

Willard Says.....

Used Dredges

The Soaked Dredge

I had had a meeting or two with the owners of a sand and gravel company in the Midwest to help them assess the feasibility of using a hydraulic dredge to mine their deposit. My interest was to sell them something—perhaps a new dredge.

They had a corporate policy that centered on the concept that the way to make money was not to spend it. The appearance of their plant and equipment gave testimony that they were adhering to this concept. Any equipment with paint remaining would have stuck out like a sore thumb. My hopes of selling these folks much of anything were muted to say the least. Still, one must not pre-judge the customer.

Then they told me that they had purchased a used dredge in Texas and invited me to stop by and see it next time I was in the area. They gave me a few details about their “new” used dredge.

Subsequently, I was talking to man who was familiar with Texas dredge goings on and I mentioned that a Texas dredge was going to work in the Midwest and described it to him. He started laughing and told me that someone was in for a surprise. He said that some years before the dredge in question had gone down just offshore in the shallow and salty waters of the Gulf of Mexico and remained there for some months. All the while that the dredge was at soak the top portions of the operator’s cab and hoist frame had been in clear view of passers-by on the nearby state highway.

The new owners were naturally quite proud of their “new” used dredge and were eager to give me a tour. It did indeed look splendid in its fresh coat of original factory-color paint. All nice and clean—the operator’s chair was newly upholstered and the instruments were all new—very unusual for a used dredge. It was truly a fine looking specimen. They were waiting for discharge pipe so they had not pumped with it yet.

The next time I stopped by they were not so happy with their “new” used dredge. Seems as though the engine was using oil like mad and smoked a lot, the dredge pump bearings had failed, the gearbox had shelled its gears, the hoist winch was making crunchy noises, watery fuel was an issue and the hydraulic oil was all foamy.

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They were beginning to suspect that their “new” used dredge had some submerged time on it even though this particular model was not named after a sea creature. Also, the guy they bought it from said that it had not sunk. Technically that was true because it was never totally submerged, just setting low in the water.

I did not add to their store of information about this dredge because I had no first hand knowledge, however, it was obvious that these dupes had soured on the idea of dredge mining and there was little reason for me to call on them again. They had spent money on a machine and now all it was doing was causing them to spend more money—a direct violation of company policy.

As it turned out, this company went out of business a year or two later and I lost track of the dredge. I suspect they were well on their way to corporate demise and the “new” used dredge only hastened the day of reckoning.

One of the problems in buying a used dredge is that it seldom is possible to see it at work. A truck, a tractor, a scraper, a crane or excavator can be run through its paces with little problem. Not so with a dredge. It is usually in pieces scattered around a storage yard or partially hidden by tall weeds, which makes placing trust in the words of the seller a necessity.

Said seller (read salesman) can seldom avoid praising the many attributes of the machine in question. Telling the buyer what he wants to hear is still a very effective method of closing the sale. People want to trust people but truth too often goes into hiding. The seller in this case, if he knew, would have been extremely reluctant to reveal that the dredge had been steeped in salt water.

Still Going to Buy a Used Dredge?

Some suggestions for would-be used dredge buyer:

- Buy a new dredge that comes with warranties and a phone number to call if you have problems. Pay now or pay later.
- Keep in mind that used is part of “abused”.
- Obtain the serial numbers of the major components. Find out if parts are available before you buy.
- Determine the specifications for the dredge. Dredges do not come in one size fits all. What equipment, ladder length, digger, pump size, etc. are required to produce in your pit. The wrong machine will disappoint even if it is mechanically sound.
- Hire a competent mechanic to inspect the major working components.
- Get a second opinion about the dredge from someone you trust.

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- Get a signed sales agreement that includes whatever representations were made about the dredge.
- Talk to the previous owner and especially the former operator.
- Try to make the sale subject to successful launch and startup. The money goes into an escrow account until the dredge runs for a specific period of time.
- Be ready to repair. Expect to spend the money that you “saved”.

Conclusion

Sadly, the experience related above is not unusual in the used dredge market. The problem is with the buyer and not used dredges and used dredge salesmen. Due diligence is a must if you are considering a used dredge. While rare, there are decent used dredges available for a good price. Knowledge and research is the secret to success in the used dredge market.

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