

The right man for the job

Levee bid risk for Morris

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FORT PIERRE — It took Morris Inc., 40 years to prepare for the flood that could have wiped much of Pierre and Fort Pierre off the map, and only eight days to build the levees that saved countless homes from disaster.

It took 40 years for the company to prepare because they have been building the infrastructure and acquiring the resources, personnel and knowledge required to take on a task of this magnitude — and though they were far from the only contractor working on the muddy banks, locals say without the ready and able Morris family and company, much of the town would have been under water.

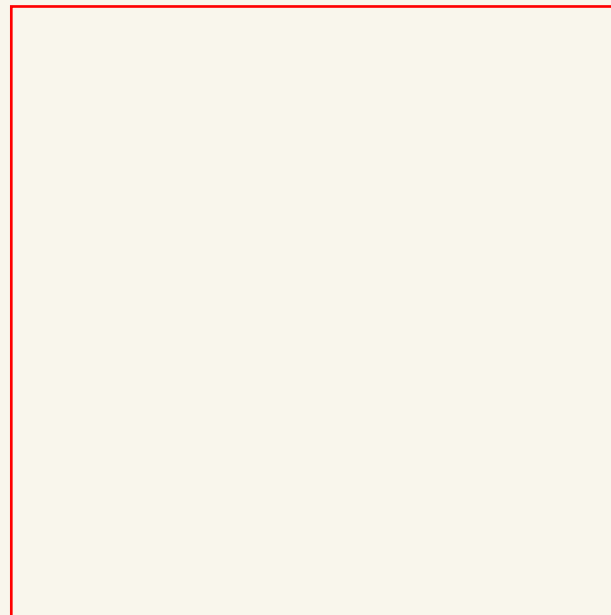
“We knew we had to do it,” said Morris Inc., founder Milton Morris. “We didn’t have the luxury of saying we didn’t want to. It was a high risk job, there’s no question about that, but we figured there isn’t anybody else in the state who could mobilize and had the resources and knew the local people like we did.”

No Small Task

But even for the Pierre native whose family has extensive experience in the construction and irrigation industries, the job was no small task. It required that they throw everything they had, and then some, at the raging Missouri River to build 4.5 miles of levees on both sides of the river.

Morris Inc., had never built a levee system of this scale. In fact, they had never built a levee before they put in a bid with the Army Corps of Engineers to take on the job. They had done some flood preparation projects with dirt and sandbags around town in the late 1980s, and know water systems as well as anyone. But building the levee system to the corps specifications was a first and the amount of time they had to do it was nearly ridiculous.

“If you had to sit and think about it, you’d say it couldn’t be done,” he said. “But we didn’t have time to think about it, we just did it.”



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Officials and National Guard members measure
the height of the levee by the Ramkota on May
31.

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The levees are actually a pretty simple thing to build, he said. It's essentially a pile of dirt. First, you build a wide base for the trucks and equipment to drive on, and keep building up.

Corps standards demand the dry side of the levees, which creates the backbone and strength of the structure, extend two feet out for every vertical foot. The top of the levee has to be wide enough for the trucks to drive on — at least 10 feet wide — and bigger is better. On the water side, the slope must extend three feet out for every vertical foot.

After the structure is in place, they cover it in a plastic tarp that is trenched into the levee on the water side, and lay sandbags to keep the tarps in place. Then it's a matter of monitoring it all.

For an experienced builder, building temporary levees is not that difficult. But the complications came when the corps changed the necessary height from 1,434 feet of elevation to 1,436.

Morris had to decide whether to build the base out farther, working into the river or farther onto people's property — or to make the top narrower, making it harder for machinery to drive on top. They also had to find a larger plastic tarp to cover those extra two feet.

Complications, Communications

Despite those snags, the toughest part of the past few weeks has been communications and coordination. Within the company, they decided to shut things down a few times to regroup, look at the big picture and get on the same page. But that wasn't a possibility with the other entities working the project.

Morris doesn't have a lot of love for the government side of the operations, and has especially harsh words for the bureaucrats sitting in the Emergency Operations Center running things with clean boots that haven't even touched the mud and the levees.

He said there should have been times where everybody — the cities, state and federal government and the contractors — got together and talked over their plans and progress — but that didn't happen. They could have saved a lot of time by being in better contact with the homeowners who know the land, pipes and irrigation ditches — but that didn't happen either.

The one bright spot in government he can point to is Gov. Dennis Daugaard, who spent time riding along with construction workers in near every aspect of the operation, and who sent his general consul, Jim Seward, along with Morris every day.

Seward described his role in the emergency preparation as the conduit between the government and private sector, and said the cooperation between the two parties and the outcome was the best he's ever seen.

"Normally, you don't think of a public private partnership to be quite that close inside the cab of a pickup truck," Seward said. "But within the first day or two that I was with Mr. Morris, I had never seen a public private partnership work so well — whether it was traffic control or National Guard issues."

In a seven-day period, the two spent 130 hours together, and while they didn't always see eye to eye, he said it was a tremendous honor to serve with Morris and his family. Seward said it took real vision for Morris to bid on the contract to build the levees, and it took superhuman efforts to actually build them.

“In most communities across the state, you wouldn’t have a contractor of that size and capability,” he said “So the citizens are really fortunate that he and his folks are here.”

On the line

As the largest construction company in town, Morris Inc., took on a contract with the corps to build the levees due to a sense of responsibility for their home town — and with a degree of caution. Morris knew if anything were to go wrong, hundreds of homes, along with his good name, would be washed away by the river and never recovered.

He said he knew he would be putting a lot on the line while building two miles of levee in Pierre and another two and a half miles in Fort Pierre, but that just made the job all the more worthwhile and exciting.

“I live in Pierre and we work in Fort Pierre,” Morris said. “And I’ve never run from a problem before in my life — I’m not afraid of a challenge.”

But still, in order to mount a defensive against the Mighty Mo’ he knew he would have to cancel or put on hold his other contracts. Luckily, most people they were working for understood the extreme danger facing the town and the reason Morris had to redirect resources. Some jobs in town had to be canceled due to the flood anyway.

Though he won’t talk about the price of the contract, he expects to make some money.

“We decided if we’re going to do it, we’re not going to do it for nothing,” he said. “So we’re going to come out of it all right.”

Those 2.5 miles of levee in Fort Pierre include a private “gentlemen’s agreement” contract with the homeowner’s association in the Marion’s Garden neighborhood, where the homeowners and Morris agreed to build a dike across their canal first and work out the monetary details later.

The fact that residents of Marion’s Garden trusted him not to gouge them on the price says something, said Darrel Reinke, who sits on the homeowner’s association board of directors.

“His primary concern is making sure we protect homes and businesses, and details have a way or working themselves out in those cases,” he said.

Although that was just one of many projects Morris was working on simultaneously, Milton was personally out there every single day checking details and making sure everything was going according to plan, Reinke said.

Without the dike, every single home that faces the canal side would have been flooded Reinke said. And without Morris, there would have been no dike.

“The bottom line is without him, it just simply could not have happened. Period,” Reinke said. “There’s just not another company out there that could have pulled that off in that short amount of time.”