



Cass Biggs, left, and his son, Thomas James, a heavy equipment operator, have worked together on several pipeline projects.

Photo courtesy of Cass Biggs

Laying the Groundwork

Cass Biggs and his son travel nationwide to help build oil and natural gas pipelines

By Dianna Troyer

After helping build the longest oil pipeline in America, Cass Biggs plans to begin work this month on a lengthy natural gas pipeline.

The 713-mile Rover Pipeline will carry natural gas through 42-inch diameter pipe across Ohio into Michigan.

For more than two decades, the 44-year-old Connor Creek resident has worked on pipeline construction and maintenance projects from coast to coast.

"I really like my job because the salary is good and I enjoy working outdoors," says Cass, an assistant superintendent for Wisconsin-based Precision Pipeline LLC. "It's interesting, too,

because unpredictable things happen on jobs. Sometimes you find artifacts and fossils where the trenches are being dug to lay the pipe."

During his last project, Cass was among hundreds of workers who helped build the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline—the nation's longest interstate oil pipeline.

The 30-inch diameter pipeline stretches 1,172 miles across four states from North Dakota to Illinois, and will transport 470,000 barrels of crude oil daily.

"The 159-mile section I worked on started east of Des Moines, Iowa, and went south," Cass says of the project that began last April and ended in December. "We bored a 7,000-foot-long tunnel 80 feet under the bottom of the



Cass, his wife, Dawnya, and son Quirt look at aerial photographs of his work sites.

Mississippi River near Keokuk, Iowa.”

Their work schedule was disrupted several times near the river when protesters damaged equipment, tied themselves to vehicles, blocked roads and sat in the pipes.

“One morning, we came to work and five dozers and three track hoes were burned up,” Cass says. “We had to put up a fence around our work site and hire 24-hour security. We still got the job done.”

On a typical project, Cass and other employees work a minimum of six 10-hour days.

“We usually go over that,” he says. “Basically, you work, eat and sleep. It’s a tough lifestyle with long days and being away from your family, but you eventually get used to it.”

As assistant superintendent, Cass typically works 12-hour days, six days a week, and comes home every few weeks.

Years ago, his family often accompanied him.

“When the kids were young, it was easy to do,” says Dawnya, Cass’ wife of 24 years and high school sweetheart. “Now that they’re older, they have activities, so we really can’t be gone for a long time.”

Four years ago when their oldest son, Thomas James, nicknamed T.J., turned 18, he began working with Cass as a heavy

equipment operator.

“I really like running a dozer,” says T.J.

Colton, 15, hopes to join his dad and brother after he turns 18.

“After I graduate from high school, I want to be a welder or an operator on a pipeline,” Colton says.

The other Biggs children—Natassia, 20; Dawnya Sioux, 17; and Quirt, 6—say they plan to choose other careers.

Cass launched his pipeline construction career in 1995 as a member of the International Union of Operating Engineers.

“My dad had taught me to run equipment,” he says. “On my first job, I helped build the Tuscarora gas line near Reno.”

Since then, Cass has worked for several pipeline construction companies.

“You don’t always stay that long with companies because once a project is done, they don’t always have a new job lined up,” Cass explains. “Precision has a good work flow with projects.”

After working for many years as an operator, Cass was promoted to assistant superintendent four years ago. He oversees operators, makes sure no previously laid lines are ruptured and decides when to temporarily halt a job.

“Rain is our No. 1 enemy,” he says. “When the soil gets too slick, it’s dangerous to work because equipment can slide.”

The job has other risks.

“One time, a landowner changed his mind about granting a right-of-way on his land and chased me off his property with his shotgun,” Cass says. “We had to call the sheriff to resolve that.”

Not all the surprises of his job entail danger. While digging trenches, Cass has uncovered fossilized mammoth teeth and campsites of Native Americans and Chinese railroad workers.

“None of them were considered sensitive historic sites,” he says. “When we find something like that, archaeologists come in and document the area and we keep going.”

In Ouray, Colorado, Cass found the remains of a storage pit on the ranch of Chief Ouray, a Ute tribal leader.

“Based on that, archaeologists were able to map out the other buildings on the ranch,” he says.

As operators work, they typically bury the pipeline 8 to 9 feet deep. To ensure no leaks occur, each $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick, 80-foot long section of steel pipe is joined together with three welds.

“A single weld can take as little as three minutes with automatic welders,” Cass says.

Once a project is complete, it is difficult to tell where the pipe has been buried because the topsoil is reseeded with vegetation, he says.

Cass has not only built new pipelines, he has helped maintain old ones.

“There’s plenty of work,” he says. “I’ll be doing this at least another 20 years.” ■