

# REEVES JOURNAL

PLUMBING | HEATING | COOLING

NOVEMBER 2010 | VOL 90, NO 11

WWW.REEVESJOURNAL.COM

PRODUCT &  
LITERATURE SHOWCASE!

## CII Plumbing

RADIANT FOCUS: ANCHORAGE

A bnp PUBLICATION  
media

- TECH TOPIC: H.E. PUMPS
- RPA NAME CHANGE
- HOLIDAY MARKETING IDEAS



## Commercial expertise abounds at Klebs Mechanical

By John Vastyan

Klebs Mechanical construction manager Tom Even checks out the mechanical plans at the Palmer State Office Building. *Photos courtesy of Laars and Taco.*



# Anchorage

Alaska. The state is known worldwide for its rugged beauty, fearless folks, sled dog teams and its other colorful exports. It's the last frontier.

Today, Alaska's riches include all these things, with beauty and natural resources almost beyond measure. And yet, way back in 1867, we bought those 586,412 square miles from the Russians for \$7.2 million. Just 30 years later those acres were the scene of the great gold rush. Money didn't exactly grow on trees, but it came barreling out of the ground. And it's still that way today.

Invariably, most trips to Alaska take you first into the big town of Anchorage where 40 percent of the state's residents live. Headquartered there are the men and women of Klebs Mechanical, a full-service, 80-person commercial and residential mechanical contracting firm that exceeded \$14 million in gross sales last year, up from \$6 million just five years ago.

Gary Klebs founded the company in 1986 as a two-person operation based out of his home. At the time, the firm specialized in commercial sheet metal ventilation and exhaust ducting.



Today, Klebs specializes in installing and servicing commercial and residential HVAC and hydronics systems.

Though hydronics has grown in popularity in Alaska over the past decade, Klebs' work with the technology began in the early 1990s. Service work and some new installations with standard, high-temp systems led the way to radiant heat and—because natural gas was cheap—they sought out and found plenty of hydronic snowmelt work as well. "We wanted to be a total mechanical company," Klebs said.

Klebs said an early push into hydronics pushed the company to unexpected growth and diversification. He attributes recent growth (and over the past couple of years, far fewer losses than they could have seen in the market's regression) to these key things:

- Alaska is recognized for tough environmental policies and a populace known for rugged individualism. New and emerging technologies are eagerly embraced by commercial building owners and enterprise, helping them to manage energy use and to improve employee productivity.
- The state has tremendous financial resources generated from the sale and exportation of its oil and gas reserves.
- The military makes up a very substantial part of Alaska's economic base.

"From the outset, we've tried to be the first choice as a full-service mechanical systems contracting firm," Klebs said. "To be involved in all facets of the mechanical equation is something I've always seen as a healthy thing, one that leads to greater opportunity at every turn."

Klebs Mechanical general manager Eden Larson agrees. Larson, whose varied background includes working for the Associated Builders and Contractors, added it's no easy task to find and hire technically competent people with experience in the HVACR and hydronics fields, good attitudes and a strong work ethic.

"So, in some instances we hire people for their attitudes and train them in the skills," she said, noting training helps keep people aboard long-term. "We're highly invested with employee development and training. We don't buy into traditional construction management models where you hire seasonally. We want our people working for us all year long."

In addition to technical development, Klebs also maintains a professional development program for managers and supervisors. Klebs says this commitment to their people is one of the company's biggest assets.

Because of this training, the company can be flexible—adopting new technologies and skill sets as needed. One of those adoptions was the move into the commercial hydronics business which, years ago, developed as an outgrowth of its own commercial plumbing division.

Gary's son Matt Klebs is the commercial estimating manager: "In Alaska," he said, "commercial hydronics applications just make a lot of sense. It's cold in Anchorage for a long time. The first snow falls around Halloween and stays on the ground until Easter. We have long, dark winters. And to have ambient warmth coming from the floor is not only highly efficient, but comfortable, too."



Klebs' plumbing foreman Don Scheib examines an installation during a pre-commissioning inspection at an Elmendorf AFB support shop.

The sale may be easier with customers predisposed to the benefits of radiant, but the application often isn't, especially if it requires running pipe underground. "Permafrost is a huge, ugly issue here," Matt Klebs said. "For companies who've never dealt with it, permafrost can be an enormous barrier to being successful. You must account for it in your load calculations and you must use the techniques and materials to do the job right. People who take shortcuts are destined to fail . . . and it's a cold, hard fall."

After all, Alaska isn't the typical place to work. "Relationships and reputation are everything here," Larson said. "The state is huge, geographically, but its population is disproportionately small."



That's why Klebs Mechanical makes it a priority to do things right the first time. It's this approach that helps them land projects not only all over the state, but around the world. From projects in Nome and North Slope in Alaska to tropical Midway Island, the company has spread itself geographically. Though, without question, the concentration of their work remains in the greater Anchorage area.

One recent commercial project was the Anchorage Zoo's new educational facility. Klebs engineered a hydro-air system with some radiant heating to meet the clients' needs. This includes an insulated run of radiant heat to separate the admissions building from the rest of the facility.

The system used two sealed-combustion direct-vent 65,000 BTU Bradford-White water heaters with seismic strapping.

*"People who take shortcuts  
are destined to fail . . . and  
it's a cold, hard fall."*

*—Matt Klebs, Klebs Mechanical*

Seismic strapping? Indeed. Alaska is one of the world's most seismically active regions. The "Good Friday Earthquake" of 1964 struck south-central Alaska with a magnitude of 9.2, killing 131 people. Most of them were drowned by the tsunamis that tore apart the towns of Valdez and Chenega. Building codes were adopted soon thereafter requiring seismic strapping on mechanical systems.

Another project for an aircraft support shop on Elmendorf Air Force Base was a mechanical system prefabricated at Klebs and shipped to the site for reassembly and installation.

"We used several large Taco pumps," said Klebs' construction manager Tom Even. "Two are for the boiler's primary/secondary piping and the other two are for the building's hydronic distribution."

And at the 62,000 square-foot Palmer State Office Building—a hospital-turned office building for State employees—Klebs installed mechanical systems during the renovations. Two high-efficiency, 199 MBH Laars water heaters meet the domestic water needs of a large kitchen, and several large Taco components were installed as part of the building's space heating system.

According to Even, one large snow melt job, just completed, was an entire two-block section of E Street in Anchorage where Klebs technicians used miles of radiant tubing to melt snow from street and sidewalk surfaces. "We also did snowmelt skirts with large sidewalk and entrance areas for two Target stores in Wasilla and South Anchorage," Even added. "And we combined extensive radiant heat with snow melt during construction of the new Child Development Center on Fort Richardson."

To demonstrate their prowess with hydronic technology, when Klebs built a new headquarters building a few years ago, it was 100 percent hydronically heated. The first floor is fully heated using a



Klebs Mechanical senior managers include (L to R): Mary Klebs, CFO; Gary Klebs, president; and Eden Larson, general manager.

radiant system, and the second floor employs a state-of-the-art hydro-air system that uses gas-pack units with hot water coils in the duct for early morning warm-up.

The building is interfaced with a Web-based building automation system. Packaged units on the roof provide constant tempered heat at 65 degrees Fahrenheit in the winter and 55 deg. F in the summer. Plus a snowmelt system that is part of the first floor radiant system keeps the front of the building free of ice and snow.

Klebs' building—an open architecture masterpiece with cheerful colors, spacious common areas and modern design—is a showcase for commercial hydronic system technology and sheet metal fabrication, web-based controls, piping, plumbing, and more.

From the moment you step into the lobby, it's easy to sense the pride of employees. Clearly, managers wanted it that way by design. That sense of pride and ownership, running deep, play a key role in shaping the not only the company's destiny, but also that of the Alaskans who work at Klebs Mechanical. **RJ**

*John Vastyen is a trade journalist based in Manheim, Pa. He specializes in the hydronics, radiant heat, plumbing and mechanical and HVAC industries. He can be reached at (717) 664-0535.*