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Keep On Truckin'

After 53 years and 5,000 septic tank installations, Texas onsite worker Al Pavlicek insists he'll keep busy and enjoy family in his retirement

By Jim Kneiszel



Were they really the *good old days*?

If you talk to Alfonzo "Al" Pavlicek about his long career installing septic systems, you might wonder why so many people look back fondly at the way things used to be.

When Pavlicek first grabbed the pick and shovel for Van Delden Wastewater Systems in San Antonio, Texas, the crews had a daily quota: 150 feet of trench, 18 inches deep and 2 feet wide. It was 1960 and much of the dirt work was done by hand.

"I've still got calluses from I don't know how many years back," recalls Pavlicek, 73, whose bosses estimated he'd installed 5,000 septic tanks after 50 years. "Sometimes you would think, 'I can't do this.' But you can, especially if you're young. The shovel was there and the pick was there ... pain and sweat, that's about all it is."

When Pavlicek reflects on a lifetime working in the industry, he sees equipment advances that have made the job faster and easier, and onsite system options for customers that work better and are incredibly reliable.

But still, at its heart installing septic systems remains difficult, challenging work that only a small percentage of the American workforce feels called to do, he says. And Pavlicek congratulates anyone who's tough enough and determined to make installing a career.

"It's a good, hard job and you make a lot of people happy," says the installer who retired recently.

A LOYAL WORKER

Pavlicek worked for three generations of Van Deldens: Gary, Garrett, and now brother and sister Chad and Courtney Van Delden. He started making 75 cents an hour, but recalls how the company boosted his wage to \$1 a few weeks after he started on an installing crew. His hard work and loyalty over the years was answered by loyalty from his bosses. That's one reason he put in so many years for the company.

"If you have people who, whatever you need, they're there to help you, it's kind of hard to leave them," he says. "Mr. Van Delden would always loan me money if I needed to take the kids or my wife to the doctor. How can you leave



ABOVE: On his 50th anniversary on the job, Al Pavlicek, left, is shown with three generations of company leaders, left to right, Gary, Garrett and Chad Van Delden. RIGHT: Al Pavlicek at the controls of his trusty Case backhoe installing a septic system in 1999. The equipment today beats working all day with a shovel and a pick like he did in 1960, Pavlicek says. (Photos courtesy of Van Delden Wastewater Systems)



someone who would take the shirt off his back to help you? I had to repay him by working my butt off and doing the best job I could."

Another reason Pavlicek stayed in the industry all these years was that he genuinely enjoyed the work, no matter how many days the summer heat rose past 100.

"I really liked to work outdoors; I don't care for an inside job," says Pavlicek, echoing a sentiment I hear frequently from installing pros. "Another thing I loved about it was that every three days I was working at a new location. We put in septic tanks all over this side of Texas, 150 miles either way from San Antonio."

BETTER SYSTEMS

New locations every week meant new challenges in topography, soils and other site considerations, requiring the installing crews to come up with fresh solutions for wastewater treatment. During Pavlicek's tenure, the earth moving machinery and system components improved dramatically, meaning his crews could get things done more efficiently and with less effort, and deliver systems that worked better and will last longer. That's the biggest reward for the onsite installer, he says.

"Every year they made a new machine and they just kept improving them. Nowadays you can hardly wear a machine out. They're too durable. Throughout the years they would fix what was weak about a machine, so now when you buy a new machine, all you have to do is maintain it."

Al Pavlicek

In the early days, systems consisted of a septic tank and concrete drain tile running out in the backyard, and with little or no government regulation of the industry, corners could be cut by competitors, he says. But as the industry has grown up, systems are better built, strictly regulated and have the potential to last a lot longer.

"It's good for the homeowner. He gets a better quality job for what he's paid for," he says. "The way the old systems were designed, you were lucky if you could get 22 years out of them. Now you can get more than that, not just because of the variety of systems out there, but because you are required to have more maintenance, too."

The machines used to install the system components are vastly improved, too, according to Pavlicek, who was often at the controls of a Case backhoe over the decades.

"I noticed every year they made a new machine and they just kept improving them. Nowadays you can hardly wear a machine out. They're too durable," he says. "Throughout the years they would fix what was weak about a machine, so now when you buy a new machine, all you have to do is maintain it."

FIND A GOOD EMPLOYER

Pavlicek worked through many Texas booms and busts, and he and wife Martha raised four children and have seven grandchildren. Retirement comes as

his knees and lower back are giving him some trouble. "I feel like a half-wore-out horse. Even though I'm not pulling the plow, I still feel it," he says. He hopes to do more fishing and hunting with family. "I've got to keep on truckin' somehow."

Pavlicek's not sure whether there will be enough people ready to take on the hard work and challenge of installing septic systems in the future. For young people who want to work outside and pursue a career in the industry, he offers a simple bit of advice.

"In this business, there's lots of competition and a lot of work out there. Find somebody good to work for," he says. "I was lucky enough to work with people who appreciated everything I did for them. It's hard to find somebody who will take care of you for so many years."

Good luck, Al, and enjoy a well-deserved retirement! 