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Guide**

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Installer Gary Sloan (foreground) installs drip distribution lines at a local park as installation assistant Mike Levario operates the Ditch Witch RT40 rock saw and truck and loader operator James Gallegos operates the loader in the background. (Photography by Eduardo Romero)

No Surprises

Good information and clear communication help Van Delden Wastewater provide prompt, high-quality service and keep customers coming back

Van Delden Wastewater Service Company Inc., Boerne, Texas

OWNERS: Garrett and Pam Van Delden

YEARS IN BUSINESS: 73

MARKET AREA: 100-mile radius

SPECIALTY: Complete onsite installation and service

EMPLOYEES: 18

AFFILIATIONS: Texas Onsite Wastewater Association, NAWT

WEB SITE: www.vdwws.com



By Gil Longwell

If you're in the family, there is an expectation you'll go into the family business," says Garrett Van Delden. For four generations, Van Delden children have grown up around the family business, and they have all gone to work in it, though not necessarily right away.

Seeing how hard his dad and grandfather worked, Garrett Van Delden first chose to work elsewhere. "I was able to get by OK," he says. But it wasn't until he worked for someone else that he realized the rewards a family business brings.

So, in 1977, Garrett came on board with his dad, Gary. In 1997, Garrett and his wife Pam bought the firm, Van Delden Wastewater Service Company. "It was the right move," Garrett says. "Being in business lets us get more out of life.

It has created opportunities that we would not have had working for someone else."

In 2003, daughter Courtney came on board, and in 2006, son Chad did likewise. Each plays an important role in the company, based in Boerne, Texas, about 30 miles northwest of San Antonio. The business serves customers within a 100-mile radius.

Focused diversity

In 1937 Gary Van Delden's business had four somewhat related services: crane services, general excavating, general contracting and masonry. "Back then granddad molded his own 300-gallon septic tanks," says Garrett.

For many years, Garrett's dad and his three uncles each ran one line of business. In 1972, Gary bought the excavating business,

"We are honest and forthright in all of our customer contacts. We do not want anything about our work to be a surprise to the customer. This starts with the first customer contact and really never stops."

Garrett Van Delden

which by then had begun to gravitate toward onsite treatment work. Since then, the business has evolved to focus on onsite services exclusively.

Under that broad umbrella, there is great diversity of opportunity, and today the company is positioned to handle any onsite-related request. Services range from site suitability evaluations and landowner consultation, to system design and

Fifty Years On

Alfonzo (Al) Pavlicek found Van Delden Wastewater Systems a "comfortable place to work." After 15 years on the job, the business changed hands, yet Pavlicek barely noticed.

"If you don't notice time passing, you must be comfortable doing what you're doing," he reasons. When 22 more years passed without much notice, he again found himself working for a new owner. In January 2010, he marked 50 years working for Van Delden. Through the years it has been a comfortable relationship.

"There was a time when we could put absorption laterals in areas where we blasted the rock to loosen it up," he says. "We can't do that anymore. Blasting was an art that has been supplanted, mainly by technology."

"It was common for us to have as many as 18 men using 115-pound jackhammers to break rock," Pavlicek says. "Today, one person using a machine equipped with a 1,200-pound hoe-ram can do two to three times more work than those 18 could! Today, we break rock for building sewers and tank excavations, but

not for absorption areas.

"Before joining Van Delden Wastewater, Pavlicek wanted to work for the city's utility service, but they only paid 75 cents per hour. He took a job with Van Delden for the same money, and it was the right move.

"I was a hard worker then, and I am now too," he says. "After three days on the job, the boss, Garrett's grandfather, came by and said, 'You're a hard worker and you're giving us a full day's work.' I got a 33 percent raise on the spot!"

Pavlicek says going to work keeps him young. So does his love of hunting and fishing. But what really makes him feel best comes at the end of a job.

"When the owner expresses appreciation for a job well done, that makes me feel good," he says. That's true whether the good job involves a neat job site, a nicely restored lawn, or a tree saved: "It is the pat on the back that is my most treasured reward."

It is a reward his bosses and customers have presented time and again — a simple gesture that never goes unnoticed.

permit application, to installation.

The company also provides ongoing service through maintenance, operation or management contracts, basic component repairs and treatment tank pumping. Relying on inspection standards he wrote by himself, Van Delden fields system inspectors who evaluate existing systems before property transfers.

This diversity helps the company overcome downturns in individual segments while overall it continues to prosper. For example, installation work is slow now with the depressed market for new homes, but pumping, maintenance, management and component repairs have enabled the company to avoid layoffs.

All sides of the business create contacts that typically evolve into long-term customer relationships. The company continues to serve systems first encountered when Van Delden's dad or grandfather were

the owners. That helps build the customer list.

Not isolated

Van Delden Wastewater operates from a two-acre site next to an Interstate highway. "Our purpose-built building lets us leave work at the office," Van Delden says. The facility is a central base of operations that includes an office and shop, a modest parts warehouse, and outside space to stockpile aggregate, topsoil and sand. Fuel storage tanks hold gasoline and diesel fuel, purchased in bulk. Supporting company operations are:

- A 2004 Case 590 Super L backhoe with a 1,500-lb Tramac hammer.
- Two 2006 Case 580 Super M backhoes with 1,200-lb Kelly hammers.
- A 1999 Case 580 Super L backhoe.



Van Delden Wastewater Service Company is a family-owned business. From left, daughter Courtney Van Delden, co-owners Pam and Garrett Van Delden, and son Chad Van Delden.

- A 2003 Takeuchi TB015 mini-excavator.
- A 1992 Case 1840 skid loader.
- A 2006 Ditch Witch RT40 rock saw.
- A 2001 Mack CH613 15-cubic-yard dump truck.

All this equipment and three vacuum trucks are stored and serviced on site.

The company's 18 employees have focused tasks but are also cross-trained to some extent. Except for state license or registration restrictions, there is usually someone available to do any task required. Three employees are licensed site evaluators,

and one is a registered sanitarian.

Pam Van Delden, office manager, handles accounting and payroll and keeps things flowing through the office. Receptionist Stacy Brockwell directs callers to the best resource and schedules service calls. Garrett and Chad Van Delden coordinate work assignments and handle job costing and estimating.

Son-in-law Jeff Supplee is a state-registered sanitarian who handles system design, while Kimberly Beaton supports his work as a drafter. Supplee's wife, Courtney, manages pumping operations and real estate inspections.

In the field, Alfonzo Pavlicek (a 50-year employee) and Gary Sloan operate equipment and serve as on-site supervisors, guiding helpers Mike Levario and Victor Sifuentes. Maintenance and service technicians Ken Munson, Anthony Edgell and Bill Hoover keep nearly two-thousand onsite systems running smoothly.

No surprises

"We are honest and forthright in all of our customer contacts," Van Delden says. "We do not want anything about our work to be a surprise to the customer. This starts with the first customer contact and really never stops."

Typical discussion subjects include price, conditions of service, what to expect at each stage of a job and under what circumstances extra charges may apply. All that information finds its way into written customer contracts.

In the company's semi-arid area, lawn-watering sprinklers are common and unseen. "We use sprinkler and driveway damage waivers to shield us from liability for damage to these features," Van Delden says. No subject is off the discussion table, and employees treat every question as legitimate.

The direct communication style may scare off a customer now and then, but mostly it helps avoid misunderstandings and surprises. Close attention to every detail of every job also keeps surprises to a minimum.

Meanwhile, the office serves as an information clearinghouse. Callers speak directly with people well-versed in onsite system issues. Van Delden believes it is essential for callers to reach a live, knowledgeable person in the office, not a voice mail system or a crew member on a machine on a job site somewhere.

The company has an electronic customer database. Van Delden created the file, which houses a wealth of information. Before crew members leave for a job site, they can access key information about the customer, the system and its maintenance history. That helps them arrive prepared to get right to work.

Changing markets

Van Delden likes subdivision



work where his customer is a single large builder. Such customers save significant money through bulk purchasing of advanced treatment units and system components and supplies.

These projects build an immediate and close bond with the eventual homeowner and lets Van Delden tune the system more closely to the family's lifestyle.

"In all situations, we recommend

"I will not risk the reputation of this company to install a minimum system that will not meet the owners' long-term needs."

Garrett Van Delden

"These jobs keep us busy for longer periods of time," Van Delden says. The arrangement also cuts sales and marketing costs and reduces overhead. Unfortunately, as market conditions change, multiple-home projects are becoming scarce, but another profitable segment is working with custom builders and individual land-owners evaluating sites and choosing the most appropriate system.

systems that are above the regulatory minimum," Van Delden says. "I will not risk the reputation of this company to install a minimum system that will not meet the owners' long-term needs."

He has walked away from jobs where the customer wanted the minimum, when the family's lifestyle would generate much more than minimum design flows.

Service technician Ken Munson uses a flowmeter from Dwyer Instruments Inc. to check the airflow volume on an aerobic treatment unit.

New opportunities

Van Delden expects to see continued growth opportunities in the next five years, although not in large numbers of new systems. Maintenance contracts for advanced technology components and entire systems will grow.

The operation and maintenance business focuses on treatment units from Clearstream Wastewater Systems Inc. "We are experienced with these systems and stock a complete range of maintenance parts for them," Van Delden says. He believes it is too costly to maintain expertise and parts inventory for a wide range of technologies.

"The most common treatment unit we install is Clearstream's 600NC3T aerobic system. Clearstream products are the only advanced treatment units we have under maintenance contract." Those units discharge to a variety of dispersal systems: drip irrigation, spray irrigation, conventional drainfields or low-pressure distribution.

Some installers, while competent to install a Clearstream unit, subcontract warranty and service work to Van Delden as a third-party provider. "Our business gets a good number of referrals from homeowners when they discover their maintenance provider cannot meet their needs," Van Delden says.

For 73 years, Van Delden Wastewater Systems has been satisfying customers with solutions for every onsite need. Change has helped drive focused diversity and has created new markets. It all adds up to a bright future for the next generations of Van Deldens who take over the family enterprise. ■

MORE INFO:

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