

Local family business is flush with success

BY RANDY LANKFORD

As the third-generation owner of the business his grandfather, Frank Van Delden, started in 1937, Garrett Van Delden, 50, might feel some pressure to maintain the family's legacy. If he does, it doesn't show.

Sitting in his office, surrounded by Jimmy Buffett memorabilia, Van Delden doesn't appear to have a care in the world.

"Oh yeah, I'm a real Parrot Head," he says, proudly invoking the nickname used by Buffett's fans. "I founded the Parrot Head Club in San Antonio."

The owner of Van Delden On-site Wastewater Systems doesn't appear to be the type to let the stress of running a business keep him from enjoying life.

"You have to have a sense of humor," says Don Craighead, owner of Craighead Homes, another multi-generation family business. "Not everything's going to go exactly according to plan. You have to be able to roll with the punches. Garrett's good at that."

Craighead's grandfather began building custom homes in San Antonio in 1923. He passed the business on to his son in 1946. He, in turn, handed it over to his son, Don, in 1980.

"My dad worked with Garrett's dad, Gary. We've been doing business with the Van Deldens for 40 years," Don Craighead says. "I build eight or 10 homes a year. They average over 4,000 square feet. By the time people are ready to buy a custom home like that, they've already owned several homes, so sometimes they have someone they like to use. I always tell them about the Van Deldens."

Van Delden's office, storage, manufacturing and service years cover 1.8 acres at 26665 Interstate Highway 10, just north of Boerne Stage Road. Inside his office, along with the Buffett trinkets, are dozens of photos depicting the history of the family business. They are arranged in framed collages and organized by year.

"My grandfather came to America from Germany in 1907. He came through Ellis Island," Van Delden recalls. "He moved to Florida and then somehow ended up in San Antonio in the mid '20's. He was doing masonry work on buildings downtown. He also bought and sold new and used pipe. He bought a piece of property down on Nogalitos Street in 1927. There's still a giant "V" there. About 1937, he built some septic tank forms. This business evolved out of the other businesses he was involved in at the time."

Growing up

The Van Delden family business has grown considerably since then. In addition to installations, the company also pumps, repairs and

maintains its products. Septic systems typically cost between \$7,000 and \$10,000 installed.

The Van Deldens have installed more than 8,000 septic systems, or On-Site Sewerage Facilities (OSSF's), since 1975, when Texas began requiring installation permits. While Van Delden declined to reveal annual revenues, he says sales continue to increase between eight and 10 percent yearly. Besides the owners, the firm employs more than 15 people.

"My grandfather died the day after I was born," Van Delden says. "My dad had some brothers who were in the business also. One was in the crane part of the business, another was in tractor repair and my dad ran the septic system part of it. They were all under one roof back then, in 1955. They all split up in 1972. My dad took the septic system business and renamed it Van Delden Service Company."

Van Delden credits his father with growing the business. Developments like Shavano Park, Hollywood Park and others on what were — at the time — the fringes of San Antonio were prime targets for the septic system business.

"Those developments weren't on the city system back then. (Some of those areas still do not have sewer access.) That was all rural," Van Delden explains. "They were all septic systems. Dad really grew the business in the 50s, 60s and 70s."

Van Delden describes a simpler time.

"Back then, you just went out and shook hands and went to work. There weren't any permits or anything like that," he says. "Then the state came along and started changing things. It's still changing."

"He had the business on Rochelle Road (on the city's Northwest Side) until 1997. We moved here in 1999," Van Delden adds.

Growth today comes mainly from referrals. Thomas Blackmon, a real estate agent with The Home Team in San Antonio, refers all his buyers to Van Delden.

"I got sued over a septic system back in the 80s. It wasn't my fault, but because the inspector didn't do his job right, I had a problem," Blackmon says. "Now when I sell rural property, I require my clients to use Van Delden. If they insist on using someone else, I make them sign a waiver saying that I'm not responsible if something goes wrong with their system. Garrett's not the cheapest around, but their work is exceptional. You never have to worry about anything."

Craighead remembers one problem Van Delden solved.

"There was a house one time that every time we'd get a heavy rain, the system would back up into the house. Nobody could figure out what



was causing it," Craighead says. "I called Garrett and he was able to determine that there was an underground spring under the lateral beds. When we'd get a lot of rain, the spring would rise and flood the beds causing the system to back up. He moved the lateral beds and solved the problem."

"Reputation is everything," Van Delden stresses. "Most of our business comes from word of mouth. We get referrals from all over, but it's mostly from our residential customers. They tell their neighbors and friends about us."

Future generation

Van Delden has already made arrangements to hand that reputation over to the next generation. His daughter, Courtney, works in the permits department and does mortgage inspections alongside her mother, Pam.

"We were already married when I started working here," Pam Van Delden explains. "I started out working for his (Garrett's) dad."

Like most young men in high school, Garrett didn't know what he was going to do with his life. He just didn't think it would include digging ditches and laying pipes.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I sure knew what I didn't want to do. I saw the worst part of the business possible when I was in high school working for Dad," he says.

"There was never any pressure for me to go into the family business," Courtney adds. "I worked here as a receptionist during the summers in high school and college. I liked working with my parents. I liked what I was doing, so when I graduated from college I started working here full time."

Courtney, who is 24 years old, says there's some comfort in knowing what she's going to be doing for the next 30 years.

"A lot of people my age don't know that. I know I'm going to get to work with my parents and do something I enjoy," she says.

"I don't know about another 30 years," her father says with a laugh. "I don't plan to be here that long. I'm ready for her to take over right now. I'll go fishing."

Parrot Head that he is, he'll more likely go to a Jimmy Buffett show.