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Jackson, Wyoming

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# Macy's, Inc.

## Jackson, Wyoming

*Jim Macy is happy he got talked into the septic pumping and portable toilet business 18 years ago*

By Lynn Tilton

Jim Macy freely admits he got into the pumping business 18 years ago because he was talked into it. Since then, he's walked the walk that's made it possible to build Macy's Inc. into a \$550,000 a year business in an area where the biggest town has fewer than 7,500 residents.

Jim explains, "At the time, two major plumbing contractors in town were unhappy with the guy that had the septic business before. They had men standing around because that pumper didn't show up when he said he would. They talked me into buying a septic truck and adding pumping to my existing services."

Macy grew up in Jackson, Wyoming. It's a small town 15 miles south of the Grand Teton National Park, in a valley 80 miles long and eight miles wide. The area has made it big with the international set, what with 84 inches of snow per winter that provides ideal skiing. Snow has helped drive up the cost of a residence.

Jim points out, "A building lot costs \$100,000. If you want a three-bedroom, two-bath house with a daylight basement you're looking at a \$225,000. Mansions, though, bring the value of the average home in Teton County to \$630,000.

"Teton County is 93% government land. Then, when you consider what is already developed, figure in wetlands, hillsides and undevelopable areas, you have less than half of a percent left for development."

This home town boy also was a city council member. He strongly believes anyone in business should be involved in local community events. Macy points out his family has been in Jackson for decades. Now 57, Jim got his start by driving truck for others after he finished high school.

"I got my business start with an old B Model Mack truck I rebuilt in the shop behind the house. I was going to sell it to pick up some extra coins. But I hated to part with it so I got a dump truck contract instead and put it to work." A couple years later he got a water truck for a county contract to keep the dust down on county roads.

For 18 years before going into septic and drain service work, Jim followed in the footsteps of his father and made a living principally as a mechanic. Naturally, when he got the word from the plumbers he turned to his father, now living in Rock Springs. "He told me not to get too carried away in debt. He said he had a two-year-old Chevrolet that is in good shape mechanically. It had been in a wreck and had a bent fender and blown front tire."

Now, 18 years later the company has seven full-timers, counting his wife Lee and himself. "Pumping accounts for 35% of my business,

and the rest is in backhoe work, truck rental, water hauling, and emergency sewer jetting in the winter for a couple of small subdivisions in the area."

He points out winter temperatures plummet to 30 below around New Year's Day, and will stay that cold for an entire week. Jim comments, "This little business we got was built and sustained by some real good employees all through the years. We make sure to tell them the nasty side of what this job consists of. We're doing no one any favors by not giving them the bad news up front. It costs money to train people, and three or four days of paid experience, riding with others, before really joining the company helps prospective employees decide whether they really want to do this type of work."

While the newcomer is testing the waters, the people he'll work with get a chance to see whether he will be compatible with the rest of the crew. "I think everybody working for me at this time has our interest at heart. They know if they don't do it right, it costs us. They're all good drivers, and get along well with the customers. They care about the equipment, the customer, and themselves. They're strong on personal integrity."

Jim then adds that one way to keep good help is to keep them earning year 'round in a business that tends to be seasonal. "That's why we do our own truck repairs during winter when pumping slows down. We pay them a higher than average hourly rate for the area and benefits include paid vacation, medical insurance and a Christmas bonus."

Macy's crew members are allowed to use the shop to wash their personal vehicles as well as make any repairs. "As long as they're not competing by taking on paid work, and I'm not furnishing parts, they can use the shop for mechanic work after hours on weekends. Our lead mechanic has been with us a long time, he does some of the repair work for his friends. Why not? It's not that much more expensive to raise and close the doors. My theory is if he's working on someone else's vehicle, he's gaining knowledge that's to my benefit."

Macy worked for eight years with his father in his father's truck repair shop. "If our cars needed something we took them to somebody who knew cars because we were truck mechanics."

Still, one tactic is to keep debt low. "I bought my first pumper cheap. The tank was an old 1,200-gallon boiler. I put a real good vacuum system on it for \$1,600 — and a lot of work. It's got a Masport HXL75WV pump, and it's still with us."

That pump was an important addition because at 7,200 feet, Jim needs 21 inches of vacuum to pump efficiently. "The old pump I

began with started smoking paint on the side at 16 inches of vacuum. It moved a lot of air, but I couldn't keep it cool."

When asked the biggest challenge in serving the Jackson Hole Valley, Jim replied, "Our biggest challenge here in the septic pumping business and in portable toilets is cold weather and lots of snow. As I said, we'll get 84 inches of snow in an average year. But in town, there's generally only a couple of feet on the ground, but it's here for the winter. Then in February a thaw settles the snow, bares the streets, and the toilets thaw out so we can clean them and start over again."

Snow cover keeps the ground from freezing too hard for a winter pumping. "We just have to dress warm. We keep our two pumping trucks and the two portapot trucks inside a heated building. Everything else is plugged in with tank heaters for the cooling system and pan heaters so the oil is kept warm. We also do all our own maintenance and repair work on vehicles."

He adds that once in a while he'll farm out a gas engine as well as carburetor or electronic repair problems. "We do all our own diesel, transmission, rear end, suspension, electrical, things like that."

As he considers unusual calls over the years, he comments, "I would say for pumping, the most unusual we got was a service station in Grand Teton National Park. They were in a big panic. A couple of motor homes pulled up, got their tanks mixed up and instead of dumping their waste into the station's waste tanks, they dumped into the station's fuel tanks."

The solution involved pumping out the fuel tanks and taking the load 110 miles to a small refinery. Jim reports the quick response made his business a bunch of friends. "We also got twice the standard rate because we were able to sell the fuel when we got it to the refinery."

He adds that he opened the hatches and valves after disposing of the load. "By the time I got home it had all aired out good. I will say that when my pump sounded like a six-cylinder engine, the popping scared me. But we got through it all right."



Jim and Lee Macy "after a swell 36 years."

He emphasizes that since then environmental regulations have made this solution impossible today. At this time, Macy's Inc. is the only septic pumper in the valley. "There are other competitors within 50 miles, but I'm the only actual local person. I've had competitors through the years, but they've gone out of business, mostly because they didn't seem to have their heart in it. They tried to do the work themselves then hire part-time people only. You can't find good hands that will accept part-time pumping and low hourly rates."

When asked about availability when needed, Jim noted that his wife takes the calls. He has a cellular, but forest fires are the only place where they really use it because that particular call can send a truck out of radio range. "We operate mostly from our radios. Lee's the one who tells everyone where to go and what to do, including me!"

Macy's Inc. has a standard five-day work-week, with two hours of overtime given to those who will be taking calls at their house during weekends. "Any job they get is in addition to those two hours they get just for being available. They get paid for staying home, and calling in every few hours to see whether they're needed for any jobs." He notes that his own house is just four blocks from the shop and yard. "A couple others live within 3-4 blocks, so it's easy to respond when we get an after-hours call."

It wasn't long after the plumbing contractors had persuaded Jim Macy to go into the pumping business when they began talking to him about taking on portable toilets. Jim resisted their blandishments. "I was scared of it.



Jim Macy drives his portable toilet parade unit, a converted lawn mower that pops wheelies and spins around in circles.

I had no idea how many to get, what to do. Finally, I called up Carma and Bill with the Roto-Rooter business in Pocatello, Idaho. I rented from them. They were really good about giving advice for starting up a portable toilet business."

Now the company has 220 units, including 30 Jim bought after the 1998 Pumper & Cleaner Environmental Expo in Nashville. "I got the show price. I told the Satellite people (he's 75% Satellite) that it was too early in the season to predict how many more units I would need. They said if I would call them within two weeks of the show they still could give me the show price."

He also got his video inspection camera at the Expo. "With this one we can go into pipe as small as three inches. It also will handle two elbows and show 200 feet of line." This early in the game, how profitable has this been? Jim responds, "You know how it is. I got lots of calls last year, enough to make it worthwhile. So we bought it — and haven't had a call since." But he knows that when he does get a call he'll be able to answer it. He's able to better take care of the customer than he was before the Expo.

Regarding his portable toilet business, Macy's gets rentals for special events in July and on Labor Day. "But construction is the biggest part of that business, with residential construction the largest portion of construction. We've got the money crowd here. They're buying what little land is left for exorbitant prices and building multi-million dollar homes. We've had toilets on a homesite for up to four years. Then, two months later they'll sell the house, and the new owner decides to remodel, so we have them on site for another year."

Reviewing his septic service, he comments, "The main thing we do differently on our septic service than most other people is we run our exhaust from our vacuum pumps back to the inlet side and blow exhaust air from the pump back down the hose and bubble stir everything up real good. It makes it easier to pull the stuff out of the tank. There's generally a crust on the top and sludge on the bottom, and running our exhaust in the tank can really stir up everything. We don't have to keep rebuilding our vacuum."

In Teton County, most septic tanks are 1,000-gallon units. A typical uncomplicated call takes about two hours. This includes digging, pumping and covering. "Local regulations will not allow the use of distribution boxes, and riser pipes are limited to six inches in diameter. So bubbling is the only economical way to clear the tank." Generally, tanks are within six inches of the top of the ground, but some are buried down a full eight feet.

"People out here are building daylight basement homes on hillsides, so the septic is below the house. We often have to string 150-foot of hose and lift 40 feet. A couple of times we've used a trash pump set down on the tank. Fortunately, architects and engineers and county officials are well aware of this problem, so they're not building as many of those kinds of systems now."

As with other successful pumpers, Jim relies on the honesty of the customer. "We tell them when we'll be there, go ahead and do our thing, then send a bill and they pay us. We have had very little loss of either cash or from waiting for someone to show up. If they're home, we hit them up for the check at the time of pumping."

What does he do to ensure the billed payer will pay on time? Jim replies, "Oh, we just tell them, 'If we don't get paid on time for hauling it off, we'll bring it back and you'll have a hell of a mess.'" But they say it with a grin.

What about those who honestly don't have

the money but need the pumping? "I was born and raised in this valley and know a lot of old people. We try to give them a good break. My wife always says when a squeaky little voice asks, 'Is Jimmy there?', she knows it's going to cost us money."

The talk turned to the other services provided by Macy's Inc. "We furnish potable water for those fighting forest fires. I've got two potable water tanks we can hook together, a 3,200-gallon and a 3,800-gallon unit."

Reviving leachfields is another plus. "Our Terralift is proving to be a real asset. With this machine we can perforate a leach field, frack the ground, put in styrene pellets through the fractures to keep the ground from sealing. It extends the life of the leachfield."

When a customer asks about the effectiveness of the technology, Jim responds, "If the drainfield worked before for a reasonable amount of time, this can make it last that long again. If the field hasn't worked good before, I can't guarantee anything."

This technology keeps owners from using up alternate sites, from digging up the lawn or removing trees. And do it for half the price, or less, of a new drainfield.

"We're in there and out of there in a matter of half a day. There's no dirt on the lawn, no sod torn up, no trees destroyed. This state-of-the-art machine probably makes more friends in our business than anything else we can do."

Macy also rents dump trucks to other contractors or to government entities that have a special project. "I have just two of those now. They've paid their way." He adds that one of his dumps, a 1956 Autocar, is more of a pet. "I've restored it to like new condition."

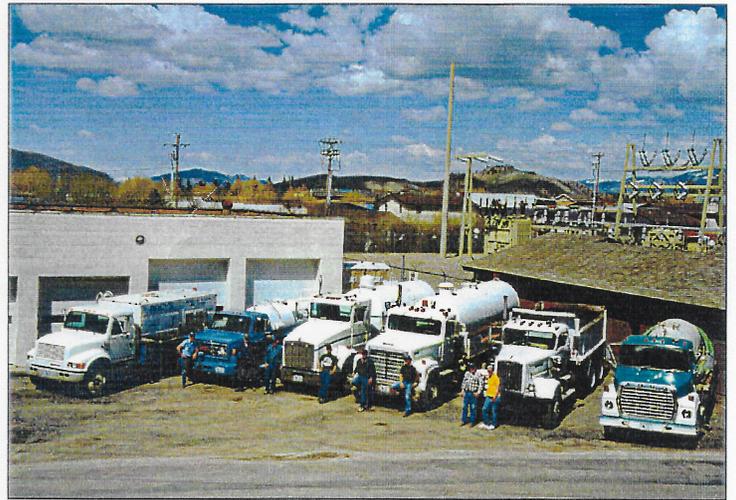
Another "vehicle" in his lineup is a motorized outhouse, which Jim drives in local parades. "We converted an old outhouse, put it on an old power lawn mower, and did a little bit of revamping on the brake system. There's a crazy wheel on the back so we can run it all around the parade route." The first time after it appeared in a parade it also appeared in all the area newspapers.

While he is proud of the motorized outhouse, Jim is much more pleased with the mapping job they've done over the years. Every septic they've ever pumped has been accurately measured off and is in the service tech's book. Little time is needed to find where to dig. "You can't see septic tanks with six feet of snow on top. Mapping every septic tank we've pumped has cut our service time by an average of 30 minutes. The average home changes hands every 2.5 years, so many homeowners don't know where the tank is. Many don't even realize they've got a septic system."

While the sewer jet generally doesn't get much attention, Jim recalls the time the line from a halfway house across the ski hill into a condo development had frozen up. Owners called Jim, who ran the truck to the foot of the hill, carrying 1,000 gallons of water. "They came down with snow grooming machines, hooked and pulled me to the top of the ski hill so I could be over the manhole and keep ice out of their line."

Another snow groomer covered the tracks to avoid any loss of ski surface due to ruts. "It was fun being parked up there doing our thing and watching skiers flying by. They'd turn and look at the truck in the middle of the hill with no tracks around it. They'd stare so hard that they'd wreck." But that wasn't the only source of enjoyment. Jim adds, "I never got to park a truck on six feet of snow before."

All in all, Jim Macy is glad he got talked into pumping septic tanks and jetting lines. It's given variety to life, despite the product involved. ■



From top to bottom: Macy's first-response unit is dispatched to area forest fires with 3200 gallons of potable water and 12 portable toilets; Macy's four pump trucks, sewer jetter, and working restored 1956 Autocar dumptruck along with, from left: Dick Dickson, Keith Florence, Jerry Despain, Robin Hinks, Marc Whitman, Jim and Lee Macy. All the pumpers are equipped with Masport vacuum pumps; Bud Mullendor and Marc Whitman with 1979 Dodge 320/220 gallons, 1993 Hino 530/320 gallons and 1995 Hino 490/300 gallons. All three trucks are capable of hauling four portable toilets. On the cover, Macy's lead man Jerry Despain with the new unit they designed and assembled this past winter. The scenic Teton mountain range is in the background.