

One of two Adkins Sanitation trucks is parked on the Miller Ferry for a trip to Middle Bass Island. (Photos by Jason Werling)



# EXPANDING THE MENU

For more than 50 years, the Adkins family has continually taken on a new and varied workload to answer the shifting demand for local liquid waste services

By Ken Wysocky

One thing leads to another. In a nutshell, that old adage describes how Adkins Sanitation Ltd. in Fremont, Ohio, went from a one-truck outfit to a multi-service company — not to mention persevering long enough to become a fourth-generation, family-owned business that's still going strong after more than 50 years.

"In this industry, you start one thing and it tends to lead to another," says John Adkins, who owns the business along with his father, Jim. "It all kind of snowballs."

When Jim Adkins started the septic pumping business in 1957, he had no notions about dramatic growth. After being laid off from a factory job, it was strictly a matter of survival.

Equipment-wise, all he had going for him was a 1951 Ford truck outfitted with a 1,000-gallon tank and a 4-inch centrifugal pump. "I didn't even have any Yellow Pages advertising because I missed the deadline for publication," Adkins says. "If I didn't have any work, I'd just leave the house at 7 a.m. and drive

around and knock on doors. Sure, it was daunting. But it paid off in the long run."

## TODAY'S EQUIPMENT

Today, Adkins Sanitation owns four vacuum service trucks. Two of them are 2009 International 7500 models with 4,000-gallon aluminum tanks. One was built by Tri State Tank LLC (TST LLC), a division of Walker Group Holdings LLC, and features a Masport pump. The other was built by Transway Systems Inc. and uses a Wallenstein pump. The other two rigs are 1995 Ford 9000 models, built by Marengo Fabricated Steel Ltd. with 4,000-gallon steel tanks, and using Wallenstein and Jurop pumps.

The company also owns two combination

vacuum trucks: a 2005 Sterling built out by Vac-Con with a 16-yard-capacity tank and a Roots 824 PD blower, made by Dresser Inc.; and a 1993 Ford 9000, also built by Vac-Con with a 12-yard tank.

K.C. Collins attaches a hose to the back of an International vacuum truck at Adkins Sanitation in Fremont, Ohio.





The Adkins Sanitation team includes (front row, from left) Jimbo Adkins, J.R. Adkins, Joey Adkins, John Adkins, Jim Adkins and Jed Adkins. Back row (from left) are Wilma Rapp, Dan Licursi, Laura Williams, Jon Ottney, K.C. Collins, John Seamon, Tom Fisher, David Reyna, Sara Reyna and Dan Fisher.

**“THIS IS A SEVEN-DAY-A-WEEK JOB, AND YOU HAVE TO LET YOUR CUSTOMERS KNOW YOU’RE DEPENDABLE. IF A CUSTOMER PLUGS UP AT MIDNIGHT ON THE FOURTH OF JULY, THEY WANT SOMEONE THERE RIGHT AWAY. THEY NEED TO KNOW THEY CAN DEPEND ON YOU.”**

**John Adkins**

In addition, Adkins Sanitation owns two restroom service pump trucks: one a 2005 Peterbilt 335 with a 2,200-gallon aluminum tank and a Masport pump, built by Transway Systems, and the other a 2000 Ford F-550 with a 900-gallon steel tank and Jurop pump. Adkins also owns two jetting trucks, a trailer-mounted jetter and a camera-inspection truck.

Septic pumping generates about 60 percent of the company’s business volume; televising and cleaning pipelines contributes another 25 percent; and the balance comes from portable restroom rentals, Adkins says.

Jim Adkins knew modern, productive equipment would be critical to success, so in the mid-1960s, he made his first major capital investment: a 1962 Ford vacuum truck built out by Pearson Brothers. The cost? About \$2,500, Adkins recalls.

Adkins slowly gained business through word-of-mouth referrals. As business grew, he bought a second vacuum truck. “For the longest time, we had two trucks,” he says. “John would take one truck, and I’d take the other. A lot of times, I wish it was still like that.

It was all a lot easier and simpler.”

But by the 1980s, he knew he couldn’t remain a two-truck, one-dimensional business for much longer. With John and two stepsons working for him, Adkins needed to generate more work to keep them all going.

“So we bought a combination truck and started cleaning catch basins and sewers for local municipalities,” he says. “At that time, a lot of guys were using a regular pump truck to clean catch basins in emergencies. That’s just how it was done. But that’s what led us to get a combo truck. I saw that work was available — saw a different direction we could go with the right equipment.”

#### **TWISTS & TURNS**

The business continued to grow in unexpected directions. Seeing the need for pipeline video inspection work, Adkins Sanitation invested in a camera truck and televising system from CUES Inc. That, in turn, led the company into pipeline repair work, says John Adkins.

“We’d camera a line and see problems, so we’d also make the repairs,” he says. “We didn’t

## Profile

### **Adkins Sanitation Ltd.**

**Fremont, Ohio**

**Owners: Jim and John Adkins**

**Founded: 1957**

**Employees: 15**

**Services: Septic and grease trap pumping, septic tank installation, jet rodding, camera inspections and portable sanitation**

**Services area: 50-mile radius in northwestern Ohio**



do line repair work before, but a lot of contractors didn’t want to do smaller jobs, so (camera) customers started asking us to do it. We didn’t need a license back then, and it was pretty basic work, so we did it.”

The next logical extension of service was portable restrooms. Existing customers kept asking if Adkins Sanitation had restrooms to rent, so the company started buying small quantities. They eventually bought two service trucks, too. The company currently owns about 300 restrooms — mostly from Satellite Industries Inc. and PolyJohn Enterprises Corp., and plans to buy more. “They’re like mushrooms,” Adkins says. “They keep popping up.”

Entering the portable restroom field was a risk, to a degree, he notes. But that risk was tempered by the fact that customers kept asking for them, which indicated strong demand.

John Seamon prepares to process a load of waste with the Lely Maximizer at the company's Fremont, Ohio, waste facility.

Adkins says the company does not finance equipment purchases.

"You've got to put something back (save money)," he says. "I learned that from my dad. You're always going to have to repair or upgrade equipment, so you've got to keep something back. We've been very fortunate in that respect."

### DIVERSITY PAYS DIVIDENDS

Through it all, developing a diverse business base and services has been a boon to Adkins Sanitation. If one business sector slows down, the others keep employees busy — and maintain cash flow.

"Lately, we've been doing an awful lot of

televising, cleaning and pumping," John Adkins says. "We

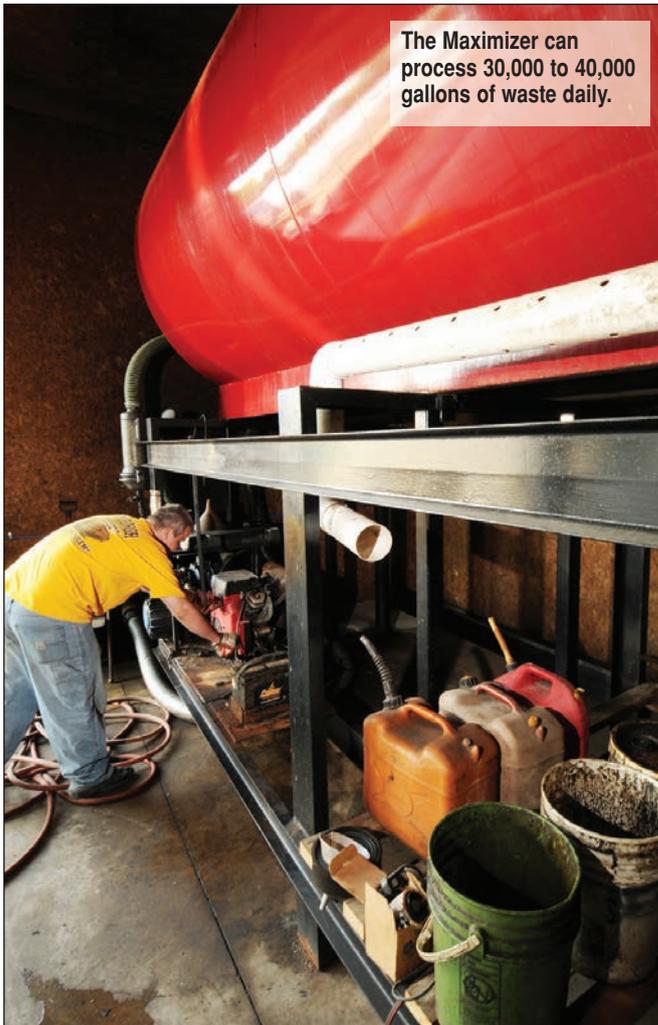
even went to Iowa for two

or three weeks to do catch basin and sewer line cleaning, a job we obtained through an environmental company for which we do a lot of work."

Adkins Sanitation's diverse customer base includes an unusual arrangement: a contract with a nearby town to pump out 1,500 septic systems — hooked up to its sewer system — every two years. The regular pumpings help



The Maximizer can process 30,000 to 40,000 gallons of waste daily.



## ADKINS TAKES ON DISPOSAL

Tired of burning daylight and gasoline to haul septic waste to treatment plants — and paying ever-increasing disposal fees, to boot — Adkins Sanitation Ltd. in Fremont, Ohio, decided to treat its own waste instead. In 2003, the company invested in a Maximizer from Lely Waste Solutions LLC, and the purchase has been paying dividends ever since, says co-owner John Adkins.

"It's great because our trucks can dump here and leave empty every morning," he says. "It eventually pays for itself over time. We pay four to five cents a gallon for local waste disposal.

"Plus, most treatment plants in our area are about a half-hour to 45-minute drive away," he continues. "That meant our trucks were spending a lot of time driving to the dump ... which costs us in terms of gasoline and labor."

The system can process 30,000 to 40,000 gallons a day. However, thicker loads can decrease that rate to 10,000 gallons a day, Adkins says. "We try to take those (thicker) loads to the local treatment plant," he says. "Our drivers use their own discretion."

Aside from saving time and money, the company plant also keeps Adkins Sanitation from being overly dependent on municipal disposal options. "If they have a problem and cut us off, we still have a place to go," he says.

**“I GO TO THE PUMPER & CLEANER EXPO TO SEE WHAT PIQUES MY INTEREST. THAT’S THE BEST WAY TO GET IDEAS. WE ALSO LISTEN CAREFULLY TO OUR CUSTOMERS AND SEE WHAT THEIR NEEDS ARE.”**

**John Adkins**

ease the load on the municipality’s treatment plant and allow it to generate cleaner discharge, an important step in meeting federal water standards.

Adkins signed the contract three or four years ago, and it has proven valuable by providing fill-in work. “We might have half a day scheduled for emergency work, and we’ll fill in the rest of the day with the contract cleanings,” Adkins says. “That’s the best thing about it. It also leads to more work ... if we’re working out there and we see something else they’re going to need done, that’s the time to approach them.”

**FAMILY TRADITION**

Adkins Sanitation is a family operation through and through. The company employs

John’s three sons — Jimbo, J.R. and Jed — and John’s grandson, Joey. Moreover, Jim’s sister, Wilma, has been the company’s secretary since 1977.

The heavy family involvement presents John Adkins with his biggest challenge: figuring out how to position the company so it remains a viable business for his children. Part of his concern stems from an area trend toward fewer septic tanks.

“Around here, one neighboring county wants all residents on its sewer system within 20 years,” he says. “There are fewer and fewer tanks to pump every year. So I’m always thinking about what direction to go — what to get into, like pipelining, for example.

“I go to the Pumper & Cleaner Expo to see what piques my interest. That’s the best way to get ideas. We also listen carefully to our customers and see what their needs are.”

Keeping a family company running harmoniously requires an emphasis on communication. So Adkins says the family periodically makes time to talk about issues.

“Sometimes we get real busy, and everyone’s running in different directions, so it’s important to

make time to sit down and talk,” he notes. “With more people come more opinions about ways to do things, so talking helps keep us all moving in the same direction.”

One thing that everyone in the family agrees on is the importance of customer service. Jim Adkins puts it best:

“The key is hard work,” he says. “This is a seven-day-a-week job, and you have to let your customers know you’re dependable. If a customer plugs up at midnight on the Fourth of July, they want someone there right away. They need to know they can depend on you.”

That philosophy just might carry Adkins Sanitation to another 50-plus years of service. But what direction it’ll go is anyone’s guess. ■



Four generations of the Adkins Family attended the 2009 Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo in Louisville. Pictured at right is company founder Jim Adkins and (from left) grandson J.R. Adkins, great-grandson Joey Adkins and son John Adkins. (Photo by Sherry Dobbins)



Dan Licursi cleans a manhole with a 2005 Sterling combination truck by Vac-Con.

**MORE INFO:**

**Chandler Equipment Inc.**  
800/342-0887  
www.chandlerequipment.com

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

**CUES Inc.**  
800/327-7791  
www.cuesinc.com

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

**DRESSER Roots**  
877/363-7668  
www.rootsblower.com

**Transway Systems Inc.**  
800/263-4508  
www.transway.on.ca

**Lely Waste Solutions LLC**  
800/367-5359  
www.lelywaste.com

**TST LLC**  
800/255-0008  
www.tstllc.com

**Marengo Fabricated Steel Ltd.**  
800/99-2652  
www.mfsltd.com

**Wallenstein Pumps - Elmira Machine**  
800/801-6663  
www.wallensteinpumps.com

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www.masportpump.com

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904/284-4200  
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