

TRENCHLESSTECHNOLOGY.COM

**Trenchless**  
TECHNOLOGY.

SEPTEMBER 2024

# MAINSTAY IN THE TRENCHLESS INDUSTRY

MADEWELL PRODUCTS CELEBRATES  
ITS 50TH YEAR



ALSO INSIDE:

PIPE RELINING GUIDE 2024

FEATURE

ARPA-E FOCUSES ON  
UNDERGROUNDING

FEATURE

FT. LAUDERDALE  
HDD

# MADEWELL PRODUCTS: A MAINSTAY IN THE TRENCHLESS INDUSTRY



**Georgia-based manufacturer celebrates 50 years and looks forward to future growth**

By Mike Kezdi

**T**here was a lot going on in 1974. A Chinese farmer discovered the Terracotta Army, Happy Days made its TV debut, President Richard Nixon resigned, Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth’s homerun record — and the world of composite liners changed forever with the formation of Madewell Products Corp.

Now amid its year-long, 50th anniversary celebration, the Alpharetta, Georgia-based manufacturer is setting its sights and leadership up for another 50 years of success. Since its inception, captaining the Madewell Products ship has been the Steele family. Incorporating the business in 1974 was Jay Steele, and, later, during the early 1980s, Jonathan “Jon” Steele gained operational control of the business.

As of July 8, Natalie Steele is now the president of Madewell Products. As with most family-owned businesses, she helped around the company in her teenage years, but she officially joined Madewell Products in 2012 following her graduation from the Terry College

of Business at the University of Georgia. In the ensuing years, she’s worked in several facets of the family-owned business and was most recently vice president of operations.

Joining her at the leadership table is Craig Closser, vice president of business development. Although no longer involved in day-to-day operations, Jon Steele remains an integral part of Madewell as majority owner.

## Establishing its Niche

The cornerstone of Madewell Products is its Mainstay Composite Liner. Its lineage can be traced to the United States Steel Corp., which originally developed the process for lining uncured reinforced concrete pipe with coal tar epoxy coating. The first successful application of the product was in 1962.

Jay Steele owned Steele & Sons, a licensed applicator of the U.S. Steel product, and when U.S. Steel decided to divest itself of its coating interests, Steele & Sons became the exclusive licensee of the Mainstay liner. Madewell Products was established in 1974 to manufacture Mainstay products.



interested in adding manhole rehabilitation to their list of offerings.”

It’s the discovery of this niche industry that has helped propel Madewell Products’ growth. Closser notes that in addition to showcasing the Mainstay Composite Liner, the addition of Art Wilson in Florida as the first manhole rehabilitation contractor helped propel the company forward. “It snowballed from there,” Closser says. “He still has some of our original equipment and is still lining manholes today.”

“Most of our growth has happened in the last 20 years. The development of the Mainstay Composite Liner is our most significant milestone. Developing the equipment to apply it is probably our second biggest milestone,” says Jon Steele.

To help understand Madewell Product’s growth in this sector, it’s important to understand what made its Mainstay Composite Liner unique and stand out in a crowded space. Jon Steele understood that mortar and epoxy coating served different purposes when it came to concrete restoration and corrosion protection, however both were necessary to the process.

Part one of the Mainstay Composite Liner process is the application of the high-strength, high-build mortar on the surface. Once the desired thickness is achieved, the applicator adds the epoxy coating over the uncured mortar. This, Jon Steele says, was not widely accepted at first. Like any good business looking to grow in a new space, Madewell Products overcame that by offering free demonstrations of its materials and equipment.

“Once we got involved in the manhole rehab space, our growth took off from there. We created a sales team and brought on certified applicators to promote the Mainstay Composite Liner,” says Natalie Steele. “We’ve mostly grown organically through our network of applicators and their relationship with our sales team.”

While numbering only about 20 employees at its Georgia headquarters and its equipment manufacturing and service center in Indiana, the entire Madewell Products team takes great pride in the hands-on approach to making sure their applicators are properly

After Jon Steele graduated high school in 1973, he worked on the biggest Mainstay project Steele & Sons had performed at the time, and he then spent the next few years applying the Mainstay product alongside his dad and brother Jeff Steele.

When Jay Steele became more involved in the development of the NACE (now AMPP) Coating Inspector Program, Jon Steele came into control of Madewell Products to grow and advance the Mainstay product line. It’s worth noting that Jay, Jeff and Jon have NACE Inspector Certification Program (now the AMPP Coatings Inspector Program) certificates #001, #016 and #018, respectively.

“My grandfather and my uncle were more involved on the contracting side. It was my dad who took on the role of growing the manufacturing business and making the product,” says Natalie Steele. “[He] made it what it is today: A two-component system that encompasses a mortar and epoxy coating.”

“At that time, Mainstay consisted of one product, a coal tar epoxy coating,” says Jon Steele. “In the early 1990s, I began developing other coatings, as well as mortar products, and by the late 1990s, the Mainstay Composite Liner [as we know it today] was created to rehabilitate manholes and other underground infrastructure affected by corrosion.”

As Jon Steele began to develop the product, it became clear that it had uses



Jonathan “Jon” Steele

outside of Madewell’s core markets. This was early in the time of trenchless, as system owners across North America began taking a hard look at their underground assets and EPA Consent Decrees started becoming more prevalent.

## Turning to Manholes

“We started exhibiting at the Pumper Show [now the WWETT Show] in the early 2000s, when we first discovered the potential for restoring manholes with the Mainstay Composite Liner, and trenchless technology was still a new industry,” says Jon Steele. “From there, we attracted contractors who were



trained and equipped.

“This helps promote a lot of faith in our products from municipalities and engineers that come out to see this work. We are big on [the idea] that execution is everything,” says Natalie Steele.

### Focusing on Contractors

To help further that growth, Madewell Products brought Closser on board in 2016. Closser, a seasoned trenchless contractor, had years of experience on the manhole rehabilitation side, first working for his in-laws and then with Winchester, Indiana-based Culy Contracting. Culy Contracting is Madewell Products’ biggest customer.

Closser started working for Culy Contracting in 2006 to help start up their new manhole program. He knew what they needed to start the program and picked up the phone and started calling the various manufacturers and suppliers in the space to gather the necessary equipment and products.

“I called everybody and Madewell was the only that would agree to come to Indiana and complete two free demos — one with mortar and one with mortar and epoxy — at no cost to us,” Closser says.

Madewell Products brought the Mainstay Composite Liner and one of its trailers to Indiana for the demonstration.

Closser, who had experience with a variety of manhole rehab products, was sold when he saw the product and the sprayer casting it. He told his boss that Madewell wasn’t leaving with that trailer.

Since joining Madewell Products, Closser makes sure to maintain that same level of service and support he received from the company when he was building and maintaining Culy Contracting’s manhole rehab crews.

“When a contractor signs up with us, the first thing we do is get out there with them to teach them the products and the equipment,” says Closser. “They really become like family.”

He says that it’s up to the contractors how big they want to go. There are some contractors who Madewell sells to that complete a few projects a year and there are others that have robust programs like Culy Contracting.

If the contractor has the desire to go big Madewell will help them along the way. Madewell will attend conferences with them, set them up with promotional materials, help with live demonstrations, and more. Closser notes that Madewell’s two technical services workers are on the road more than they are not.

Regardless of size, all customers are treated the same when it comes to training and service. This commitment

to customers, and Closser’s focus on relationship building, has help Madewell Products grow by leaps and bounds.

“We’ve been growing significantly especially since we brought on Craig, so keeping up with demand was a little bit of a challenge for a little while,” Natalie Steele says. “[We went] from making a certain number of truckloads to making three times that.”

### Future Growth

Prompted by this growth in sales, and a need for more production space, Madewell opened its dedicated equipment manufacturing facility in Indiana, close to Closser, as well as Culy Contracting. “We moved our equipment manufacturing up to Indiana in 2019 and in that first year we sold 18 trailers,” says Closser. “We’ve taken a lot of time and effort to build high quality robust equipment that our contractors find easy to use and maintain.”

And that growth trend continues as Madewell looks to expand its underground infrastructure offerings into the world of horizontal assets with products like ML-72HP for sanitary and storm sewers. It’s also growing in the world of aquarium linings, an area that Natalie Steele has been heavily involved in. To help keep up with demand, there are also plans in the works for a new manufacturing and storage facility in Georgia.

“We have plans to keep growing and getting more people out there selling our product and increasing our certified applicator base,” says Natalie Steele. “We’ve got plans in the works for new programs and educational opportunities and I am pretty excited about that.”

Closser adds, “There are big things happening and I look forward to it and I’m excited about it. Both Natalie and I want to grow even more and we’re looking forward to the future of Madewell.”

*Editor’s Note: As we were closing this issue of Trenchless Technology, we received word from Madewell Products that Jonathan Steele passed away on Aug. 22.*

Mike Kezdi is the managing editor of Trenchless Technology.