

By Jeff York

The dying art of friction crane operation

The crawler crane market has changed considerably over the last 15 years. As manufacturers have converted from building friction and clutch cranes to hydraulic crawler cranes, there are fewer and fewer operators available who have what it takes to run an old friction rig. That's not to say that friction crawler cranes are outdated or obsolete. They have simply been replaced by something that is safer and takes less skill to operate. There are thousands of friction crawler cranes in good working condition that are still in use. Take the Manitowoc 4100W, for example. This popular and versatile crane is just one of several friction crawler cranes still in use today. It has been an industry icon for more than 30 years and is still considered by some contractors to be their equipment of choice. It makes one wonder what newer hydraulic crawler cranes will look like after 30 years of service, or better yet will they still even be in service?

Different skills

The trouble is that while crane owners still rely on the productivity of friction crawler cranes in their fleets, operators with experience on friction rigs are retiring or leaving the market.



The venerable, versatile Manitowoc 4100W is still popular today.



Jeff York is president of Signal-Rite, LLC, in San Leandro, Calif. Signal-Rite provides training and testing for crane signal-persons and riggers using a standardized system that is in accordance with ASME/ANSI standards. Prior to starting Signal-Rite, Jeff worked as a crane operator for 23 years. He can be reached at jeff.york@signal-rite.org.

It requires a different skill-set to be able to operate one of these cranes. Operators must be able to use both their hands and their feet in conjunction with each other. In addition, everything happens a lot faster when you are operating a friction crane. In an instant, you could have a free-falling load. At a minimum, you have a load lying on the ground, or worse, it could mean an accident involving loss of life or property damage.

While modern hydraulic crawler cranes offer many benefits, including easier transportability, self-erection features, and reduced maintenance costs – the operation of these cranes is so easy that almost anyone can do it. These new cranes have increased the interest among young people of becoming crane operators. Yet, this is a double edged sword. With the certification of crane operators a requirement in many states there comes an increased responsibility for operators who are licensed. Meanwhile, the people working under our hooks, namely signal persons and riggers, are still given the liberty to run amok without standards to govern them. It is no longer surprising to me why many old-time operators are exiting this industry. More responsibility should equal more pay, but unfortunately that is not the case here in California.

Continuing education and certification

So what's a friction crawler crane owner to do? Sometimes, it means digging a little deeper into your pocket to pay for a qualified operator; other times it may mean extending your labor search out of state. Ultimately, training is one solution that can solve two major problems facing the crane industry today. Many professions, such as fire fighters, require continuing education credits. Crane operators, signal persons, and riggers could all benefit from continuing education. Many unions may have friction rigs at their training facilities, but unless the individual requests it, new operators may not be getting much seat time on a friction rig. Not to mention that they may never get the chance to fully refine their skills on the job, as the friction cranes are slowly being replaced by their hydraulic counterparts.

And until the crane operator, signal person, and rigger are all required to be certified, there will remain an unresolved problem that is the root cause of many accidents. Continuing education and certification for all three professions would create a safer and more productive working environment. ■