

A residential septic system installed by Gale's is ready for inspection. Gale's made the septic tank and distribution box, while the riser and lid are from Tuf-Tite Inc. (Photos by Marg Gale)



ROUGHING IT

Newfoundland's wilderness pumpers promote the value of routine septic service and replacing failing steel tanks to customers who've never heard the message

By Ken Wysocky

As the only septic service providers for about 150 miles in a remote area of far southwestern Newfoundland - a large island in Canada's eastern Atlantic Provinces region - Gerard and Marg Gale face an array of challenges.

For starters, consider fuel prices, which have topped \$5 a gallon for years. Then throw in customers that are more than 100 miles away from Gale's Septic Cleaning Ltd., the business the couple started in 1993 in the small town of South Branch ... a host of neglected septic tanks in the company's service area that haven't been cleaned for decades, if ever ... a less-than-robust economy that leaves residents with little disposable income ... and the week or more it can take to procure repair parts, which arrive by boat and airplane from mainland Canada and the United States.

"Equipment breakdowns can be a bit of a challenge," says Marg. "We can't just go down the street and get repair parts, so breakdowns usually cost us a bit of time."

But amid the hardships, there's still reason for optimism. Spurred by the discovery of mineral, oil and natural gas deposits, the provincial economy is showing signs of renewed vigor. And in 2009, Gales Septic diversified - and created a new revenue stream - by becoming a Turtle Tanks franchise.

Based in British Columbia, Turtle Tanks are round, concrete septic tanks (halves make 500-gallon tanks and two halves make a 1,000-gallon tank) allowing Gales Septic to capitalize on a growing customer need as thousands of steel tanks in the region reach the end of their life cycle.

Below: The Gale's Septic team includes, left to right, Marg Gale, Gerard Gale, Shelley Gale, Timothy Agombar (holding Cecilia Agombar, 3, and Gerard Agombar, 1) and Scott Burchell. Driver John Pear is not shown.



Profile

Gale's Septic Cleaning Ltd. South Branch, Newfoundland

OWNERS: Gerard and Marg Gale

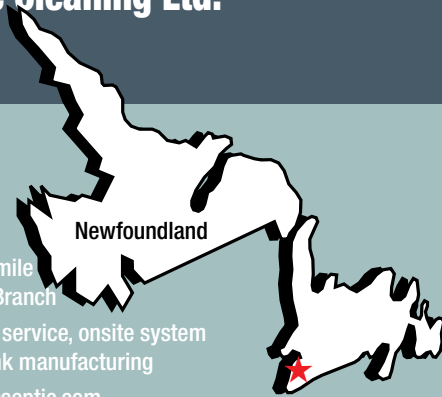
FOUNDED: 1993

EMPLOYEES: 7

SERVICE AREA: 150-mile radius around South Branch

SPECIALTIES: Septic service, onsite system installation, septic tank manufacturing

WEBSITE: www.galesseptic.com



process of grooming their daughter, Shelley, to take over the business in a few years. Shelley returned to Newfoundland in 2009 after spending five years traveling and working in Southeast Asia and England and another five years working in western Canada.

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

A lack of competition coupled with demand for service prompted Gerard and Marg to establish Gales Septic. After several decades of working as a welder in the boilermaker trade, Gerard was looking for a new business to tide the couple over until his retirement. Since all homes and businesses in the area rely on septic systems, the couple saw an opportunity.

“We started off by welding a 1,000-gallon tank to a trailer,” Marg says. “The only other provider was 150 miles away. One of our biggest challenges was tanks that haven’t been pumped for years. In fact, I grew up in a house with a family of 16, and our tank wasn’t pumped until we started the business.”

“We still pump tanks that haven’t been cleaned for 30 years, and some of them still function,” she continues. “It’s strange how it works. They must have very good drainage systems. Most of the steel tanks we pump are 500- or 600-gallon capacities.”

Business was slow at first. But with telephone book and newspaper advertising, Marg says people gradually caught on to

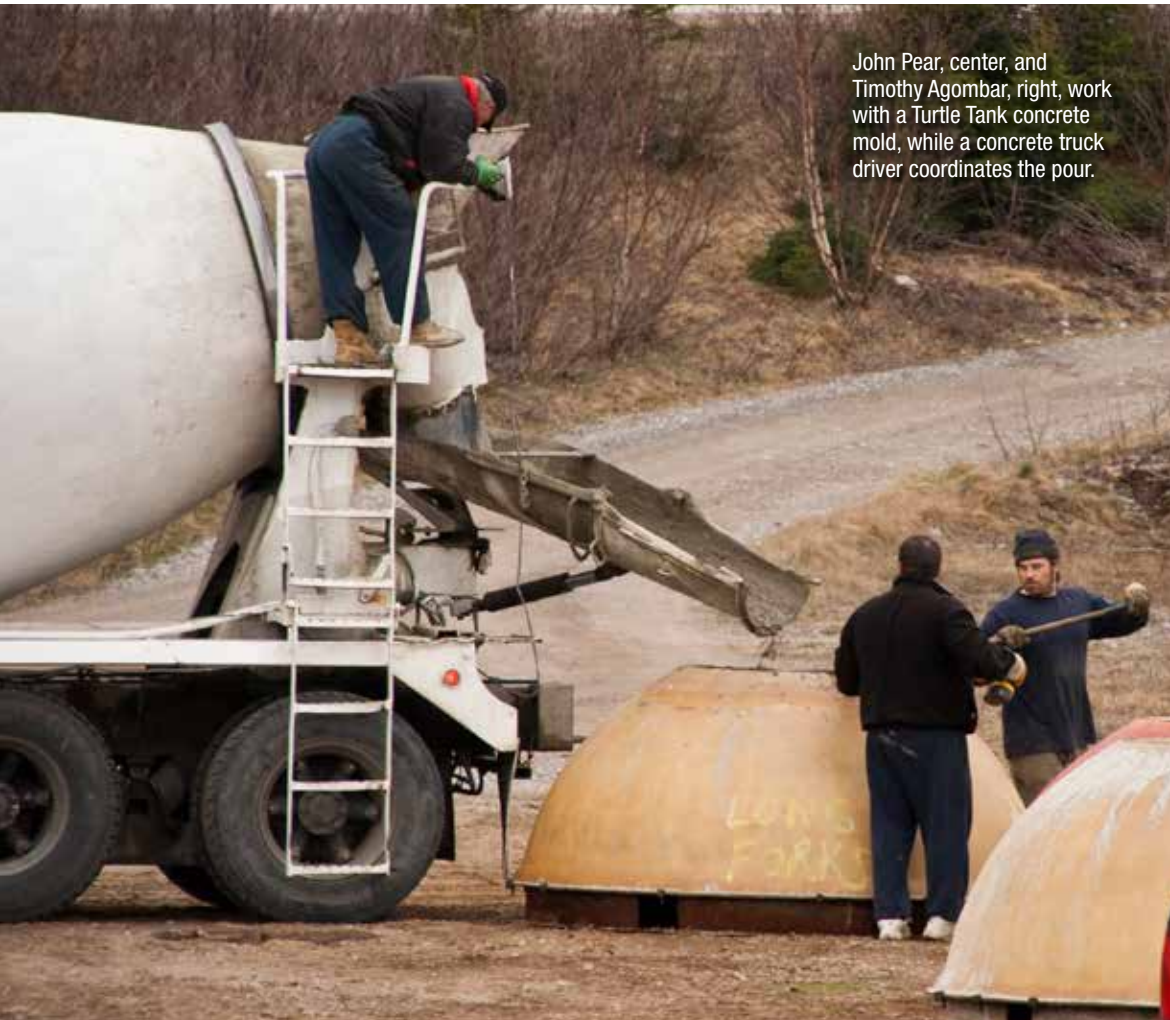
“ We’ve seen some pretty crazy tanks around here ... people who buried old cars and ran a pipe down into them, or built big wooden boxes. Some people have pretty much buried just about anything and used it as a tank. But we think people will want to put something in the ground that lasts.”

— Brian Favreau



Left: Gerard Gale works the boom truck, moving a freshly made tank half at the Gale's Septic yard.

Below: Gerard Gale stands by the boom truck while a new Turtle Tank is lowered into the ground.



John Pear, center, and Timothy Agombar, right, work with a Turtle Tank concrete mold, while a concrete truck driver coordinates the pour.

Settling Down: World traveler returns home to take over the family pumping business

After five years of working and traveling overseas – including stays in Thailand, Vietnam, Australia and England – and five more years of working in western Canada, Shelley Gale realized it was time to come home to Newfoundland and do something she'd never planned on: operate Gales Septic Cleaning Ltd., the business her parents, Gerard and Marg, established in 1993.

"I really wanted to see the world, and I did," says Shelley, 37. "But I reached the point where I wanted to be closer to my parents. Then they got onto the Turtle Tanks idea and said they'd only do it [invest in a Turtle Tanks franchise] if I came home and eventually ran the business."

Shelley's experiences abroad – especially in India and Indonesia – provided her with a greater appreciation for the services her parents have provided for the last 20 years.

"I saw lots of septic problems and issues, especially in India," she says. "If I could get the financial backing, I'd set up a business over there ... you could save so many people from dying of diseases. They don't have a handle on treating sewage at all. In India, it's everywhere – in the middle of streets and on sidewalks ... it's crazy, especially from my perspective, coming from a family that runs a septic company."

Shelley says she enjoyed many adventures overseas, but none as harrowing as the tsunami that devastated Indonesian coastlines on the morning of Dec. 26, 2004. She was on a small island off the coast of Thailand when it hit.

"A friend came running up and woke us up, saying, 'The sea is coming! The sea is coming!' " she relates. "There were two warning waves. The first one came up to my ankles, followed by one that came in up to my waist. Then the ocean was sucked out – just disappeared. Something clicked that this wasn't right, so we started running.

"We ran up a mountain and stayed there for a couple days," she adds. "There weren't many deaths on the island because it's not very populated. But there was a lot of destruction ... we were very lucky. We were still asleep, and had our friend not come running to warn us ..."

In Newfoundland, many young people move away because jobs are scarce. As such, many businesses shut down when the owners retire, instead of passing it down to a next generation.

Shelley says she's happy to reverse that trend. While she'd like to try some new ideas, she says she'll always value her parents' opinions and look to them for guidance and advice.

"Some people might ask their parents to step away once they own it," she says. "But I don't look at it that way. I respect that this was my parents' business and will look at it that way even after we own it. They worked their whole lives for this and gave up a lot over the years, and I want to respect that."

In the long run, Shelley believes that the recent discoveries of mineral, oil and gas deposits in Newfoundland and Labrador will result in an economic boom that will entice more people to move back. That, in turn, could create stronger demand for septic tank installations and pumping service.

"I know many people who are waiting to move back here," she says. "I'm very optimistic. I think we have something good here that's going to do well."

the fact that they benefit from having their septic tanks pumped regularly. Word-of-mouth referrals also spurred growth.

The company's roster of equipment has expanded over the years. The company currently owns a 2004 Mack truck, bought used, with a 2,500-gallon steel tank and Fruitland Manufacturing pump; a boom truck built on a 2006 Sterling chassis with a 12-ton capacity Hiab crane; two backhoes made by Caterpillar Inc.; a Crust Buster made by Schmitz Brothers LLC; a Steam Jenny pressure washer, manufactured by Jenny Products Inc. and used to clean machinery; a 14-foot Ford box truck to transport supplies; and a 2012 Ford F-450 pickup truck.

EASY WASTE DISPOSAL

Fuel prices pose a constant challenge, especially with a service rig getting about 7 mpg. The cost of fuel is built into the company's rates, and Marg is thankful that, for the most part, customers understand and don't complain about the company adjusting prices as fuel costs rise.

On the other hand, the company can dispose of septic waste more cost-effectively than most haulers, transferring it to a collection pit located on land the company leases about 10 miles from its home office. The operation allows the Gales to cut down on transportation costs. Such pits are legal in Canada and subject to an annual inspection by the provincial government; Gales Septic has been using the same pit since the company's inception.

The pit measures roughly 120 feet long by 80 feet wide by 8 feet deep. It's



located in a former gravel pit, so it drains well. Before dumping waste, employees add Bio-Clean, a blend of bacteria and enzymes that break down septic waste, into the tank. The company collects an average of about 12,500 gallons of waste a week, Marg says.

Thanks to the pit's location near the center of the company's service area, it's easy to achieve route efficiency; the driver generally runs routes in out-and-back fashion in whatever direction makes the most sense on each day. "When we go, we book for a full load – usually three or four customers," Marg explains, noting that a full route takes a whole day to complete. "We try to save a dollar wherever we can."

The crew talks about the day's work orders with the company vacuum truck, a 2004 Mack with a 2,500-gallon steel tank and Fruitland Manufacturing pump. Shown, left to right, are Shelley Gale, Timothy Agombar and Gerard Gale.



TANKS SPUR GROWTH

Motivated by the prevalence of failing steel tanks throughout their service area, Marg and Gerard decided to sell and install Turtle Tanks in 2009. Under a franchise agreement, the couple can manufacture the 1,000-gallon tanks, using a set of forms that create two halves of the round tanks.

Concrete is solving a big problem with the steel tanks, which the Gales say are proving to rust out in 15 to 20 years.

“My parents have a concrete tank that’s 80 years old and they’re still using it today,” she says.

“We can get concrete whenever we need it ... the supplier is only about 30 miles away,” she adds. “We usually keep seven tanks in stock. We made six molds for ourselves [based off the original mold from Turtle]. That was a winter project. Gerard is a welder by trade, so he’s very resourceful and creative.”

The Turtle Tanks are easy to install because they don’t require squared-off excavating, which is more difficult and takes more time to do. At about 4,000 pounds total, the tanks also weigh less than traditional concrete tanks, meaning Gale’s Septic doesn’t need larger cranes to handle them. Furthermore, the couple says, round tanks are easier to clean because there aren’t any hard-to-reach corners where waste can get stuck.

“We think there’s strong market potential,” she continues. “We’ve

seen some pretty crazy tanks around here ... people who buried old cars and ran a pipe down into them, or built big wooden boxes. Some people have pretty much buried just about anything and used it as a tank. But we think people will want to put something in the ground that lasts.”

That growth potential is gaining traction; Marg says tank sales and additional pumping have helped business revenue grow by 50 percent last year. But further growth will require ongoing customer education about the benefits of concrete tanks, especially since steel tanks cost about \$400 less – a considerable sum of money for many budget-strapped families in the area, Shelley notes.

Marg Gale was featured in a Newfoundland newspaper for whimsical characters she painted on the side of septic tanks on display in front of Gale’s Septic Cleaning. An avid photographer, she picked up a brush and started to decorate the tanks as a hobby. They attract a lot of attention from passersby.

THE NEXT GENERATION

Marg and Gerard plan to hand off the business entirely within the next few years. Marg says Shelley’s world travels have prepared her for running the business. Currently, Shelley handles many office-management functions while learning the ropes.

“All her traveling turned my hair gray, but it did wonders for Shelley in terms of knowledge, confidence and self-esteem,” Marg says. “She learned how to survive on her own over there ... she even survived the [2004] Indonesian tsunami, so running a business should be much easier than that.

“She has two small children now, so she’s settling down,” she adds. “She was in high school when we started, so she grew up with the business. We’re expecting a very smooth transition.” ■

MORE INFO

Bio-Clean/Statewide Supply
800-553-5573
www.bio-clean.com
(See ad page xx)

Caterpillar, Inc.
309/675-1000
www.cat.com

Crust Buster/Schmitz Brothers, LLC
888/878-2296
www.crustbusters.com

Fruitland Manufacturing
800/663-9003
www.fruitlandmanufacturing.com

Jenny Products, Inc.
814/445-3400
www.steamjenny.com

Tuf-Tite Inc.
800/382-7009
www.tuf-tite.com

Turtle Tank
250/863-8372
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