

The Register-Guard

SECTION **F**

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"Every bridge that gets demolished in Oregon, we're going to bid on."

— RON RICHEY, GENERAL MANAGER OF STATON COMPANIES



WAYNE EASTBURN / The Register-Guard

Three backhoes from Staton Companies tear down the Interstate 5 bridge over Turner Road in Salem on June 13. It is one of dozens of bridges being replaced on I-5.

KNOCK DOWN

Aging I-5 bridges mean work for demolition specialists Staton Companies

By **TIM CHRISTIE**
The Register-Guard

It's just after 9 p.m. on a Monday night, and Jeff Staton is ready to start wrecking things.

In particular, Staton has trouble in mind for an overpass on Interstate 5 in Salem, a slab of concrete and rebar that's carried cars and trucks over a railroad since 1951.

Staton, a project manager for Staton Companies, takes a slug from a cup of Dutch Bros. coffee, lights a Camel and gets ready to work when he gets word from the railroad: That eight-hour window they promised tonight to allow for demolition of the bridge? Forget about it.

The railroad has five trains it wants to run through tonight, so it won't grant the clearance needed to do the demolition.

"The railroad rules all," Staton said, "and there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

His crew and hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of heavy equipment stationed at the site are idled for the moment, but Staton isn't ready to call it quits just yet. The night is still young.

So it goes for the Staton Companies, a Goshen contractor that specializes in knocking things down. Bridges, mills, malls: You want it gone, they get it done.

As the state undergoes a massive initiative to repair and replace highway bridges, Staton Companies expects to stay busy through the end of the decade.

The Oregon Department of Transportation will spend \$1.35 billion replacing 180 bridges and repairing 113 through 2009 — the biggest investment in Oregon's



Jeanne Staton, now president, helped found the company in 1971. Ron Richey joined the company as a partner in 1995.

highways since the interstates were built 50 years ago, according to ODOT.

Staton Companies has added about 10 employees in the last three years to bring its payroll to 37, and has purchased "a ton" of new equipment to handle the work, company President Jeanne Staton said.

Last year, the company knocked down 50 bridges, and will probably do 35 this year in Oregon and Washington, said General Manager Ron Richey, a partner in

the business.

"Every bridge that gets demolished in Oregon, we're going to bid on," he said.

The company was founded in 1971 by Leonard Staton and his wife, Jeanne. Leonard Staton had been working for an excavation contractor who had gone out of business, and rather than try to get another job, he decided to start his own company.

He saw a niche for demolition work, and his timing couldn't have been better. Jeanne Staton said, because Eugene was then going through urban renewal.

"We literally wrecked half of Eugene," she said.

"There was a lot of demolition to be done in this town." Jeanne Staton did the books, and drew up a business plan at her kitchen table. Leonard Staton found jobs and did the work.

"It was rough going" at first, Jeanne Staton said.

The Statons divorced in 1997, and Jeanne Staton took over as president. Richey became a partner in the business in 1996.

A turning point for Staton Companies came in the early 1990s, when the company realized it was spreading itself too thin, Staton said. In addition to demolition work, the company was doing a lot of site work and excavation. She realized that 20 percent of its customers were providing 80 percent of its business.

"We decided to go back to our roots, eliminating site work and just doing demolition," she said.

The move boosted profits, but the trade-off was that the company would have to do a lot of work out of town. But employees said they would rather do that than not

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Staton: There are times when demolition work needs to be delicate

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work at all, Staton said.

The company does big jobs — it was the prime contractor on the \$3.5 million demolition of the International Paper mill in Gardiner — and small — it still pulls underground storage tanks out of residential neighborhoods. Dut bridges are its bread and butter.

Sometimes the work is straightforward: Use heavy equipment to take out a bridge or take down a building.

"We like to wreck things with big equipment because that's what we're good at," Richey said. "We like to go at it with the big iron and make short work out of big jobs."

Other jobs requires some finesse. Staton was hired to take down a seven-story parking garage attached to Salem Hospital. The structure is attached to the hospital's data center,

which means the work must be done slowly and methodically under an engineered plan to carefully take the upper levels of the building apart so as not to disturb the computers next door.

Richey said it will take about five weeks to dismantle 15 percent of the building, and about two weeks to demolish the rest. The job requires some innovative techniques. Staton bought 100 mattresses and placed them on the roof of the data center and covered them with construction cloth and plywood to create a cushion in case any debris fell on the roof.

Back at the bridge demolition site in Salem, Jeff Staton — Jeanne's 30-year-old son — huddles with Neal Spoon, project manager for the general contractor and bridge builder, Hamilton Construction of Springfield. They're waiting for a Union Pacific signal man to

get off the phone. He's talking to headquarters in Omaha, trying to get the clearance back so the contractors can get to work.

While they wait, Staton decides to get his equipment in place, just in case he gets the green light. He hops in his biggest, most powerful excavator, turns the key, and — nothing. It won't start, and an effort to jump start doesn't work. The machine is out of commission for the night.

"I had high hopes for tonight," Staton says. "What ever can go wrong at night will go wrong."

It's a setback, but one that he's prepared for. He has two other excavators on site ready to go.

"We can still do the bridge if it comes down to it," he says.

The waiting game continues. Just after 10 p.m., the Amtrak Cascades passenger train zips by. Finally, at 10:20 p.m., the UP

man has good news: The railroad will run one freight by in an hour, then the contractors can get to work. The bad news: The promised eight-hour window has shrunk to four hours.

"That's why they call it construction," Spoon says.

With an hour before the freight comes through, Staton and his crew get to work. Staton climbs into a Cat excavator and starts moving giant timber pallets, fashioned from railroad ties, that will be placed over the tracks to protect them from demolition debris.

It's a tricky job because Staton doesn't have a lot of room to maneuver between the bridge, the railroad and a small creek. He places a few pallets on the track, then moves the excavator up onto the pallets, then reaches back for more pallets, which he puts on a siding next to the main line.

All the while, he's moving

the big excavator along the pallets as gracefully as a cat walking atop a fence.

Staton does as much set up as he can, getting the siding covered, then moves the excavator off the tracks, takes the pallets off the main line, and waits for the freight train. At 11:49 p.m., the train rumbles by, blasting its horn. Staton fires up another Camel. At 11:52 p.m., the train is gone. "Clear! Let's go!" Staton said.

He and his crew get back to work, covering the track with the pallets, large timbers and construction cloth. At 12:36 a.m., the "containment" is in place, and the destruction begins, pitting today's demolition experts against yesterday's bridge engineers. It's not a fair fight.

Atop the bridge, Staton is on one side of the span in an excavator, and one of his crew is on the other side in a second exca-

vator. Both machines are equipped with hydraulic-powered jaws that crush and pulverize concrete and wind up threads of rebar like spaghetti.

At 12:39 a.m., Staton takes the first bite out of the bridge, and soon both excavators are taking out chunks of concrete, gnawing steadily at the bridge, exposing rebar and sending gritty clouds of gray dust into the early morning air.

With their powerful jaws ripping and tearing at the rebar, the machines look like a pair of T-Rexes feeding hungrily on carrion.

The work continues for about two hours, then the crew cleans up before the work window closes and the next train comes through.

They'll come back another night, wait again for railroad clearance, and finish the job. Then they'll find another bridge to wreck.