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The Rural Route

By Mary Shafer | Filed Under: Cover Story

January 2009 Issue

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Overview: Melding old-fashioned customer service and careful diversification, Bailey's Septic Services celebrates four generations serving customers in Pennsylvania Dutch country



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Long history echoes in the clatter of horses' hooves on asphalt as they pull black buggies up and down the rolling swales of southeastern Pennsylvania's Amish country. Amid centuries-old family farms, a different kind of small business history plays out in Reading, the only city in Berks County.

Atop a small rise on Pottsville Pike sits Bailey's Septic Services Inc. Inside a large building, a dozen people build on a 74-year family legacy of planned diversification, measured risk-taking and a keen sense of what the market wants.

Careful fiscal management and hands-on business involvement by Bailey's principals has built a reputation for responsive service.

THE FAMILY TREE

Morris Bailey started his septic pumping and well drilling business in the depths of the Great Depression. It was 1935, and though money was scarce, people still needed fresh drinking water and a place to get rid of it later. It was the beginning of the firm's market-driven approach.

Bailey had several sons glad for the built-in jobs, so he had no scarcity of ready labor. Several years later, one of those sons, John Bailey, took over the septic pumping. In 1969, John Bailey died and his wife took over the business. Their son, Les Bailey, had worked in the business since he was 16, and bought it in 1974. "She was a saver, I was a spender, so I've got to give her credit," Les Bailey says of his wife, Pat, the keeper of finances. "If I handled the money, I'd have bought a new truck every year. But I did the work and she did the financing part, and that's why we did so well."

Pat Bailey's strength is in determining when old equipment is approaching the point of diminishing returns, so large purchases are made on a true need basis and not simply on desire. Still, she appreciates the advantages new technology can bring. Carefully weighing these against cash outlay, she has kept the company's risk manageable.

One good example is her approval of the purchase of a new truck that features a See Level flow meter, which indicates how many gallons have been pumped out of a tank.

"That really helps back up our prices," she says, "because you can just show someone how much you took out of their tank. It used to be we could give a price and people would accept it, but now they want to know what they're getting for their money. Some people think their tank is, say, 250 gallons, but then the meter reads 295. If we can tell them our driver logged 295 gallons off the meter, then we have a way of justifying our charge."

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The septic pumping side of the business now includes a fleet of four service rigs: 2007 International 4400 DT500 with 3,500-gallon aluminum tank and Masport HXL 400 pump; 2003 International 4000 with 4,000-gallon aluminum tank and Wittig RFL pump built by Allied Tank. They also have a 1998 International 4700 with 2,300-gallon steel tank and Jurop 260 pump; and a 1995 International 4400 with 2,500-gallon steel tank and Moro USA Inc. Turbo PM80 pump, both built by Sanitary Liquid Waste.

Eldest son Todd Bailey joined his parents in 1994 at age 27, starting a portable restroom division on a shoestring and helping with septic pumping when needed. He bought 14 units and bet the market would support them. "We didn't even have a service vehicle, just put a tank on one of our septic trucks." It was a risk, but he believed it would pay off.

His mother recalls, "To haul the portables, we had a used trailer that Todd's uncle fabricated so it would carry six standard units." And it remained that way until she was convinced the business was viable and her son was serious about it.

He is, having built his inventory to 617 total units: 550 PolyPortables Standard models; 40 PolyJohn PJ III; nine PolyPortables Enhanced Access Units; 15 PolyPortables Ambassadors; three PolyJohn Enterprises Corp. Fleet units; and eight PolyPortables SuperTwin hand-wash stations.

This array is serviced by a fleet of six portable restroom trucks: a 2006 Ford F-550 Super Duty Power Stroke with 1,100-gallon steel tank and Masport HXL 4DE pump from Imperial Industries; 2006 GMC 5500 Topkick with a 1,100-gallon steel tank and Jurop 260 pump from Pik Rite Inc.; 2002 Isuzu NPR with 900-gallon steel tank and Masport H series pump from Keith Huber Inc.; 1999 GMC slide-in stake body delivery truck with 450-gallon steel tank and Masport M4 pump; 1996 Ford Super Duty with 900-gallon aluminum tank and Masport M4 pump; and 1994 Ford F-250 service and delivery truck.

"We still bill them all as separate businesses, even though the boys own their own divisions," says Les Bailey. The umbrella business is Bailey's Septic Services Inc. Portables are under T.M. Bailey Portable Toilets, and septic inspections are done under Bailey's Inspection Services.

UPON FURTHER INSPECTION

The septic system inspection service was the idea of younger son Scott Bailey. "It started about five years ago," he explains. "Using opportunities we uncovered through our septic pumping service, we decided to get involved in system inspections."

He went to the Pennsylvania Septage Management Association's 3-day offsite facility training. This program teaches to state standards and protocols, requiring a written test to become certified as an Advanced Onlot Wastewater Treatment System Inspector. Then he became an instructor for the Real Estate Education Center in York (www.real-estateeducationcenter.org), educating real estate agents about inspections.

This instruction discusses the importance of proper septic system maintenance and the direct relationship it has to real estate transactions. Studies show a higher percentage of properly maintained systems pass inspection tests required at sale, while poorly maintained systems tend to have issues that complicate a sale.

Through word-of-mouth and referrals, he says, the inspection business "pretty much took off from there." Some of those referrals come from pumping customers, and the advantage has been reciprocal.

"Doing inspections helps us get more pumping business, absolutely," he says. "It's not only the pumping we're doing at the inspection, but that contact also serves as an introduction to new people moving into the area. We hope they'll become customers for life."

Scott Bailey encourages buyers to be present at every inspection so they can be educated about their systems, maintenance and water conservation practices, and safe types of system additives. "A lot of new homeowners have moved here from having public sewer, and they don't even know what a septic system is.

I've come to realize that the educational aspect of the inspection is the most important, because most people just don't have any idea what it takes to properly maintain a septic system.

"We highly recommend digging down to the manhole and then installing risers so they don't have to go through all that hassle in the future," he says. "Some people think you're just trying to drive more revenue, but we just want to do the job properly so we have repeat customers in the future."

LOOKING AHEAD

The downward trend in new construction still hasn't hit that hard in Bailey's territory. Todd Bailey remarks that, "I'm actually still going really strong in construction rentals, but a distinct rise in the cost of doing business is the biggest trend I see."

In hindsight, he says one way to save significantly on expenditures would be to eliminate working for construction contractors and focus only on school sporting events and special events, "so you don't need employees. You'd get rid of having to deal with harsh winters, workers' compensation, medical costs and equipment replacement; all the hassles of having employees."

His father, Les Bailey, agrees with this outlook for septic pumping as well. "I'd agree with staying small, maybe just you and one other person. The overhead's just too high with employees."

And yet this grandson of the company founder seems to belie his own words. Nearly three years into what he calls "early retirement" at age 64, his advice is still highly valued as a company asset. His history doesn't appear to be that of a proponent of limited growth.

family for 75 years and it makes me feel proud when I see those trucks driving around with the Bailey name on them."

Looks like the talk about staying small will stay just that ... talk. The Bailey boys clearly have other plans.



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