



# ON A MISSION

**Nick Woodhead helped bring waterjetting to the United States and supported its development with two major manufacturers**

By Ted J. Rulseh

**N**ick Woodhead first saw a waterjetter while working as a service contractor in England in the early 1970s.

Around that time, a new national law required trucks to be cleaned before mandatory safety inspections. A market quickly grew for pressure washers, and it wasn't long before inventors figured out that somewhat larger machines, if equipped with nozzles, could be used to clean pipes.

Those early jetters delivered 2,500 psi at 10 gallons per minute (gpm). The company Nick worked for bought its first jetter in 1973, then a second, then a third. By 1975, the units were delivering 4,000 psi/10 gpm.

Jettors quickly caught on in England, but when Nick came to the pipe cleaning industry in the United States in 1981, he found the market still largely wedded to cable and rodding machines and skeptical of the new technology. Over more than two decades since, he has been among the leaders in bringing waterjet technology to the forefront, first with Harben Inc. and then, since 1991, as co-founder of US Jetting LLC.

## A step forward

Nick, son of a British cotton classifier, was born in Egypt and lived there until the Suez crisis in 1956. He lived for a time in Peru before his father returned to England. There, Nick completed his schooling and went to work in advertising in London before getting involved in the contracting business. He joined Harben in that country as the first salesman other than the sales director John Twigg, and worked there until August 1978.

At that point he joined a small division of the

Guinness brewing company that made injection-molded sailboats, and came to the United States in February 1979 to set up sales and distribution. Nick knew he wanted to work in the States and just needed something to get him there. In 1981, Harben brought him back on board to help start a United States operation, Harben Inc.

Nick was already a believer in jetting. "The whole concept of high pressure and low volume is that you use less water to do more work," he said. "The speed of the water coming out of the nozzle does the cleaning.

"In old days, people were using 20 to 36 gpm at 1,200 to 2,000 psi. That was a standard trailer jet in

those days. Those machines were what we called flushers. We turned up on the scene with a high-pressure jet. It allowed us to use 1/2-inch hose, which was lightweight and easy to use and would go 500 feet up a pipe in nothing flat, plus we could use 1/4-inch hoses as well for even smaller lines.

"The concept of reducing the amount of water and raising the pressure achieved two objectives. One, you could make the machine smaller and more affordable. And two, it didn't use as much water, so it didn't need a huge tank. The advantages made the jetter a tool that a plumber

could afford to buy and could make money with."

## Steady evolution

In his contracting days, the machines Nick used were small trailer-mounted units with 20 hp Petter diesel engines and no water tank. "We would put a cattle trough in back of a pickup and would have a suction hose with a filter coming off the pump," Nick said.

**"The concept of reducing the amount of water and raising the pressure achieved two objectives. One, you could make the machine smaller and more affordable. And two, it didn't use as much water so it didn't need a huge tank. The advantages made the jetter a tool that a plumber could afford to buy and could make money with."**

**Nick Woodhead**



## PROFILE

### NICK WOODHEAD

**YEARS IN THE INDUSTRY:** 30

**COMPANIES:** Harben Inc. and US Jetting LLC

**UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION:** Promoting and developing the concept of high-pressure, low-volume waterjet pipe cleaning in the United States

"We'd fill the trough with water, throw the filter in there, and try to prime the pump. We had a little reel on it with about 300 feet of hose. The diesel engines had to be hand-cranked, which was a real problem in cold weather.

"We found these machines were very effective for commercial drain cleaning — much easier than using rods or cables. The only non-mechanical alternatives in the UK were large, truck-mounted units that were out of the average contractor's price range."

Harben Inc. started with jetters that carried a 35-gallon water tank, manual reel, and 30 hp Lister diesel. "Over here, there was a lot of resistance," Nick recalled. "Contractors said, 'We've been using cable machines for the past 20 years. Why should we change?' I said, 'Because someone's going to jump on this, and the rest of you are going to be left behind.' It was difficult in the early years because there were no reference customers."

Nick started with Harben Inc. in California, setting up distributors. He sold his first machine to Bruce Williams, owner of a Rescue Rooter franchise in Hayward, and his second to Skip Stewart of Stewart Plumbing and De-Rooting in Santa Barbara. "Bruce Williams convinced a lot of other Rescue Rooter franchisees to buy them, and then the Rescue Rooter Corporation took notice," said Nick. "Things started to take off on the West Coast."

## A big break

He later moved to Atlanta to set up the factory and also began attracting dealers and selling units to the East Coast. One of his first customers was a Roto-Rooter store in Stratford, Conn., run by Tom Conway and Jim Gura.

"Roto-Rooter had just been purchased by Chemed," said Nick. "We went to Stratford to do a demonstration for the company-owned Roto-Rooter locations in the

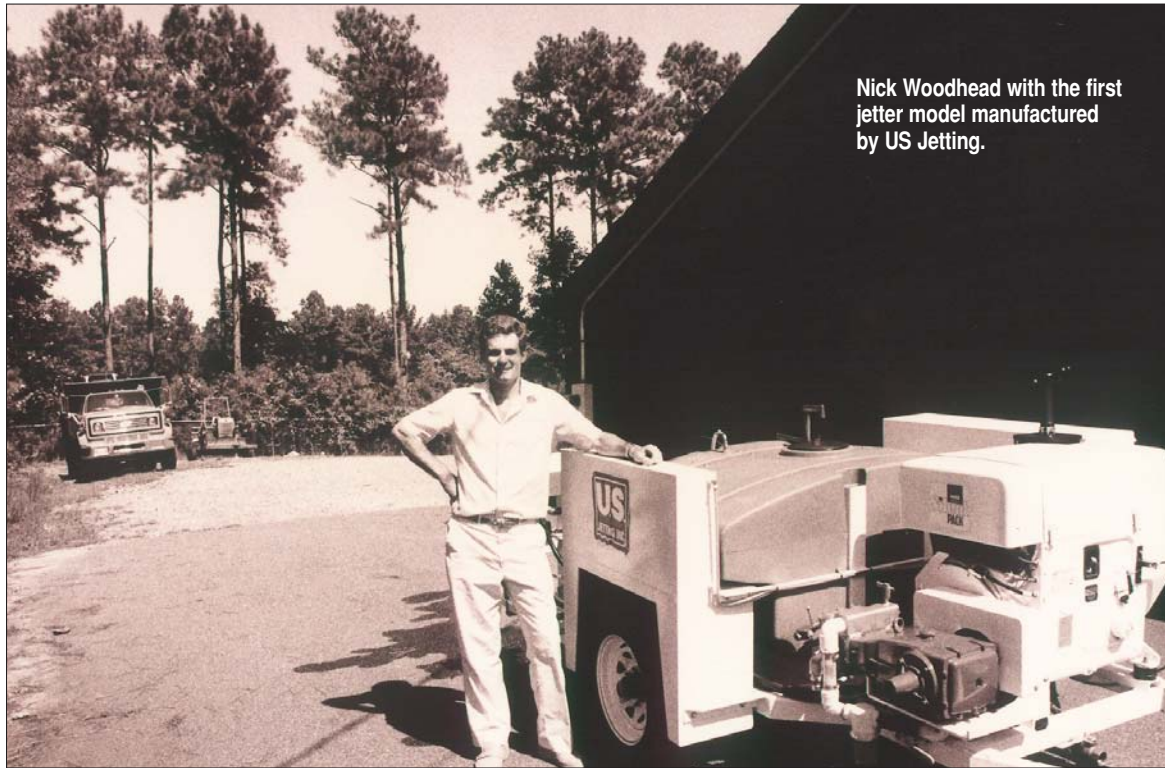
## Saluting Industry Pioneers

This is another in a series of profiles of Industry Pioneers that will be published in *Cleaner* leading up to the 25th Annual Pumper & Cleaner Expo in February 2005. Readers are welcome to recommend outstanding industry contributors for profiles in future editions. Send your suggestions to Jeff Bruss by e-mail (jeffb@pumper.com), fax (715/546-3786) or mail (COLE Publishing, P.O. Box 220, Three Lakes, WI 54562).

---

**“Our whole idea is: Let’s make it a win-win. We don’t look at our customers as customers. We look at them as part of our team. It’s a joint effort. If our customers are successful, then we will be successful. Our philosophy is that if we don’t sell you a second unit, we haven’t done our job.”**

**Nick Woodhead**



Northeast. All the managers came to Stratford to look at our machine. At the end of the meeting, they came out and said, ‘Thanks, but no thanks.’ It was very disappointing.

“They just didn’t think it was something that would work for them. It was too small. The first machine had a manual reel, and they said nobody in this country was going to pull hose by hand. We had a powered reel on the unit in about a week.

“Soon after that, I cut a deal with Conway and Gura. I told them that if they got a job in next month that they couldn’t handle with a cable machine, I would bring the jetter up and loan it to them, and if it did the job, they would buy one.

“They called in a week. They had a contract at a GE plant to clean overhead pipes. Their practice had been to dismantle the pipes and use a cable, and it took from three to five days to do it. They thought this was an

ideal opportunity for the jet. I took the unit to them. They did the job in a day without dismantling hardly any pipes and charged the same amount. That was our first sale to Roto-Rooter.”

Gura then transferred to the Houston area and soon bought a machine there. “Then it started to mushroom,” Nick recalled.

#### **A new company**

In 1987, British Fittings, a public company, bought Harben in England and the US. Four years later, Nick left with a colleague, Ken Bryson. They teamed up with former Harben Systems founder Allan Bennie and another investor to launch US Jetting.

“Harben had a unique product with a radial piston diaphragm pump,” Nick said. One of its advantages was that it was able to run out of water without damage.

“At US Jetting, we designed a plunger pump that also

could run out of water without damage. A plunger pump is easier to maintain and has only six valves as compared to 16 with a comparable diaphragm pump. For the same size, a plunger pump produces considerably higher volume.”

The US Jetting team diligently went to work building a customer base. “We made ourselves easy to do business with,” Nick said. “Our whole idea is: Let’s make it a win-win. We don’t look at our customers as customers. We look at them as part of our team. It’s a joint effort. If our customers are successful, then we will be successful. Our philosophy is that if we don’t sell you a second unit, we haven’t done our job properly.”

Nick and his US Jetting colleagues operated on the premise that the optimum waterjetter performance is achieved at 4,000 psi and 16 to 18 gpm. Among their other innovations is the wireless remote control, and power pull-out swivel reels, which have been on the market for the past two years.

The company has seen jetting expand from the commercial contractor market into the municipal and industrial sector. Trailer-mounted and small truck-mounted jetters have proven more cost-effective than large combination trucks for clearing blockages in 4- to 12-inch lines. Cities that own jetters can reserve their larger equipment for routine maintenance and for big jobs, Nick observed.

#### **Need new blood**

The entire waterjetter sector has expanded greatly since Nick entered the United States market in the early 80s. “Since I started, four or five other manufacturers have come on-line,” he said.

He sees the business growing dramatically over the next ten years on the manufacturing and contracting sides alike. “I would like to get more young people involved in the industry,” Nick said. “I don’t see as many young people coming into the business on the manufacturing side.

“It’s an exciting industry. It’s challenging. It changes every day, and we actually do something positive. When you see one of our machines working, you see that it actually does good for the community.

“Plus, the guys can make an excellent living using them. I’ve had a lot of contractors who have said to me, ‘Without you forcing us to buy one of these machines, we would never be where we are today.’ Some of these guys have become very successful, and very wealthy businessmen because they bought a jet in the early days.

“And we still haven’t scratched the surface,” says Nick. “There are more opportunities today than in the early days, because many more people are aware of what a jet can do.” ■