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(L to R): Tom Yantis, Blake Yantis, John Yantis, Mike Yantis and Michael Yantis of the family-owned contractor The Yantis Co. They are standing on the site for the master-planned community Alamo Ranch, which Yantis is helping to build.

Contracting firm is drawing on its family roots to grow

BY TRICIA LYNN SILVA

For all of the stories of how business owners struggle to make a go of their company, few would be hard-pressed to top John Yantis' tale. He drove right into a hurricane.

The year was 1970 and Hurricane Cecilia was blowing through Corpus Christi. John, the patriarch behind general contracting firm Yantis Co., was making the 141-mile trek from San Antonio to Corpus in order to get a part for his excavating machine — the very machine that John would need for a job in Austin the following day.

"This was in the days when (Dad) only owned one excavator," explains Thomas G. Yantis, who now serves as president, and is a partner in the firm that his father founded back in 1965. "It had to run, or nothing would get done."

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YANTIS: Third generation of family looks to next generation of technology for future

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Fast-forward 40 years and two generations later, and Yantis is still braving the elements for the sake of its clients.

John's other son, Mike, serves as executive vice president of the firm.

"The most important things — to finish a job on time and on budget," says Mike Yantis. "That is how we keep our clients; we focus on that above everything else — whatever the cost."

The formula has worked well for Yantis, which specializes in what the industry calls heavy highway utility work. In layman's terms, their job is to do all of the infrastructure work on a development — from clearing the land, cutting the roads, to putting in the water and sewer lines. It is a job that the firm has carried out several times for numerous repeat customers, such as Bloomfield Hills, Mich.-based Pulte Homes.

The firm also has worked on some noted highway projects, including the portion of Wurzbach Parkway that connects Military Highway and Blanco Road.

These heavy jobs have led to equally heavy revenue. This past fiscal year — which for Yantis ran from July 1, 2004, to June 30, 2005 — the 460-employee strong firm reported \$62 million in revenue. The firm looks to bump this figure up to \$80 million on the next go-round.

And just this last May, Yantis embarked on its biggest project to date: The master-planned community called Alamo Ranch.

It's all relative

The 3,162 acres that make up Alamo Ranch are on the far West Side, bounded by Culebra Road and Loop 1604 on its eastern border. The land will be bisected by the extension of State Highway 151, presently under construction.

The catalyst for the project is locally based ABG Development, which put together the land in 2004. The company has

"I PICK THE BEST. AND (YANTIS) IS THE BEST."

Charles Martin Wender
Developer
Westover Hills

since sold off 1,600 acres to Pulte Homes for a mix of traditional residential development and a Del Webb retirement community. Meanwhile, other developers are scoping out commercial uses for the land.

Tom's son, Blake Yantis, who oversees the main office and handles tech projects for the firm, likens Alamo Ranch to another noted community.

"You look at (North Side master-planned community) Stone Oak, that is what Alamo Ranch will look like 10 years from now," he says. "And we'll be on the leading edge of that."

Indeed, the infrastructure work required for Alamo Ranch could keep Yantis busy

for the next three to four years, and could add up to about \$24 million worth of work.

Brothers Tom and Mike are still trying to get their mind around those figures.

"We grossed a million in my first year in the business," says Mike, who joined Yantis in 1981. "Those were huge numbers then. Then by the mid-1980s, this company was worth a million dollars. We've grown — not always at the same rate, but we've consistently grown."

And with that growth has come some pains, adds Blake, who, since joining the firm two years ago, has gone to great lengths to bring Yantis up to date with the technology that is now used by many in the construction business.

Blake recalls one of the early changes that he instituted — equipping the 14 or so project managers and superintendents with mobile phones that could also send and receive e-mail. For the next two weeks, Blake got the silent treatment from many of the field guys.

"The new phones were just a little bigger and had a lot more capabilities, but they didn't flip open the same way the last one did," Blake says. "And there are probably still guys here that don't love the phones, but a lot more wouldn't want to do their job without it."

Blake and Michael Jr., who is Mike Yantis' son, also instituted an accounting software system that has essentially integrated the myriad of functions taking place in the office, in the equipment shop and throughout all operations. The server-based program keeps track of information such as billing orders, equipment maintenance and all costs associated with each job.

"These guys are a big reason for our success," says Tom, pointing to his son and his nephew Michael Jr., who oversees each of the job sites, including working with the developers and engineers of each project. These days, a lot of Tom's time is also spent at the satellite office that the firm established at Alamo Ranch.

"They are on the cutting edge of the business," says Chris Lindhorst of Michael and Blake. Lindhorst, who is the vice president of land development for Pulte, refers to Michael's and Blake's approach to business as one that is both aggressive yet honest. It is an approach, he adds, that will guide Yantis through the next 40 years of business.

So, are Michael and Blake ready to bring in the next generation of the business?

"It would be a dream to see that happen," Michael says. "It's been neat working with the two generations before me."

Quips Blake: "I gotta have a kid first. I don't even know what I'm doing this next weekend."

Test of time

For now, all three generations of the business are happy to concentrate on where the firm has built itself over the past 40 years.

"I think when grandpa comes in and picks up his mail, he likes seeing the animal he's created," Blake says. "He's just the coolest guy."

John Yantis, a former construction-equip-



Wender

ment salesman started his firm with \$2,000 — \$1,000 of which he brought in himself, the other \$1,000 coming from his partner Norman Harwell.

"We made \$40,000 in our first month," John recalls. "We were off to the races after that."

Harwell sold his portion of the business to John in 1976 — in order to enable his partner, "to make room for the boys," as John puts it.

Both Tom and Mike worked on and off in the business while they were in school. Tom came on board full time in 1980.

While Blake and Michael may be the new wave of the firm, both they and their fathers know that it is John Yantis who set the firm's foundation.

Says Blake: "He instilled in us a sense of fairness."

And some of those customers that continue to come back to Yantis all started with John. Just ask the patriarch of master-planned community Westover Hills.

"I'm a big customer and a big fan," says Charles Martin "Marty" Wender, who has been working with Yantis for over 20 years. About a year ago, the firm put in a sewer line that was needed for the future development of one of Westover Hill's biggest tenants: JPMorgan Chase. That it was a small job made it hard for Wender to find a firm that would do it. Then Yantis came forward.

"They knew how important it was to me," Wender says.

"I work with people like Chase, Hyatt Hill Country Resort, Hartford Insurance — people of that caliber," Wender continues. "I make commitments knowing that Yantis will deliver. I don't lose a night's sleep. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the professionals that I rely on. I pick the best. And (Yantis) is the best."

NEWS BYTE

Literacy

A national survey released by Central Connecticut State University shows that San Antonio is one of the least literate cities in America. The study examines 69 cities with populations of 250,000 or more based on the number of bookstores, library resources, audited newspaper circulation rates, educational attainment and Internet resources.

San Antonio ranked 64th on the overall list, beating only Bakersfield, Calif.; Anaheim, Calif.; Corpus Christi; El Paso and Stockton, Calif., in terms of literacy.

San Antonio ranked poorly in every category, including the number of bookstores, Internet connections, libraries and newspaper subscribers relative to the population, and highest education level attained. The study is available online at www.ccsu.edu/AMLC.

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