

The 10-1/2 Foot Pole List

by Wes Bender

Through 34 years of distributing explosives, loading shots, consulting for various companies, renting and selling seismographs, and generally trying to keep blasters out of trouble, I've had the privilege of working with a good many really likeable individuals and companies. I value quite highly the experiences that I've had with these folks. On the other hand, there have been a few companies and more than a few people that I would probably have been better off not knowing in the first place. I refer to these people and companies as being on my **10-1/2 foot pole list** because, after one experience with them, I wouldn't touch them again with a 10 foot pole.

Now, before you try to get me to send you a copy of The List, I should caution you that I can't release it. Any of the people listed on it would probably sue me for defamation of character for including them with the rest of the unsavory characters that are on The List.

Some on The List are there because of their bad credit. Now don't get me wrong, I can understand how some situations can put a crimp in cash flow, and if you leveled with me and explained the situation, I was more than willing to work with you in paying off your outstanding balance. It would be easy to make The List though if you wouldn't return my phone calls or otherwise kept ducking the issue. You were guaranteed a spot on The List if you tried to pull any shenanigans. One particular engineering firm tried unsuccessfully to avoid paying the final month's rent on a seismograph. When I finally got hold of the branch manager to inquire as to why he wouldn't pay the invoice, he tried to tell me the instrument wasn't functional during the final month. When I told him it was fine when it got back to me, he responded with the statement that they hadn't used it at all during that last month so they shouldn't have to pay for it. Although I usually try to give a person a way out, his demeanor didn't warrant such treatment, so I informed him that when the instrument got back there were four events still in the memory of the instrument that were recorded during the period in question. A check was forthcoming, but it didn't keep him and his group off The List. (One comment on credit: 90% of your credit problems come from 10% of your customers. If you can identify who they are, you're probably better off letting your competition have them.)

In the explosives distribution business, collecting for unpaid explosives can get a bit dicey. If it happens to be a federal job, you can't file a lien against it. If they've shot up all the powder you can't take it back either. We usually filed the California Preliminary Lien Notice anyway. Some contractors didn't know we couldn't actually file a lien and paid promptly. Logging contracts were particularly bad. The contractor didn't get paid for the roads he built. The cost for them was subtracted from what he paid for the timber. When one nocturnal aviation (as in fly-by-night) logger tried to skip on his powder bill, we put our attorney on his trail. Said attorney was a tenacious little bulldog of a guy and in his digging around found that the guy had fallen behind in corporation matters the previous year and that his corporate status was null and void when he bought the powder. Our attorney promptly filed a lien on the guy's house. We got paid (but we left him on The List anyway).

Some blasting contractors never seem to want any consulting help until they are already in trouble and are looking for a scapegoat. Consultants have to be very careful dealing with these types. No instructions can be given verbally and documents need to be very carefully written with language to protect your dusty butt. One blasting contractor that had a reputation for scattering flyrock into nearby neighborhoods (a fine example of his was in blasting for the Nevada County courthouse, but I digress) got himself in trouble blasting for a shopping center in one of the towns in the Sierra foothills and wanted help. When the first words out of his mouth were how his previous consultant was to blame because he advised him incorrectly, I suddenly remembered that my calendar was too full to take on any new projects. He had been on the verge of making The List, so I went ahead and put him on it and moved on.

Numerous mining companies and mining promoters managed to make The List, some being on there under more than one name. It took a goodly amount of research and digging before you dared to have your name associated with their particular project. I had one client for whom I did a fair amount of work, mainly in the blast effects field (i.e. vibration, airblast, etc.). They never wanted my help in designing blasts, but had the nasty habit of referring to me as their "blasting consultant". I finally had to notify them in writing to cease and desist with the blasting consultant bit. If they didn't want or didn't use my advice, I didn't want to be blamed for their flyrock or other foibles. They're no longer in business and they never quite made it to The List, but they came close a couple of times.

There was one rather small contractor at Lake Tahoe who was so tight that he squeaked. He was always calling for free advice. He pumped you for information, but phrased it in such a way that made it sound as if he were just carrying on a friendly conversation. I soon wised up to what he was doing and would respond with, "L....., it sounds as if you could use my expertise." Of course, he seldom wanted to hire me to solve his problems. I finally agreed to do some actual consulting for him in blasting a fish channel at a dam for the Bureau of Reclamation and was it ever an experience. As usual, the Bureau wanted a two-part blasting plan. His was only a page and a half long. I reviewed it and suggested that it was pretty much inadequate because he failed to address most of what they wanted. Of course, my cost to develop an acceptable plan for him exceeded what he wanted to pay, so he struggled along adding a bit here and there as they rejected each one. He couldn't start drilling or even bring explosives on site until the plan was approved, but he tried anyway. He ordered powder and magazines from XYZ Powder Company, but then had to reschedule because his plan hadn't been approved. When it finally was approved, XYZ couldn't immediately drop everything and deliver that day. He called me and wanted to know who else could provide powder. He wanted my seismographs to be there early on, but didn't want the rent to start until his first blast. He called and wanted to know if I knew of another blaster he could hire. His had quit in the middle of the turmoil.... and on and on, ad infinitum. I did end up designing the cautious blasting scheme for blasting the channel itself (but I wish I hadn't). It involved presplitting both sides ahead of the production holes, a fairly common method. Of course, he wouldn't muck out one production shot before shooting the next. He started getting cutoffs in some of the Nonel tubing and asked me if it could cut itself where one tube crossed over another. I told him no, but that if the tube was close to, but not touching detonating cord, cutoffs could happen. He also deviated from my scheme by experimenting by adding delays in some of the pre-split lines.

When it appeared on the surface that the rock hadn't been adequately fractured, he refused to pay my invoice for design services rendered. I found out later from a former employee of his that, when they got around to digging it all out, the results were exactly what we had wanted. After I learned that, I tried to contact him but he wouldn't return my calls. Needless to say, his name is permanently engraved on The List. He called me several years later asking for help on another job. Instead of demanding payment for the previous work or hanging up on him, I politely refused, citing my 'busy' schedule. (On hindsight, I should have mailed him The List, but then there's that "defamation of character" thing.)

There are a few governmental agencies and bureaucrats on The List, for various reasons. One state agency wanted me to file a bushel basket of forms and paperwork so that I would qualify to sell them the \$10 replacement manual they wanted to buy. Sorry guys. Send someone over with a ten spot and I'll even pick up the sales tax. Sheesh.

Now, some of you readers out there might be a bit miffed because, when you called me for assistance, I was too busy. If you'd like to give me a call, I'll check to see if you're on The List.....