



Technician Sam Biggio of Plummer's Disposal Services cleans a row of Five Peaks portable restrooms. (Photos by Russell Climie)

## Profile

### Plummer's Septic Tank Wyoming, Mich.

Owner: Richard Plummer  
 Founded: 1957  
 Employees: 20  
 Service area: 40-mile radius from Grand Rapids  
 Specialties: Pumping septic tanks, drain line cleaning and televising and grease traps; septic tank inspections



### Plummer's Environmental Bryon Center, Mich.

Owner: Todd Plummer  
 Founded: 1987  
 Employees: 30  
 Service area: 50-mile radius from Grand Rapids  
 Specialties: Liquid waste hauling, cleaning and televising sewer and storm lines, pipe lining, water main pre-cleaning, hydroexcavating, power washing, and emergency spill response

### Plummer's Disposal Service Bryon Center, Mich.

Owner: Nick Plummer  
 Founded: 2005  
 Employees: 4  
 Service area: 50-mile radius from Grand Rapids  
 Specialties: Solid waste disposal and portable restrooms  
 Affiliations: National Association of Wastewater Transporters Inc.

# Plummers On Duty

**Three brothers run distinct and successful businesses to carry on 50-year winning family tradition in the wastewater industry**

*By Scottie Dayton*

Needing extra cash to support his wife and two children, Warren Plummer of Wyoming, Mich., had a 500-gallon tank fabricated and mounted on his late-1940s Ford pickup. He added a small gasoline engine to run a 5-hp diaphragm pump, and opened Plummer's Septic Tank in 1957. Warren, 18, had learned the trade from his father, who installed conventional onsite systems.

After pumping nights and weekends for three years, Warren was earning more money working on Saturday than he made all week at his day job. He started pumping full time in 1960 and soon branched into onsite installations and construction trenching, manufactured precast concrete septic tanks, rented and serviced portable restrooms, and created Plummer's Environmental to haul liquid industrial

waste and do hydroexcavating and jet-vac work for municipalities.

Plummer's sons worked with him, but he always encouraged them to follow their hearts and didn't force the business on them. Richard, 43, Todd, 40, and Nick, 29, inherited their father's independence and love of the outdoors. When the time came, they were ready to guide the Plummer business through its next 50 years.

#### **NO HOUSE BIG ENOUGH**

According to Warren, passing a family business from one generation to the next required grooming those who want it, then selling to them while they were young and had the drive and stamina to take on financial risks. He understood that once his sons were 40 and established in life, they would have no desire to upset the status quo.

**“ONCE I DECIDED TO STOP INSTALLING AND TRENCHING IN 1998 AND FOCUS ON SERVICE WORK, IT WAS LIKE GETTING A SACK OF POTATOES OFF MY BACK. KEEPING THE VARIOUS DIVISIONS UNDER CONTROL WAS ALMOST TOO MUCH.”**

**Richard Plummer**

“Dad’s motto was, ‘No house is big enough for two families,’” says Richard. “Once we were married with kids of our own, we wanted our independence.” When the eldest son offered to buy a portion of the family business, Warren sold him Plummer’s Septic Tank in 1994. They also agreed to sell the portable sanitation division with its 600 units from Olympia Fiberglass Industries Inc. to someone outside the family.

“I was 31, and Dad said that if I needed something, call; otherwise, I was on my own,” says Richard. “He stayed away so our employees wouldn’t wonder to whom they should listen.”

Consequently, Plummer’s Environmental became a separate entity, moving to a new shop in Byron Center 10 miles away. Warren, his wife, Marlene, and Todd were partners, with Todd running the daily operations. In 1990, they had built a pretreatment system to handle oil, wastewater, car wash waste, and all industrial and municipal waste. When Warren died seven years later, Todd, age 30, bought the business.

For 40 years, Plummer’s Septic had two and three crews installing onsite systems, manufacturing pre-cast tanks, and trenching. Then, in 1996, dealers began leasing excavating equipment with no money down. So many people jumped into excavation that prices plummeted.

Meanwhile, Richard was attending seminars conducted by Frank Blau, a plumbing authority on business management. His message — that business owners must know what their costs are and charge

accordingly — convinced Richard to cost account everything. The numbers showed that for the last two years, trenching and installation work had generated only enough to pay salaries and invoices. All the profit came from service work.

“I had to make some tough choices,” said Richard. “Once I decided to stop installing and trenching in 1998 and focus on service work, it was like getting a sack of potatoes off my back. Keeping the various divisions under control was almost too much.”

This wasn’t the first time the company faced difficulties. The economic depression of the early 1970s forced 24 building contractors into bankruptcy. The lost income hit Plummer’s Septic hard. A second recession in the early 1980s drove more builders out of business. It was a wicked one-two punch.

“It was rough,” says Richard, who joined the business full time after graduating from high school in 1981. “Dad kept five of his 25 employees, and we worked 90 hours a week. He didn’t spend any money, because Dad prided himself on always paying his bills.” The lean years taught Warren’s sons to tough it out and, like their father, honor their word.

#### **WE ARE YOUR SOLUTION**

Focusing strictly on service work, Richard enlarged his client base to include septic tank-related issues for real estate agents, including onsite inspections. Today, his customers are 70 percent residential and 30 percent commercial, mainly restaurants and

Pictured (from left), Nick, Richard and Todd Plummer carry on the family tradition of quality service started by their father, Warren Plummer.



Technician Shawn Blouw pumps a wet well with a Vactor 2115 at a recycling center in Grand Rapids, Mich.



food services, such as bakeries. Plummer’s Septic services a 40-mile radius from Grand Rapids, but grease trap work is statewide. All 20 employees reflect the company’s motto: We are proud of our W.A.Y.S., or We Are Your Solution.

The original three, homemade pumper trucks have increased to 13. The majority are Kenworth T800 trucks with 4,000-gallon aluminum tanks. Richard also has two sewer cleaning vans pulling trailer jettors. The family prefers Kenworth chassis and buys most vehicles from Jack Doheny Supplies. The entire fleet is painted Inca Gold, a pale yellow color Warren created in 1957. Vehicles are trimmed in white with forest green lettering. Company logos are similar.

One advantage Richard sees in doing just service work is that two or three customers can’t knock the business for a financial loop. “We do a whole lot of \$200 or \$300 jobs,” he says. “Of course, we want to be paid, but if some customers don’t, I won’t break into a cold sweat.”



Richard Plummer (left) wraps a hose around a vacuum truck after a job is completed. Plummer (below) pumps a residential septic job.



The other major change in the company occurred in 1996 when the family built a 10,000-square-foot pretreatment facility on its five acres. "We were running out of agricultural fields to land-apply septage, and found that we couldn't meet EPA (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) requirements on a daily basis," Richard says. "It was time to do something different."

Richard envisions the day when Plummer's Septic branches into additional locations. He already has a similar venture in Texas, and has purchased a septic tank service company in Ionia, Mich. "Having businesses in more than one location is a learning experience for me," he says. "My partners run the daily operations, which are doing well."

In the mid-1980s, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality regulations changed, forbidding septic waste haulers from transporting industrial waste, and requiring those who did to be licensed. Warren, seeing an opportunity to grow, bought a 1987 Dominator 440-cfm/27-inches Hg vacuum truck with O'Brien jetter from Keith Huber Inc. for industrial waste hauling, and a 1986 GMC Vactor 810 hydroexcavator from Jack Doheny Supplies for municipal work. Plummer's Environmental opened in 1987 and was a success, as



Todd Plummer (left) and Kevin Drent pump a 500-gallon car wash pit.

few other pumpers chose to diversify.

Today, the company has 30 trucks, including six semi-tankers, six Vactor hydroexcavators, and four trailer jettors from Jack Doheny. Its 30 employees do pipe and lateral cleaning and televising, cured-in-place pipe lining, water main pre-cleaning, hydroexcavating, power washing, and emergency spill cleanup.

### CLOSING THE CIRCLE

In 1997, youngest son, Nick, enrolled in college to become a police officer, then Warren fell ill and the brothers needed help. Returning home, Nick saw the family business in a different light. He spent most of his time running a vacuum truck, answering phones, and traveling statewide to expand grease trap service sales.

By 2005, Nick was married and ready to move forward. He wanted something that would complete the service circle, where he could help Richard and Todd find work and vice versa. "Being part of what Dad created meant a lot to me," says Nick.

One byproduct of the pretreatment facility's dewatering process is biosolids stored in roll-off containers. Nick offered to buy them and the 1992 Mack tri-axle truck with

## In Search of a disposal solution

When Richard Plummer of Plummer's Septic Tank Inc. in Wyoming, Mich., went to public meetings in the mid-1990s, people screamed that he would contaminate their well water and pollute the soil for generations if he land-applied septage. Periodically, he'd receive letters about the environmental havoc septic companies supposedly were causing. Plummer called the writers, asking permission to visit and explain the operation, and show them some data and soil samples.

"The conclusion was always the same," he says. "They blew up and hung up. No scientific evidence was going to change what they believed in their hearts." Employees injected septage only between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., and never on the weekends so as not to upset the neighbors. Plummer's Septic has never had a violation.

At the same time, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality began regulating how many gallons of septage haulers could apply to a field, while the hunt for additional land became tougher. Seeing the handwriting on the wall, Plummer went to the environmental agency to learn the requirements for building and operating a private wastewater treatment plant.

In 1996, Plummer's Septic built a 10,000-square-foot treatment facility. Trucks discharge into a grit chamber that holds back sand and grit. The sewage is screened to remove foreign matter. It then enters the initial 30,000-gallon receiving tank, flows into one of six interconnected 30,000-gallon holding tanks, and is dewatered in a belt press. The water is discharged into the city's sanitary sewer. The biosolids are stored in roll-off containers and hauled to a landfill.

"Our facility has ample capacity to unload four trucks simultaneously and get them back on the road," says Plummer. The facility also accepts waste from five other area pumpers.

cable hoist that transported the containers to the landfill. Richard sold them and, with the purchase of six new roll-off containers from Wastequip, Plummer's Disposal Service was born. Nick stores his equipment at both shops, but he and his three employees work out of Plummer's Environmental.

To find customers, Nick visited construction sites, schools, parks, recreation areas, and rental shops and handed out business cards, pocket knives and T-shirts. "I can't express enough how well-known and respected the Plummer name is," he says. "People didn't care that we had become three separate businesses. They just wanted a job done correctly and efficiently. Our proof of performance is that some of these companies were my dad's original customers."

Requests for 10- to 40-yard containers rolled in so fast that Nick placed a new order with Wastequip almost every month. As he delivered them to construction sites, he noticed that each location had portable sanitation. Nick thought, why not make it a package deal and offer two services with one phone number and invoice?

Before biting the bullet, he conferred with Richard and Todd, who spent their teen years clean-

**“PEOPLE DIDN’T CARE THAT WE HAD BECOME THREE SEPARATE BUSINESSES. THEY JUST WANTED A JOB DONE CORRECTLY AND EFFICIENTLY. OUR PROOF OF PERFORMANCE IS THAT SOME OF THESE COMPANIES WERE MY DAD’S ORIGINAL CUSTOMERS.”**

**Nick Plummer**

ing and moving portables. The brothers advised focusing on quality instead of quantity to make a good living. Nick set about showing customers that portable restrooms are only as good as the service that accompanies them. His customers loved the efficiency and one-stop shopping. By the end of its second year, Plummer’s Disposal had more than doubled its business.

Today, the company has 160, 10- to 40-yard roll-off Wastequip containers at construction and demolition sites. Besides the 1992 Mack, Nick added a 2001 Kenworth T800 tri-axle roll-off truck with hook hoist and a 2001 Kenworth T300 single-axle truck with hook hoist for smaller containers and tighter spaces.

The 225 orange portable restrooms with gray doors are K2 units from Five Peaks Technology. Construction comprises 60 percent of the business. Special events and summer locations, like parks, are 40 percent. Every unit has a Stoko spray hand sanitizer.

Nick installed motion-activated lights in four Maxim 3000 Luxury Flush & Wash units from Satellite Industries. White Aspen Elite from Five Peaks have silver bells on the door and no company name to blend with wedding decorations.

Four Comfort Inn wheelchair accessible units from PolyJohn Enterprises Corp. and four Liberty wheelchair accessible units from Satellite Industries Inc. are mainly for summer events. However, some construction sites want one in winter to accommodate workers’ bulky clothing.

A 2006 Ford F-550 diesel with 160-cfm Masport pump and Burks DC-10 wash-down pump built by Imperial Industries Inc., services the units. It has a 1,100-gallon tank (700 waste/400 fresh). A 1999 Isuzu flatbed with a slide-in unit transports six restrooms. A 2004 Dodge Ram pickup completes the fleet. The company’s service area is an 50-mile radius from Grand Rapids.

With business expanding constantly, Nick’s biggest concern is inventory. His latest purchase is a 2007 Ford E-350 flatbed with 450-gallon (300 waste/150 fresh) aluminum vacuum tank mounted crossways behind the cab, leaving room for six units. Imperial Industries built the truck. Nick will drive it until the route becomes full-time, then hire a driver.

#### **MORE INFO:**

**Five Peaks Technology**  
866/293-1502  
www.fivepeaks.net

**O’Brien Manufacturing**  
800/638-1901  
www.obrienmfg.com

**Imperial Industries Inc.**  
800/558-2945  
www.imperialind.com

**Olympia Fiberglass Industries**  
800/544-3878

**Jack Doheny Supplies Inc.**  
248/349-0905  
www.dohenycompanies.com

**PolyJohn Enterprises**  
800/292-1305  
www.polyjohn.com

**Keith Huber**  
800/334-8237  
www.keithhuber.com

**Satellite Industries Inc.**  
800/883-1123  
www.satelliteindustries.com

**Masport Inc.**  
800/228-4510  
www.masportpump.com

**Wastequip Cusco Inc.**  
905/883-1214  
www.wastequip-cusco.com

#### **FAMILY MATTERS**

“There comes a time when you have to stop working so much in the business and start working on it,” says Nick. “I plan to expand as much as possible, then maintain that level. But I’m not going to kill myself. Weekends are for spending with my family.”

As their father before, the brothers are grooming their children for the day when they have the drive and stamina to take the companies through the next 50 years. ■

© 2007, COLE Publishing Inc.

Reprinted with permission from

**Pumper**

December 2007

COLE Publishing  
1720 Maple Lake Dam Rd.  
P.O. Box 220  
Three Lakes, WI 54562  
800-257-7222  
www.pumper.com