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**August/September 1999**  
**Volume 14/Number 6**

- *NAPA awards: The diversity of asphalt paving*
- *"Get in, get out" traffic control*
- *How contractors use the infrared process*
- *Street sweeping for pollution control*



# The lead dog



*"Getting the job done, no matter what it takes" keeps Denver's Armstrong Sweeping ahead of the pack*

By Toby Linzmeier, assistant editor

**A**rmstrong Sweeping, Inc. knows what it means to be a leader — one of the "big dogs."

The company got started in 1973 with just Kerry Armstrong (who previously worked for Western Paving) and his wife, Marsha. Since then it has grown to include 20 full-time employees with an equipment inventory large enough to do sizable high-profile jobs such as the Mile High Stadium.

About 25% of Armstrong Sweeping's jobs are municipal work, including contracts for the cities of Lafayette, Loveland, and Cherry Hills Village, as well as the Castlepines metro district and the town of Mountainview. It is also on call for the Denver water board and United, Continental, Frontier and Delta Airlines.

The remainder of Armstrong's work includes sweeping construction sites and parking lots. Another segment of Armstrong's business includes power scrubbing and power washing with

water trucks, salt chip sanding and snowplowing.

## **Finding a market that fit**

In 1985 the company began doing power flushing and washing and began getting into city work.

"There were too many competitors in parking lot sweeping," says Kerry Armstrong, owner of Armstrong Sweeping, "so we started sweeping cities, highway and city streets and power scrubbing underground garages."

Armstrong points out that not everyone can afford the equipment and staff it takes to do such substantial jobs, but it suits the company well. It took the company about three years to build up the right equipment inventory to be able to do the city work, and eventually provided them with a steady niche.

"This is where we like to work. One advantage is better hours."

When the company first started, it sought customers through advertising, brochures and cold calls to prospects, but the quality of the company's work has since allowed them to go strictly by

referral and word of mouth to acquire new customers, with no outside sales force.

## **Good business**

Armstrong's number one goal is providing excellent and complete service for its customers—"Getting the job done, no matter what it takes," Armstrong says.

"Nine times out of ten, if they call us, if they give us notice, we can do anything," Armstrong says. "We kind of keep a floating sweeper that can quit what he's doing and go help where he's needed."

"We also offer emergency service, like for the Denver water board. They tear up streets all the time and repair them, fixing the water lines and such, and when they do, we come in behind them and we clean their streets up, flush them and wash them."

This type of service is what allows Armstrong to keep customers.

"The customers might get a better price from somebody else, and they might try somebody else, but they'll come back."

Attention to detail also plays a

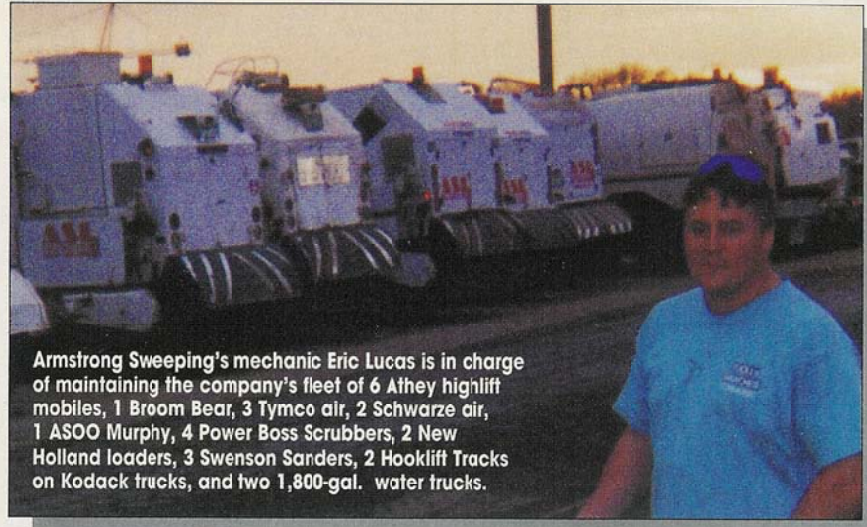


big role in keeping the business running efficiently and keeping customers happy. Armstrong's sweepers have tackographs in them to track when a truck is sweeping, how fast it's going, how long a job takes, etc. This helps the company track time spent at each job and determine if time is being wasted.

"If we're making a mistake, we want to know about it, and the customer needs to know it will be corrected," Armstrong says.

If extra time is spent on a job, the customer is informed. If the job takes extra time to be done correctly, Armstrong says the policy is to go ahead and do it.

"No matter what it costs, the job is always done right," he says. "Most customers won't question it. We work on an hourly basis, and we'll put a note on the bill usually with an explanation if the job took longer—if the sweeper



Armstrong Sweeping's mechanic Eric Lucas is in charge of maintaining the company's fleet of 6 Athey highlift mobiles, 1 Broom Bear, 3 Tymco air, 2 Schwarze air, 1 ASOO Murphy, 4 Power Boss Scrubbers, 2 New Holland loaders, 3 Swenson Sanders, 2 Hooklift Trucks on Kodack trucks, and two 1,800-gal. water trucks.

had to wait for trucks to be moved or something."

Armstrong says customers have preferences when it comes to which sweeper is used on a job, also. Having a particular sweeper requested more often has shown that the company's interest in keeping an eye on what's new with equipment pays off.

Armstrong Sweeping has established a customer base and doesn't pursue more night work customers.

"The night work is shopping center stuff, which is the very competitive part, with 40 companies in town doing it, so I don't go after that work," Armstrong says. "I keep a lot of that work

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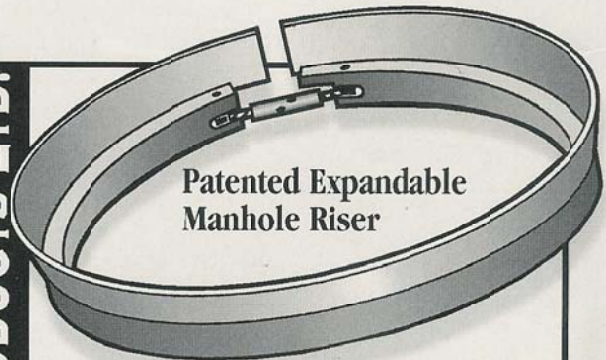
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and I get new work from our old customers, but I don't go out and knock on doors for that because the competitors are there and they'll do it for, well, it costs them money to do some jobs they do. We can't do that."

### Challenges

The company continues to make 10% to 15% controlled growth a goal while attempting to maintain a leadership role in the sweeping industry. Like all sweeping companies, Armstrong Sweeping faces the challenge of being environmentally friendly and meeting the rising cost of disposal of sweepings.

Armstrong makes efforts to work with manufacturers to minimize noise and dust, not only for the environment, but for employees. He and his son, Mitch go to every equipment show they can to see what new innovations are available.

"We want to make better



It took the company about three years to build up the right equipment inventory to be able to do the city work.

working conditions for our employees," he says. Finding employees who will do quality work is difficult, so providing a good working environment with employee benefits is a must.

Armstrong says it is difficult to find out employees' likes and dislikes, but this is key in keeping employees happy. As an example, Armstrong says that some employees will complain about dust, so the company gives them tips on how to avoid exposure.

In training, employees are assigned to an experienced dri-

ver to ride along for a week to gain an understanding of the truck. Next, the new employee drives while being supervised, and then the new driver follows an experienced driver for four to six weeks.

"If they don't come back after training, you know they didn't like the job," Armstrong says.

"It takes a good month before a driver can get to where he makes you money," Armstrong says. "For the first month, he'll be helping out a little bit, following along. After that you



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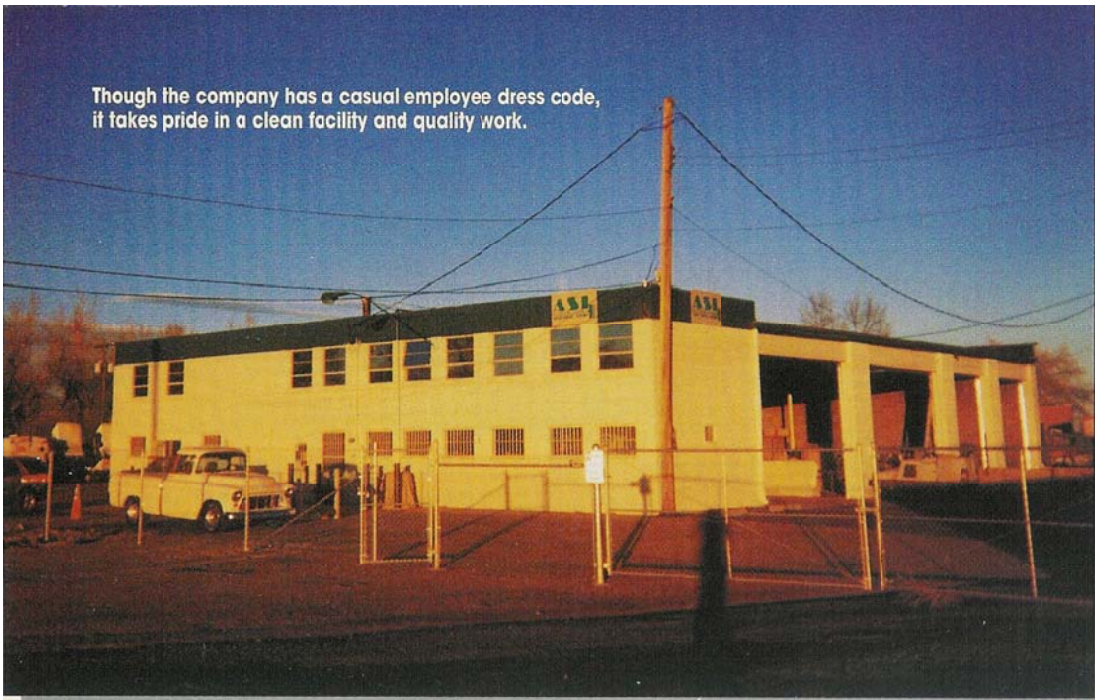
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Though the company has a casual employee dress code, it takes pride in a clean facility and quality work.



this large inventory, Armstrong says preventative maintenance is the biggest issue.

"Preventative maintenance and repairs are needed before equipment breaks down," he says. "We accomplish this with good driver training and two in-house mechanics."

The company recently implemented a check-off sheet that the drivers have to fill out at the end of every night. Armstrong says that this has really helped keep up on

equipment maintenance. The mechanic comes in and daily checks the sheets and makes repairs accordingly, before the equipment goes back out for another shift.

As far as upgrading and

Armstrong continued

can send him out and know he'll do the job."

#### Handling a large inventory

The company owns six Athey

highlift mobiles, one Elgin Broom Bear, three Tymco air sweepers, two Schwarze air sweepers, one A-5000 Murphy, four Power Boss Scrubbers, two New Holland loaders, three Swenson Sanders and two 1,800-gal. water trucks. With

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replacing, Armstrong says that small air vacs need to be upgraded every five years and the rest "when needed."

Part of what instigates regularly updating the sweepers is the need to have newer sweepers for city work.


"We got our first city contract in the middle 1980s," says Armstrong. "We needed a newer broom because some of the cities require brooms that are no older than five years."

Maintenance is another reason the company tends to purchase newer sweepers and sell sweepers when they get to be between five and seven years old.

"You can actually spend almost as much repairing equipment as a payment would cost," says Armstrong. "A good salesman talked me into it. He told me to check my repair costs against what a payment for a new sweeper would cost. I started adding it up and it

added up to more than the amount for a payment.

"Then I talked to a good friend, Jerry Riley of Riley



**N**ine times out of ten, if they call us, if they give us notice, we can do anything," says Armstrong.

Sweeping, because I always noticed that he had ads in the paper for trucks 4 and 5 years old. He said the payments are easier to make than it is to fix and repair."

Armstrong says the company has been keeping sweepers in

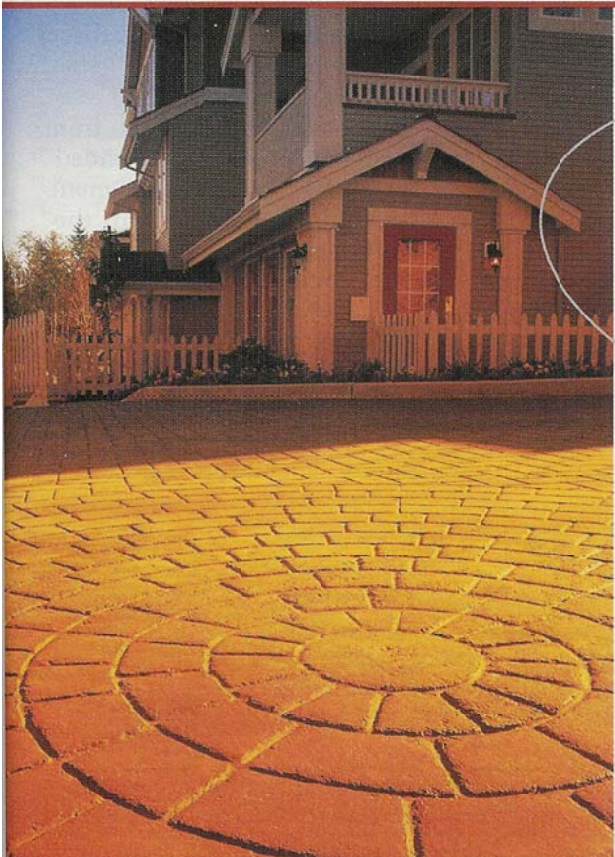
rotation in this fashion since about 1983, but does keep some older sweepers on hand for construction sweeping. The sweepers the company sells are still adequate for this type of service, Armstrong notes, but the city work requires that the company keep newer sweepers on hand for those contracts.

#### Staying ahead

Armstrong Sweeping is an active member of Contract Sweepers Institute (CSI) an institute of the American Public Works Assoc., which Armstrong says is a great tool for networking with contractors across the country.

Armstrong says that meeting twice a year (at National Pavement Expo and at the APWA convention) to see new equipment and learn new methods at seminars is also valuable.

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