

LIFE IN THE FAST LANE



The Cunningham Sand and Gravel company shares 500 acres with Capitol Raceway, a drag race-track. The company operates a mix of ZIV-2, ZV, and ZV-2s.



Traveling the country to gather stories for FOCUS, we meet a lot of interesting people, many of whom are as passionate about their hobbies as they are about their business. But in a construction world that is brimming with colorful characters, 72-year old Jim Cunningham from Crofton, Maryland, may well take the prize as being one of the most unusual. Not only has he deliberately *downsized* his 36-year-old sand and gravel business (at least for the moment), he drives his own bright red Mustang in the NHRA (National Hot Rod Association) drag-racing circuit. Nothing like hitting 204 miles per hour in a quarter-mile stretch to keep a guy young! He also owns and operates Capitol Raceway, a drag-racing track. In fact, the Raceway office and the office for Cunningham Sand and Gravel are in the same building, with the combined operations covering 500 acres.

SWEET SPOT

Crofton is located in a prime area of Maryland — nestled between Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Annapolis. In July 2007, *Money* magazine listed it as one of the best 100 smaller places to live in the United States, ranking it number 72 in the best combination of economic opportunity, good schools, safe streets, things to do, and a real sense of community. So, as it turns out, Cunningham Sand and Gravel is perfectly situated to feed a number of growing communities within a hundred-mile radius.

Jim started his business in 1972. Initially he did both asphalt and sand and gravel. “I used to have hundreds of people working for me,” he recalls. “We did bridges and all kinds of construction jobs. You made all this money but at the end of the year you had to borrow to pay the bills. And the asphalt side would suck money away like water plus it was hard



Jim Cunningham stands by a photo which shows him drag-racing his own red Mustang.

to find good workers. I had 48 dump trucks at one time. Every day something different would go wrong.”

So, six years ago, Jim finally got out of asphalt with no regrets. And he’s downsized his company till he felt comfortable balancing payroll, profit, and expenses. He has no delivery trucks, no salesmen. Most of his customers right now are commercial, but he’s hopeful the housing market will bounce back next year.

MR. HANDS-ON

As might be expected from someone who races his own car and drives all over the country for the 24-race season, Jim loves operating all kinds of equipment. Before he had his own company, he was in fact an equipment operator. He has a soft spot for motor graders, as he ran one for 12 years. Even today, if his company is an operator short, he’ll gladly run equipment, whether it’s a bull dozer or a wheel loader.

“I can’t believe the improvements made in equipment over the last 20 years,” says Cunningham. “Years ago, you had to sit out in the sun, and winter time you’d about freeze to death. Now they have cabs, heaters, air conditioners. It’s like riding in

a car. Take our Kawasaki 95ZV-2 loaders — I’m tickled to death with them.”

THE KAWASAKI ANGLE

The company’s first Kawasaki was a used 85ZIV. Although it is long gone, today they have a mix of ZIV-2s, ZVs, and ZV-2s: one 85, one 90, and three 95s. Their oldest 95 has 17,230 hours on it.

“We’ve had pretty good luck with our Kawasakis,” states Cunningham. “They’ve been real good. We’ve not had much problem with them and the few times we have, we’ve gotten it straightened out. We like them, and the people we get them from — Elliott & Frantz — are pretty nice people. And my guys like the loaders. You get a real good day’s work out of them. The newer ones are really nice — like sitting at home on the couch, you know.

“We have our own maintenance shop and are careful to follow the recommended intervals. And each operator is assigned his own machine. They take a lot of pride in their piece of equipment. For example, one of our 95s is two or three years old, but it looks brand new. The operator takes real good care of it. When he’s not loading a truck, he’s greasing it or wiping it down. One day he was out sick and someone took it through a mud puddle and didn’t clean it up. The next day he came back and raised hell over it.”

THE FUTURE

Although it might seem like Cunningham’s sand and gravel business is in the slow lane with all the downsizing, it’s not. He has a few plans up his sleeve. Cunningham also owns a lot of acreage with excellent materials that has yet to be developed — a legacy he hopes his family members will take advantage of one day. “I’ve got family members on my team — both at the racetrack and the pit: two daughters, my granddaughter, my brother-in-law, and his wife. I can go away for two weeks and not worry about anything. My family will take care of things.”

Cunningham Sand and Gravel is serviced by Elliott & Frantz, Jessup, Maryland.

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