

## ProFile



I first encountered him at an ACSM Board Meeting. As the Government Affairs Chairman, John Matonich's articulate delivery of his report really caught my attention. I'm sure I wasn't the only listener in the audience who was thinking, "This is the kind of spokesman surveyors need to represent their interests in Washington." Since then, John Matonich has continued in this role and has provided other valuable assistance to surveyors through ACSM and NSPS.

Matonich is a man of many hats and talents. His long-running column in the Michigan Society of Professional Surveyors' (MSPS) newsletter began as the President's Message while he was MSPS president. Readers of *The American Surveyor* will also recognize these heart-to-heart, down-to-earth pieces in his *Surveyin' Da Situation* column. "It's gratifying," he says, "when someone comes up to me and tells me that my story made him smile or think." Now here's a question for our readers: can you name the peculiar attribute that is *not mentioned* in each and every *Surveyin' Da Situation* column?

Based on his involvement in our profession on many levels, Matonich was a natural choice for our ProFile column. We recently visited him at his company, Rowe Incorporated, in the automotive manufacturing city of Flint,

# John Matonich of Rowe Incorporated

Michigan, located approximately 70 miles northwest of Detroit. Rowe's current facility was built in 1997, and prior to that the firm resided in nearby Flushing for nearly 30 years. With a population of nearly 140,000, Flint is capitalizing on the growing trend across the country to revitalize its downtown areas. At the time of our visit Rowe was in the process of moving to a new downtown location. The new office will occupy the second and third floors of a four-story building on Main Street, and will benefit from part of several million in grants and tax credits. Rowe has a large consultant contract with the City of Flint and the move makes

economic and logistical sense for Rowe. "Our new hires are expressing a desire to be closer to the heart of the city," says Matonich, adding, "Our existing employees haven't expressed much heartburn about the move. Many are very excited."

Founded in 1962, Rowe handles a variety of private and public work. There are currently about 120 employees in the main office, with 20 more at satellite offices in Lapeer and Mt. Pleasant. The company also owns an aerial survey firm, Air-Land Surveys, which is situated at the Flint airport. In addition to land development engineering and surveying,

>> By Marc Cheves, LS



**Left** In 1989 John caught the second largest steelhead in Michigan. **Above** Typical winter in John's hometown of Bessemer, Michigan.

Rowe offers landscape architecture, planning, construction management, utility planning and analysis, and environmental services. They run a dozen survey crews with nine licensed surveyors on staff, and approximately 60 surveyors in the firm.

Matonich was born in 1959 in the town of Bessemer, Michigan, located in the western portion of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (that peculiar piece of land that looks as if it should belong to Wisconsin, but doesn't. Folks from the U.P. often refer to themselves as Yoopers.) His father was a custodian for the local school district, but worked on a surveying crew on the weekends. At age 10, the young Matonich started tagging along with the crew, and it wasn't long before his dad showed him how to set up an instrument. He fondly remembers the surveyor they worked for, Joe Nespojani, who everyone in town called "Mister Nespojani" including Matonich's dad. Growing up, Matonich wanted to become a mining engineer, but the entire region (commonly called the "Gogebic Range") was in a recession. With the mining industry in decline, he basically had three choices: stick around and take whatever employment he could get, move away, or put himself through college and get a degree that would provide a job skill. In 1978, Michigan passed its four-year degree requirement for survey licensing. That same year, Matonich entered Michigan Tech in Houghton, and began pursuing a



**John did his part in helping celebrate Bessemer's centennial in 1984.**

degree in civil engineering with a minor in forestry. He took a freshman surveying course under the civil curriculum, and rose quickly amongst the foreign grad student instructors, in spite of the fact that his advisor discouraged him from pursuing surveying as a career. He started a study group and within two years was teaching the survey lab. Because extra credits were free, he even took a course in nuclear engineering. In 1981 he graduated with a four-year degree in surveying. With the ongoing recession and bleak

prospects for employment in U.P., Matonich responded to an ad in a surveying magazine, and interviewed for a job in Chicago, Illinois. He also interviewed with Dave Rowe, the founder of Rowe Inc. and a 1951 graduate of Michigan Tech, and even though the salary was less, he decided to stay in Michigan to be close to his home and the other loves in his life – hunting and fishing.

As it turned out, Rowe was doing a sewer study in Davison, and his boss gave him the opportunity to observe and learn every aspect of design. He recalled the first rule he learned from Dave Rowe: to make it easier to construct, all grades must be divisible by four. And so Matonich did it all – surveying, drafting, design, inspection, and as-building, as well as preparing the bid book, specs and attending the meetings. Rowe red-lined all of his work. Matonich smiled as he recalled Rowe's gruff personality. "If he wanted you to know you did a good job, he'd walk by and tap on your desk. He rarely complimented the staff, but he was fair and honest, and the kind of boss that when you look back, you're glad you had."

Matonich's plan was to work for Rowe for four years and then return home to Bessemer. But, enter a beautiful young local woman named Ellen! They were married in 1982 and in time became a family of four, whose activities have appeared from time to time in *Surveyin'*

*Da Situation.* Meanwhile, his career continued to grow. In 1991, Matonich became a shareholder and VP and COO of Rowe, and in 1997 he became president. In 2001, he became president and CEO, and in this year, was voted in the position of chairman of the board. In 2001 and 2004, Rowe was voted “Firm of the Year” by the American Council of Engineering Companies of Michigan.

Over the years, Rowe Inc. has grown from a single owner, to four principals, to its current eight principals and 18 associates, all of whom are shareholders.

Six of the principals are on the corporate management team that runs the company. Matonich tells all employees, “My job is to open doors. Your job is to walk through them.”

The standard of living for surveyors in Michigan is high in comparison to many states, Matonich believes. When it comes to licensure, he pointed out that surveyors take the same number of exam hours as attorneys, and more than engineers. For surveying to grow, says Matonich, more education is needed. In addition to his surveying degree, his own

college education also opened pathways to law and business. (We discussed the fact that as a surveyor myself, who is bound by continuing education requirements in four of the five states in which I am licensed, I found it curious that even though Michigan has a law on the books requiring continuing education, the Michigan board does not enforce it. Matonich’s position is that he supports continuing *competency*, including continuing education.)

Matonich is proud of the fact that the Rowe survey department has its own



**Above** John, age 10, the budding surveyor.  
**Right** John and his “below the bridge” deer.



**Above left** Good old boys playing “big time” cards at deer camp.  
**Above right** John’s son Matt carrying on the deer camp tradition.

clients, and doesn’t exist just to support the engineering side of the business. The company has a good reputation and works for several national clients. Topcon is the choice for robotic reflectorless total stations, running TDS Rangers with SurveyPro. To keep costs and repairs in line, the company leases its trucks (modestly-priced vehicles without many creature comforts), and turns them over every three years. Matonich noted that when he started, the company had a 60-40 split between field and office time spent on a project. Now, it’s 30-70 field to office. For GPS, the company uses Trimble. Their surveyors are encouraged to obtain CST Certification. In a top-down fashion, Rowe constantly strives for better service to the clients and the public.

Discussions are currently underway to streamline company operations. Construction specifications are posted on the company website, and all the crews carry wireless notebooks and cell phones. Time sheets are entered from the field



Johnny Big Time in his office with his award-winning fish.

on a daily basis, not for timeliness as much as for security, completeness and accuracy.

Matonich's management philosophy is simple: delegate authority. Approval of survey equipment purchases goes through the survey department, not through him. To Matonich, everything has to make sense; if it doesn't, he ratchets up his involvement. While checking on a job, he may stop and talk to a survey crew to make sure they are happy. One such stop resulted in the purchase of a trailer for the quadrunners.

He believes in goal-setting. He tells his managers, "Don't be the bad guy. Blame it on me. Don't be the ceiling, be the door. Be a champion for your people." Matonich has based some of his philosophies on the Jim Collins' book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, and believes that the biggest obstacle to being a great company is being a good one.

Rowe offers lots of company functions for the employees, including a bi-annual family day at Cedar Point Amusement Park. Clothing with company logos is available, and each employee's birthday is acknowledged. Rowe reimburses for

tuition for any educational courses. It has a cafeteria plan, and makes a 2.5 percent 401(k) match, up to 5 percent of an employee's salary. They administer pre-employment drug screening as well as criminal and driving background checks. For executive positions applicants take a character test. At the principal level, relatives aren't allowed to work for the company. A bi-annual employee survey is conducted, and findings are shared throughout. Matonich has instituted a semi-annual Breakfast with the CEO where twice a year employees can "ask or tell." Employees in the satellite offices participate in this program almost 100 percent. Rowe also fully pays the employee health care premium.


Matonich is very active in Michigan politics. He recently ran for the position of county surveyor with the intent to offer a public service and to promote surveying, but lost the race. The current hot button in Michigan is the remonumentation program. Started in 1990, the program was running a \$15 million surplus, an attractive amount that a cash-crunched state government voted to transfer to the general fund. The Michigan Society of Professional

Surveyors does now have a full-time lobbyist and legislation is now pending to restore (and even extend) the funding.

On the legislative front Matonich believes that surveyors must be willing and able to articulate their positions. They won't win every battle, but even so, must be vigilant. His skills in government affairs have led to him giving seminars on the subject around the country. He was the youngest president of MSPS when elected in 1994 and 1995 but has since seen a younger surveyor elected this year.

We discussed his long history of support for ACSM and NSPS. In the face of increasing technology and the need for more education, Matonich believes that a national organization is the only place where individuals can obtain many benefits from a group, including cutting-edge speakers and ideas. He expressed a wish to have more high-level speakers, such as Jack Dangermond or Charlie Challstrom, at the annual conference, and admitted that the venue is important for a successful show. He pointed to a long list of things ACSM and NSPS has done on behalf of surveyors, most recently work with HUD, FEMA and the new NSPS Insurance Program.

Aside from his professional activities, the guy beneath the shirt and tie remains a Yooper at heart. As evidenced in the columns he writes, his love for hunting and fishing is legendary. Space does not permit me to share the numerous and humorous camp stories he regaled us with while we were there, but one in particular I knew our readers would enjoy. Eager to get up to the camp – an eight-hour drive from Flint – he opted to drive up in his suit, with the intention of sneaking into the shack to change clothes before anybody noticed. But sneaking under the noses of a bunch of veteran hunters is no easy feat, and he was caught necktie in hand. Henceforth his camp nickname: Johnny Big Time.

Matonich embodies the mark of a survey professional. He works tirelessly – as do all the other state and national volunteers – to further our profession. In addition to being a family man, he works and plays hard. The tagline on Matonich's e-mail sums him up quite well: "If you really want to do something, you'll find a way. If you don't, you'll find an excuse." 

Marc Cheves is Editor of the magazine.