

Construction Winner

Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage Reno, Nevada

By Poppy Behrens

Gary Sabitini and partners at Sierra Management Group have owned a single self-storage facility in Reno, Nev. for 18 years. While it is just an ordinary traditional type of facility, it has been one of their most successful investments, despite its single negative. “We constantly get asked if we have

room for boats or cars or trailers in there and we just don’t have the space,” Sabitini says. Consequently, when he found a seven-acre parcel of property that had already been set aside for self-storage

by the 1985 master plan for Caughlin Ranch—a 2300-acre master planned community in southwest Reno—he knew it would be ideal for boat and RV storage. In spite of this, there was one glitch. The site does not meet two of the most important criteria for a successful self-storage facility: great exposure and easy access.

“To counter this, the owners and designers felt they would need to incorporate some unique features that would appeal to the potential upscale clients that reside nearby,” says Mike Crom, owner of Reno-based Crom Construction, the general contractor who brought this project to fruition. This was no easy task, however. In fact, it required overcoming some major obstacles both in site work and design.

Nevertheless, Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage opened for business in September 2003. It offers

state-of-the-art boat and RV storage, along with some very unique climate-controlled storage that is located underground. Having faced the challenges and come up with some very creative solutions, this facility has been named the *Mini-Storage Messenger’s* 2003 Facility of the Year winner in the construction category.

Meeting Challenges One At A Time

Because this facility was being built in Caughlin Ranch, the first high-profile master planned community in Reno, there were many restrictions set in place. In addition to Covenants, Codes and Restrictions (CC&Rs), there was also an Architectural Control Committee (ACC) that had final authority over all plans, color schemes, revisions, and changes. Added to that was the fact that the City of Reno had its own specific requirements that had to be met.



Photos courtesy of Larry Winkler



“The site backs up against a hill bordering the forest,” explains Jill Carter, Sabitini’s partner, “so we tried to blend it in with the environment by keeping it as natural as possible.” This was accomplished by using split-face rock and natural colors like greens and browns, along with extensive landscaping.

In order to get the optimum building area and meet the fire department’s eight percent grade specifications, a long road with an 81-foot elevation gain was required.

Another difficult factor was the actual location, which the master plan had designated as the highest point in Caughlin Ranch, giving no consideration to whether or not it was the best location for a self-storage facility. “I was concerned because the location is off the beaten path,” says Crom. “It is also built on very tough terrain.”

Adding to the complexity of the issue, soil tests revealed that there was an expansive layer of clay throughout

the site. This resulted in an 18-inch layer of clay being excavated from the entire site and replaced with select structural fill in the areas that would have concrete or asphalt laid down.

But the complexities didn’t stop there. In order to get the optimum building area and meet the fire department’s

eight percent grade specifications, a long road with an 81-foot elevation gain was required. Additionally, in order to optimize the site and maximize unit space, the hilltop building site required extensive cut and fill. It also required 25,000 feet of rockery retaining walls in order to shore up the hill and support the building pad. The cut and fill, however, provided the perfect environment for a very unique added feature—an underground storage building.

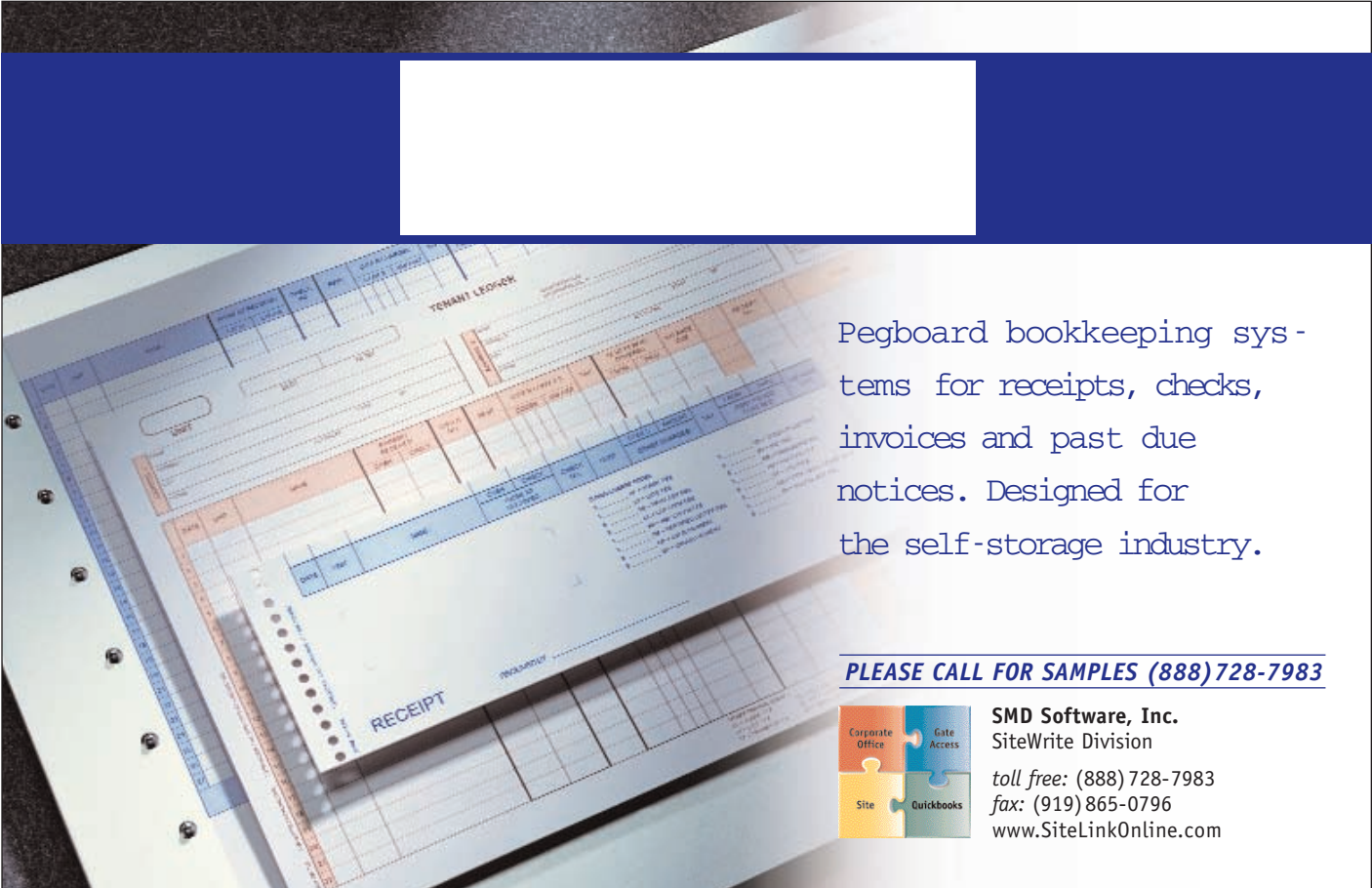
The Underground Cave

“The town that our family comes from in Italy is built on volcanic ash, and everyone there has a cave underneath their house,” says Sabitini. “They store their wine and their prosciutto and their food stuffs down there. During the summer it stays cool and they will even have their dinners in the cave. Every year when I go back there, I say, ‘That would be great to have a cave like that,’ so I started to research it.”

With all the cut and fill that had to be done, Sabitini decided that a cave might be just the answer. His idea led him to Bruce Lawton of Rohnert Park, Calif.-based BridgeTek, a distributor of CON/SPAN, a patented modular precast system for total set-in-place construction of bridges, culverts, and underground structures including vaults for wineries. These underground vaults provide many of the advantages of a traditional wine cellar or natural wine caves including natural temperature and humidity control.





“The precast pieces are delivered to the site on a truck,” says Lawton, who

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oversaw the underground component at Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage. "Typically they are eight-foot sections that are lifted off the truck with a crane and set in a cast-in-place foundation. The legs are then grouted into the foundation, it's waterproofed, and back-filled." Because the entire system is pre-engineered, it usually takes about 20 minutes per section to set on the foundation. "Even a very large structure can be set in a day, depending on the foundation. We allowed two days for this just because it was a more difficult site with very hilly terrain."

Being on a hillside definitely posed a problem. "We had extreme cover on one side and virtually no cover on the other side," says Lawton, adding that because of the steepness of the slope, there was upwards of 20 feet of fill on one side with as little as two feet on the other. "The dead load that creates on one side of the structure is difficult to design for."

In order to backfill this area, 60,000 cubic feet of material that was excavated from the upper end of the self-storage site was used. The excavation created a natural berm around the northwest and northeast sections of the property, which helped to accommodate the ACC screening requirements.

The 4,000-square-foot structure is strategically placed next to and below the main storage buildings on the hilltop. It is 120 feet deep, 30 feet wide, and extends back into the side of a hill.

"Getting it to fit into the space where we needed to cut and fill was a challenge because we needed to get that section to fit in so that it blended into the natural slope," says Crom, who has a background in underground storage construction, so was familiar with this type of project. The structure itself was clear span, which gave the flexibility to put in different walls depending on what was being stored.

Crom admits that his biggest challenge was waterproofing this underground building before backfilling over and around it. "The city required a lot of extensive landscaping so we knew that there was going to be a lot of irrigation on top of it," he says. In addition to that, there was the climatic factor—rain and snow—to consider. "We knew that we had to get the waterproofing down right."

The "bullet proof" combination turned out to be bentonite clay panels

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that were mechanically fastened to the precast concrete then overlaid with similarly fastened hydro-duct board that had a fabric coating for easy drainage. Once this was in place, back filling over the concrete structure could begin.

“We needed to build a fairly large pump house in order to meet the city’s codes for water pressure to the fire hydrants. Unfortunately, there wasn’t really any room for it.”

—Mike Crom, Owner, Crom Construction

What Sabitini has ended up storing in this climate-controlled “cave” is wine, antiques, and valuable art. “Two-thirds of the cave is for art and antique storage, and the rest is for wine,” he explains, adding that the wine section can accommodate hundreds of cases, whereas the only wine storage facility in Reno can store a mere 40 cases, thus has a constant waiting list.

The interior partitions for the wine storage area were designed and installed by Douglasville, Ga.-based DBCI. “We

installed a wine storage locker system with swing doors for this area, that incorporated a wine storage facility specific to their use,” says DBCI Regional Sales Manager Scott Sundin, who explains that the lockers were double or

triple stacked, depending on size. “We also trim-lined out all of the wine facility with DBCI’s trim-line system. It was a great use of storage space for that part of the facility.”

Because of the goods being stored in this area, security was an all-important issue. As such, the owners turned to Scottsdale, Ariz.-based PTI Integrated Systems. “The site is located on a mountainside lot with several retaining walls and elevation changes,” says PTI Business Development Representative

Gary Testa. “The wine storage area is approximately 80 feet lower in elevation than the storage buildings and RV parking area, so the conduit layout for the security/access system wiring and the camera system had to be laid out carefully and documented in order to achieve the multi-level access control needed in both the wine storage area and the main gate.”

The PTI system chosen for the facility is the Falcon system with Falcon 2000 software. This includes Apex keypads with an intercom at the gated entry, an Apex keypad at the entrance of the underground storage cave, with an additional Apex keypad at the wine storage area within the underground building. “The owners of the facility also wanted to achieve the additional access control levels without having to create multiple access codes for a single user,” says Testa. “The Falcon system was able to accommodate their request with our eight-channel relay system, combined with our state-of-the-art industry APEX keypad.”

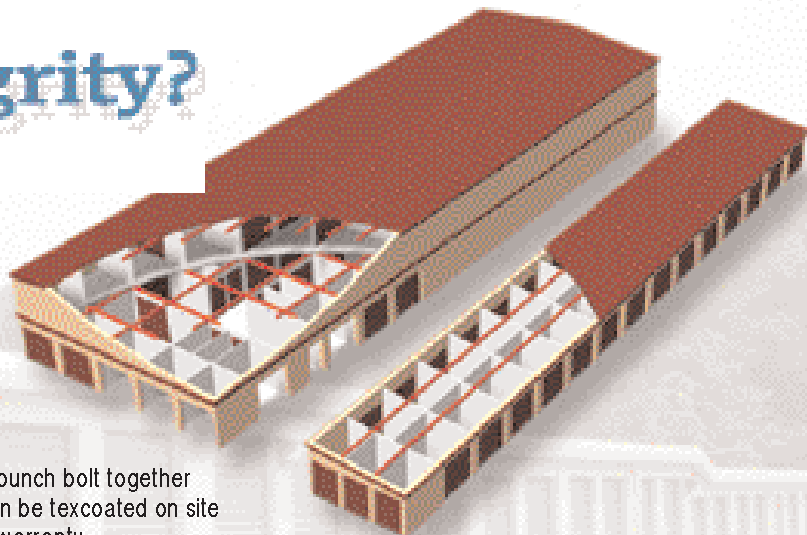
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Water Features And Challenges

When finished, the underground site was camouflaged by the rockery retaining walls that support the aboveground site. "It has a wooden door that looks like the entrance to a cave or a mine," says Sabitini. "And it turned out to be the natural place to put a waterfall."

This 35-foot waterfall is a prominent and unique feature at Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage. According to Sabitini, it is the highest waterfall in Reno. Built in two sections, it cascades down over the rocks then flows into a pond that is located near the manager's residence.

"We actually had to put the rock for the waterfall over the rockery retaining wall," says Crom. "To my knowledge, that hadn't been done before." Indeed, it is a beautiful touch to a very extraordinary building entrance.

On the other hand, water posed a problem elsewhere on the site. Because of the site elevation and the long distance from the water mains at street level far below, there was inadequate water pressure to the fire hydrants up near the storage buildings. This resulted in a sizeable threat in the event of a fire.

"We needed to build a fairly large pump house in order to meet the city's codes for water pressure to the fire hydrants," says Crom. "Unfortunately, there wasn't really any room for it." Getting creative once again, the pump house was built as a detached structure next to the manager's residence. "By doing that we were able to utilize it as a nice viewing deck for the house. It has great views of the city."

And speaking of the manager's residence, this one is far from the norm. With the design dictated by Caughlin Ranch so that it would match the upscale homes in the area, this 1,700-foot, two bedroom, two bath house is a separate structure from the adjacent office. "We wanted to capture the city view," says Crom, "and in order to do that, we had to put in a foundation that was relatively expansive. By incorporating the pump house, we were able to do that."

On The Hilltop

The upper facility at Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage is just as unique as the rest of the site. "We have a total of eight buildings up there that are

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enclosed boat and RV storage,” says Caesar Wright, president of Encinitas, Calif.-based Mako Steel, Inc., the company that supplied the storage buildings at Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage. “That tallies out to about 65,000 square feet of building area. There is also about 22,000 square feet of covered canopy storage that is built along two of the perimeter walls.”

Wright explains that the type of construction utilized at the site is exterior CMU, which is masonry. Because of its strength, this gives the buildings more longevity. “If people could fit concrete into their budget, it is the nicest method of construction for self-storage when you are talking about mullions or spacing in between doors,” he says. “Those are the areas that tend to get hit now and then. When you build them out of concrete, it is what causes the damaging blow, whereas metal takes the hit.”

The conventional storage buildings are constructed using a two-and-12-pitch on the evergreen standing seam roof. “Typically, to keep costs down, people will go with a minimal roof pitch and a Galvalume® roof,” Wright says, noting that in this case, the higher pitch with a colored roof looked a lot nicer, aesthetically.

The unit doors for Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage were provided by DBCI. “They went with our 650-Series roll-up doors,” says Sundin, explaining that the doors were made to match the facility’s custom colors and to meet their specific specs.

When it comes to security, Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage has put in all of the bells and whistles. It has a fully enclosed perimeter, with a front gate that offers tenant-only access to the property. Its state-of-the-art video surveillance system consists of 12 day/night color cameras located strategically inside the office, at the front gate, on all of the facility’s traffic isles, and on the interior of the wine storage area. Additionally, cameras are monitored from the office on a 19-inch flat screen monitor, with all camera activity recorded on a PTI Vision DVR. And for boat and RV storage, there is the option of wireless motion sensors.

“The wireless RV motion sensors are hung inside the individual RV unit,” says Testa. “Since the wireless RV motion

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sensor is a truly wireless system, we were able to accommodate inside or outside RV protection.”

Adding the efficiency of the facility is the management software—QuikStor Express—Sherman Oaks, Calif.-based QuikStor’s free software program. “It has all of the basics required to run a mini-storage facility,” says QuikStor VP of Marketing Doug Carner. “This free software can be upgraded to take digital pictures of the tenants or support pay-at-the-gate. It does, however, do what you need to run the business.” This, according to Carner, includes leases and lease addendums, reports, an automatic close-out at the end of the day, and the ability to raise rents. While this software doesn’t integrate with other companies’ security systems, that integration is available with an upgrade fee.

An Unexpected Surprise

Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage received its Certificate of Occupancy on August 28, 2003. The entire seven-acre site was used and

includes 88,360 rentable square feet with 639 units, 50 of which are canopy-covered boat and RV storage. The site also features a washing facility and an RV dumping station for customer convenience. And after being open for barely a month, the facility has passed the 19

“We got a real surprise when the facility was barely open a month and every single one of them was rented!”

—Gary Sabitini, President, Sierra Management Group

percent occupancy mark, all of which has made everyone involved with the project very happy.

Sabitini and Carter did, however, have one very big surprise. “As an afterthought, we put in 10 super big units,” says Sabitini. “They are 15-by-60 and are climate controlled with heat.” The thought was that maybe there would be a few people who wanted to store their big RVs at the site—the \$300,000 to \$400,000 busses—and not have to winterize them. “We got a real surprise

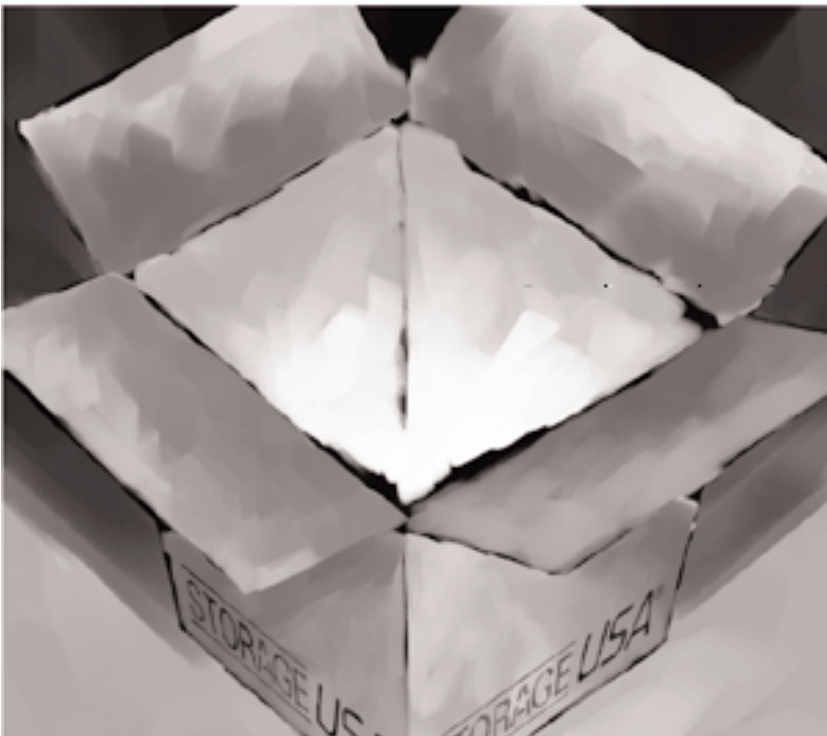
when the facility was barely open a month and every single one of them was rented! When we built them, we weren’t even sure anyone would want them!”

In summing it up, perhaps PTI’s Testa says it best. “Because Caughlin Ranch Mini-Warehouse & RV Storage is located

in a very upscale residential neighborhood, it has many beautiful interior appointments—especially within the wine storage area. And this site definitely showcases the natural beauty of this Sierra Nevada mountain region. We are proud to have been chosen to work with the owner, general contractor and all of the subcontractors involved in bringing this state-of-the-art facility to Reno.” ■

Poppy Behrens is the executive editor of the *Mini-Storage Messenger* magazine.

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