

Trench collapse

A homeowner changes his mind, a boss leaves to do errands and the crew makes a fatal mistake



Illustration by Don Lomax

December 30: a time when the days are short, the weather is less than ideal and everyone's in a hurry to finish work and go home for the holidays. Except, one construction worker never made it home.

On this day, an excavation contractor was digging footings for a new home. The homeowner decided to change the plans from a two-car garage to a three-car garage, which moved the trench for the footing out into an area that had already been excavated and backfilled. The change also increased the depth of the trench from 3 feet to 8 feet.

After discussing the changes, the contractor left the jobsite to run errands. He told the crew supervisor to take over, but warned workers to stay out of the trench. However,

the contractor had no written safety program and his Latino workers had little training and experience.

With the homeowner on the jobsite growing visibly impatient, a 32-year-old worker asked the crew leader if he could go into the trench to clean out some dirt. The crew leader told him to go in, but to come right back out. The worker jumped in and walked to the deep end. A fissure opened on the surface and the wall of the trench collapsed, covering the worker completely.

The homeowner called 911, and when the rescue crews arrived they ordered everybody out of the area. They used trench plates to secure the walls and removed 4 feet of dirt to retrieve the worker, who was pronounced dead at the scene.

How could this accident have been prevented?

- The employer should have had a competent person conduct daily inspections of excavations and adjacent areas, and take the appropriate steps to protect workers.
- The employer should have used adequate protection systems (like a trench box or shoring).
- If not using protection systems, the contractor should have sloped the trench with the slope angle determined by soil type as defined by OSHA.
- The employer should have developed and enforced a safety program and provided training in the native language of his workers.

More on this accident can be found at: www.cprw.com. Center for Construction Research and training.
www.cdc.gov/niosh/face/in-house/full200504.html



Date of safety talk: _____ Leader: _____
Attending: _____