



# INTERVIEW

## RICH ANDERSON, general manager, Roberts Irrigation Company, Inc.

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common'Tater*

**NAME:** Rich Anderson

**TITLE:** General manager

**COMPANY:** Roberts Irrigation Company, Inc.

**LOCATION:** Plover/Bloomer, Wisconsin

**HOMETOWN:** Rhinelander, Wisconsin

**TIME IN PRESENT POSITION:** 2 years

**PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT:** Controller for Rhinelander GM/Toyota—2 years; partner with Anderson Metz Ltd.—12 years; accounting manager for C.R. Meyer and Son—10 years; and accounting manager with Appleton Supply Company—2 years

**SCHOOLING:** University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, accounting degree, 1990, and passed the Certified Public Accountant exam in 1992

**FAMILY:** Married to wife, Shelley, in 1990, and two boys, Matt and Mike, both of whom graduated from college, have careers and are chasing their dreams

**HOBBIES:** Fishing, hunting, golf, making maple syrup and cutting firewood

*Roberts Irrigation was started*, in 1957, by Harold “Hal” and Nancy Roberts in Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Harold began selling equipment for Moulton Irrigation by pulling a trailer with the family car.

“In 1959, at the urging of customers, they made the move to Stevens Point to be closer to the Central Sands,” explains Rich Anderson, general manager of Roberts Irrigation, “where the sandy soil and plentiful water made an ideal case for irrigation.”

In 1968, Richard Reinke, founder of Reinke Manufacturing, traveled to Wisconsin, and Roberts Irrigation became an official distributor. Roberts Irrigation today is the oldest continuous Reinke dealer.

“Also, in 1968, Roberts Irrigation purchased Wisconsin Pump Service, a well-drilling company,” Anderson relates. “It was at this time that Hal Roberts had the foresight to realize the benefit of having control over the total irrigation process, from well drilling to irrigation equipment distribution.”

In 1979, Hal’s son, Paul, graduated from college and began to work full-

time at Roberts Irrigation. During the ensuing years, he continued his studies focusing primarily on well design.

In 1986, Hal retired, and Paul took over the day-to-day responsibilities of running Roberts Irrigation. Under Paul’s leadership, a second location was opened in Bloomer, Wisconsin.

“As of July 31, 2019, Roberts Irrigation has once again begun a new chapter,” Anderson reveals. “Paul made a decision to sell Roberts Irrigation to the employees.”

“The resulting ESOP [Employee Stock Ownership Plan] ensures that Roberts Irrigation will continue to be of service to its customers for years to come,” he states.

**Above:** When Rich Anderson was hired by Roberts Irrigation Company, Inc., owner Paul Roberts was looking for a general manager to allow him to step away from the daily operating duties.

**What is your background, Rich, and how did you come to join Roberts Irrigation?** Prior to coming to Roberts Irrigation, I worked 12 years in public accounting and 15 years in the private sector as an accounting manager and controller.

At the time I was offered a job at Roberts Irrigation, Paul Roberts was looking for a general manager to allow him to step away from the daily operating duties.

**What does your position entail?** As general manager, my time is generally split between working with the staff and concentrating on projects/processes to improve our efficiency.

**Does Paul Roberts remain president of the company, and is he still involved in the day-to-day operations?** Paul is still the president and on the Board of Directors for Roberts Irrigation. For the most part, he has stepped away from the day-to-day operation.

He does stop in the office every week and is on the phone with employees almost every day providing guidance on different projects.

**Is he trusting you with some of his responsibilities? Explain.** Yes, in addition to managing the staff at Roberts Irrigation, I make sure we have processes in place to allow us to be steady and consistent with how we handle the day-to-day activities.

I believe in empowering people to make decisions. We accomplish this by involving our staff in the decision-making process, allowing us to make the best possible choices for the collective good of everyone. It helps

**Top Right:** High-capacity well drilling is just one of many services Roberts Irrigation provides for customers. General Manager Rich Anderson says he thinks the company has done a fantastic job taking care of customers' needs, but maybe not the best job at letting everyone know about the entire portfolio of services and products Roberts Irrigation provides.



to keep the lines of communication open throughout our organization.

**What is it about Roberts Irrigation that has prompted you to make it a career and what are you most proud of?** The people I get to spend my days with here at Roberts Irrigation make all the difference. Everyone has a job, but how many are lucky enough to work with people they can have fun with throughout the day?

Being happy is a choice, and I am

lucky enough to work with a group of people that choose to make the best of every day. What I am most proud of isn't what we have accomplished yet, it's knowing I am surrounded by a group of people that have the same dream for our success as I carry.

**Is center-pivot irrigation still the name of the game? How has it changed in the years that you've been with Roberts?** We are always looking for ways to innovate and

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bring better solutions to the irrigation needs of Wisconsin.

New for this year, Roberts Irrigation has become a CropMetrics dealer,



which will help growers determine soil moisture and aid in irrigation scheduling.

Ranch Systems has also been added to our product line as an innovative irrigation automation company that offers products to control pumping units, valves, and monitor soil moisture.

**Do Reinke center pivots make up your main product line, and if not, what other brands and equipment do you offer?** Reinke is our pivot manufacturer and does make up a significant share of our irrigation product line.

In addition, we sell products such as Cadman and Ag-Rain traveling guns; Netafim drip irrigation; John Deere, JCB and Kubota diesel engines; PSI propane/natural gas engines; as well as Western Land Roller, Cornell, Berkeley, Franklin, Grundfos, Doda, Lo-lift and Parma pumps.

For irrigation automation, we work with Ranch Systems, Reinke and FieldWise.

**What are the newest technologies, and how are they helping save water**

**Above:** The Roberts Irrigation excavator is being used to trench power into a turbine pump suspended on a float system at a gravel pit operation, in 2019.

**Left:** Fresh tire tracks are still in the ground after a center pivot is newly built by Roberts Irrigation.

**and make life easier for growers?**

The uniform delivery of water to an entire parcel of property is oftentimes not the most efficient use of the water resource.

We are currently working with suppliers to use soil moisture probes throughout fields to help determine if there are opportunities to save both water and electricity to meet the irrigation needs of a certain crop and soil type.

By determining water holding capacity of different parts of a field, we can then determine if varying water application throughout the field would be more efficient.

We are happy to offer multiple product lines that help growers remotely manage their irrigation equipment. The products we offer can be used to monitor soil moisture,

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and remotely control center pivots, valves, engines and variable frequency drives.

**Tell me about service at Roberts Irrigation—servicing before, during and after the sale.** Your success is our success. The best thing we can do is make sure our customers know we're here for them no matter what their irrigation need may be.

We are a professional company. We have an obligation to treat each person with the respect they deserve and to solve their problem as efficiently and in as timely a manner as we possibly can.

We are typically in the office by 6 a.m. and often there until 6 p.m. or later. In addition, many customers will call either our sales or field staff

direct if they have an issue arise.

**I see by your latest ads in the *Badger Common'Tater* that Roberts Irrigation offers such services as drilling and installing dual-reverse high-capacity wells, well rehabilitation, well abandonment, installing pumps, filling and dewatering wells, running wire, pump repair, etc. Are these new services, or is there a renewed emphasis on these services? Explain.**

These services have always been offered at Roberts for many years. Hal Roberts had the vision of being a full-service irrigation solution for our customers many years ago.

I think we have done a fantastic job taking care of our customers' needs

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**Above:** Water is put through a new Reinke Model EII 2060 pivot system for the first time, in 2018, at Ben Sankey's Berry Patch, Plover, Wisconsin.

**Left:** This is a typical plumbing hook-up used to operate multiple irrigation systems from a single well. The project took place, in 2018, on the Bob and Chris Barden farm just east of Plover, Wisconsin.



as they arise, but maybe not the best job at letting everyone know the entire package of services and products we can provide.

We want our customers to know we are more than just a Reinke pivot dealer. With one call, we can provide a true turnkey irrigation solution.

**Why would an irrigation company delve into all those different areas?**

Being able to offer all different facets needed to solve an irrigation problem gives us an edge when it comes to helping solve our customers' problems.

Having this diversity of product

**Above and Opposite Page:** Roberts Irrigation offers services ranging from solar panel installation to pump setting, and sometimes on the same job site.

line under one roof allows us to use resources that may not be immediately available to someone without the diversity of products and

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services we provide.

**Are water conservation and irrigation efficiency the top, or two of the top, priorities today, and why or why not?** Water conservation and efficiency will always be a priority in our world. Not only are we trying to use our water resources more efficiently, but we are also trying to save costs between utility bills and man hours. I believe this will be the focus on technological improvements in the years ahead.

**What are your/Roberts Irrigation's priorities for the upcoming planting, growing and harvest seasons?** Our priority in the coming year will be help educate customers on who we are and what we might be able to do for them to help solve their problems and ultimately save them time and money.

**Who are your customers, and have**



**most of them been with you for a long time?** A significant number of our customers have been with us for many years. They are oftentimes not just customers, but our friends.

Over the years, we have all endured hard times and successes, and

that is what brings us together. Our customers are geographically located in the Central Sands area, the northwest portion of the state and Antigo area, as well as a number in the southeast part of Wisconsin.

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A self-cleaning filter is used at Seaquist Orchards in Door County, 2019, to remove cherry pits and pulp from water before sending it to a drip irrigation system. The manifold allows for different water sources to be filtered and transferred to multiple watering locations.



An LP power unit and generator are connected to a turbine pump at Wagner Farms in Adams County, 2019. The design is typically used in locations where three-phase power is not available.

Many of them grow specialty crops, potatoes, vegetables, sod, cranberries, etc.

**What are your hopes for Roberts Irrigation in the future?** By initiating the ESOP, I can see Roberts Irrigation flourishing for many years to come. Our success will be a reflection

of our customers' success.

We know that without each, and every, customer doing well, we will not succeed either. We share a vested interest in the continued success of all potato and vegetable growers in the state of Wisconsin.

**What are your goals?** Our goals are to continue to innovate, to provide a better service to our customers, as well as to grow our company by letting people know who we are and how we may be able to help them be successful. **BCT**



Three variable frequency drives and electric motors power independent turbine pumps at the Wisconsin Cranberry Research Education Foundation, in 2019. The system is fully automated, and if power fails, set up to switch to a diesel backup unit using an automatic combination gear drive.