does not work with radioactive material, Taplin says the industrial division does transport 40,000 gallons of flammable liquid five days a week. “We’ve been at industrial cleaning a long time and do our best to be equipped with what a client needs for a job.”

This preparedness includes being able to respond to emergency contamination events, something as small as spillage of a hundred gallons of diesel fuel. One iteration of Taplin companies was an environmental cleanup firm Taplin started. “I got pretty good at remediation,” he says, and his company still carries on the

work. In 2010, the emergency team responded to a broken pipeline situation — more than 1 million gallons of heavy crude oil was spilled into a tributary of the Kalamazoo River.

While much of the industrial services work is concentrated in industrial areas in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio, the environmental cleanup work is apt to occur anywhere. Taplin recalls some years ago when crews were simultaneously remediating sites in New Jersey and California. Today, while the company has a project office in San Antonio, only its three staffed Michigan offices have equipment yards.

The 55-year-old company president is not the only Taplin employee with longevity in the business. Some of his superintendents have worked there for 20 years or more, and some equipment operators have been at the company for a long time too. Taplin is hopeful that his family business will carry on his legacy with another member at the helm. His 19-year-old son Hunter is studying business at Michigan State University and “has expressed some interest.” **c**

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