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Be There First!

Rent-A-John team remembers founder's words of advice

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Shop foreman Lee Mays hauls Big John restroom units onto a rollback truck. The Big Johns boast five individual stalls plus a five-man urinal. (Photos courtesy of Rent-A-John)



Cover Story

Be There First!

In 50 years of providing quality portable restroom service, the folks at Rent-A-John have never forgotten their founder's simple words of advice

By Sharon Verbeten

Profile

Rent-A-John, Columbus, Ohio
and **Johnny on the Spot, Philadelphia, Pa.**

- Founder:** Bill Reynolds Sr.; son Bill Jr. now runs the business
- Years in Business:** 50
- Employees:** 35
- Equipment:** 2,500 Synergy World and Five Peaks Technology restrooms and numerous Big John multi-units (five individual stalls plus five-man urinal). The latter are built by Rent-A-John.
- Fleet:** 19 vacuum trucks (six Internationals, nine Freightliners and four GMC), most feature Masport and MEC 6500 pumps with 1,100-gallon wastewater/450-gallon freshwater tanks built by Indiana Vacuum Tank, Lely Manufacturing and Crescent Tank Mfg.; several delivery and service trucks, mostly from Ford and GMC.
- Services:** Portable restrooms
- Service Area:** About a 70-mile radius of each city
- Associations:** Building Industry Association, Builders Exchange of Central Ohio, Portable Sanitation Association International
- Web Site:** www.potty4u.com



The Reynolds family has come a long way since the handmade wooden restrooms their patriarch crafted 50 years ago, although the tenets of the business remain stable — fostering relationships and maintaining a client base through customer service.

That's something Rent-A-John, and the Reynolds family that runs the company, have learned through years of experience — it doesn't matter how long you've been around, you've always got to be at the top of your game.

"You have to want to supply nice product at a fair price," says Bill Reynolds Jr., who oversees the business with offices in Columbus, Ohio, and Philadelphia, Pa. "You have to get letters of reference from events that you have done."

Perhaps even more important is maintaining a solid and reliable reputation. While Reynolds' father may have enjoyed something of a monopoly on the business in the 1950s, those days are gone. Today, the region is peppered with competitors, but Rent-A-John has the benefit of history and reputation on its side.

"It's more about relationships and proving your service," Reynolds Jr. says. "The door is always open to a competitor."

BUILDING AN EMPIRE

As a young man, Bill Reynolds Sr. never set out to serve the sanitation needs of the rich and famous.

But one 55-gallon drum and four pieces of plywood later, he found he had launched a business that would, over the years, grow to service clients as famous as

"A GOOD EVENT CAN TURN BAD ON YOU ... IF THEY GET A BIGGER CROWD THAN EXPECTED. USE YOUR NUMBERS CHARTS AND SELL THEM ON WHAT THIS EVENT REALLY NEEDS TO DO."

Bill Reynolds Jr.



An onsite storage yard in Columbus houses the company's many restroom units and trucks.

the Kennedy family and events as large as the Olympics and as loud as Woodstock.

In fact, Reynolds Sr., 90, was too busy with his reclaimed metal business in St. Catherine's, Ontario, Canada, in the 1950s to think about sanitation. And it was that oversight that, ironically, paved the way for a new career path.

Back then, Reynolds Sr. and his crew didn't have restroom facilities on their jobsite; they simply used a bulldozer to cover up waste. But that soon changed when the president of Canadian Steel Corp. told Reynolds Sr. sanitation facilities were required.

The resourceful Reynolds Sr. took matters into his own hands — literally. "I built a toilet with a 55-gallon drum, four pieces of plywood and a funnel for a urinal," he recalls.

"I just did one because I had to," he says. "Then I built 10."

The makeshift wood restroom not only remedied the construction site's immediate needs, it prompted Reynolds Sr. to consider portable sanitation as a career. "I thought maybe other people could use them too," he says.

Even though he was confident in this new direction, his bank wasn't. They pulled his loan, thinking he was crazy to pursue such a business. After numerous discussions with bank employees up the chain of command, he convinced a bank manager to take a chance on his fledgling wood restrooms.

In his first month pounding the pavement, Reynolds Sr. traveled to construction sites, offering to let the workers at test locations use the units for free. Other units he rented for \$1.50 a day. He even made a tiny model of his restroom and carried it on sales calls. "I put a toilet on their desk ... that's how I got to sell them," he says.

By 1959, the business — by then dubbed Johnny on the Spot — really took off, spidering from Reynolds' workplace in Ontario to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and other parts of

Rent-A-John patriarch Bill Reynolds Sr. and his son Bill Jr. converse onsite alongside units awaiting assembly.



the Northeast, fueled, in part, by the needs of the New York power project that built Niagara Falls.

A NEW AGE

Today, the Reynolds empire encompasses two shops (including Johnny on the Spot in Philadelphia), more than 2,500 portable restrooms and 35 employees (including Reynolds' daughters Cassie and Barbara (Bobbie) and his son, Bill Jr.). "I think they saw a future (in the business), and I needed them," says a spry Reynolds Sr., who still comes in to work most days.

As one of the first suppliers in the nation, Reynolds Sr. sums up his company's early success in three words: "Be there first." Others "hadn't gotten wise to the business," he says.

Reynolds' son concurs.

"He was definitely one of the first entrepreneurs (in the field). It's a lot harder to enter the market now," he says. "My dad could put a service truck on the road for \$6,500; now, a truck costs \$75,000, and the cost of toilets has gone up. If I had to start all over, I'd have to think about it."

While Reynolds Sr. continued to pursue the construction business, he soon learned there was money to be earned and a reputation to be built through servicing special events. And that quickly became a company focus through the turbulent and politically active 1960s.

MEETING THE CAPITAL'S DEMANDS

Among his earliest clients was First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, who kept her pony, Macaroni, at the White House during her husband, John's,

presidency in the early 1960s. She hired Reynolds Sr. to put a portable restroom on the vast lower grounds of the estate, as a convenience when she rode her horses. "She was very pleasant," he recalls.

"(BACK IN THE 1950s), I BUILT A TOILET WITH A 55-GALLON DRUM, FOUR PIECES OF PLYWOOD AND A FUNNEL FOR A URINAL. I JUST DID ONE BECAUSE I HAD TO ... I THOUGHT MAYBE OTHER PEOPLE COULD USE THEM TOO."

Bill Reynolds Sr.



Rent-A-John is family business through and through. Pictured, from left, are Bill Reynolds Jr., his father, Bill Reynolds Sr., and sisters Cassie Ann Reynolds and Barbara (Bobbie) Neff at their Columbus office.

"IT'S MORE ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS AND PROVING YOUR SERVICE. THE DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN TO A COMPETITOR."

Bill Reynolds Jr.

Soon after, Johnny on the Spot provided four restrooms to Kennedy's brother-in-law, Robert Kennedy, for a pool at his Virginia property. Servicing America's then first-family wasn't intimidating; it was just part of the job, Reynolds Sr. recalls.

Perhaps one of the most memorable special events tackled by Johnny on the Spot was Martin Luther King Jr.'s march on Washington, D.C., in 1963. "He had an oratory that was out of this world," Reynolds Sr. recalls of the civil rights leader. The company provided 350 restrooms; nearly 250,000 people descended upon the historic event.

Johnny on the Spot had made a name for itself in Washington, one that wouldn't soon be forgotten. And in a somewhat macabre turn of events, the company was back on the job in Washington the week following King's 1968 assassination — serving the needs of the U.S. Army, which was suppressing rioters in the city. His restrooms were everywhere, Reynolds Sr. recalls, including 78 custom-built Big John units (with five stalls and a five-man urinal). "We made \$107,000 in one week," Reynolds Sr. says.

Further special events of note included a Vietnam War demonstration in Washington, D.C., three



Rent-A-John workers unload Big Johns at a work site.

Woodstock music festivals and two Olympics (the 1976 Summer Games in Montreal and the 1980 Winter Games in Lake Placid, N.Y.).

"I think the largest event we did was (the 1969) Woodstock," Reynolds Sr. says. "That's the one I was most impressed with." Johnny on the Spot supplied restrooms for the more than 400,000 who reportedly attended the event in upstate New York. Surprisingly, amid the rain and mud of that event, the restrooms survived in fairly good condition.

THE SECOND GENERATION

Reynolds Jr. was only 9 during that first Woodstock, but he still remembers riding around with his dad in the service truck. "He took me with him everywhere he went," he recalls.

It must have made an impact on the younger Reynolds; he's never worked anywhere else. "I think it's a good thing. It gave me the opportunity to work every position," he says.

When he and his buddies were in their teens, they painted the units — getting a taste of the business early. "I always wanted to help out. I was doing anything I could to make a buck." Later, while in college, Reynolds Jr. began running a truck route for the company.

Like his dad, Reynolds Jr. services a fair amount of construction business. But while his father may have paved the way servicing huge special events, it now accounts for about 30 percent of the business. "Special events are still a big part of the business, but we

Special events, special concerns

When you focus part of your business on special events, it's important to note that they do come with special concerns. Here are some tips from the experts at Rent-A-John in Columbus, Ohio.

GIVE 'EM WHAT THEY WANT

About 100 of Rent-A-John's 2,500 portable restrooms are not the typical blue you might see on a construction site. That's because the special scarlet-and-gray models serve all home football games (about seven each year) for the Ohio State University Buckeyes. Providing custom colors is one aspect that makes servicing special events a little more, well, special. But don't college kids and rowdy crowds trash the units? "Overall, things come back in pretty good condition," says Bill Reynolds Jr., who now runs the business.

BE VIGILANT ABOUT VANDALISM

Company founder Bill Reynolds Sr. does remember vandalism being a problem in the 1960s during Vietnam War demonstrations in the nation's capital. Rioters "burned all the park benches and four of my Big Johns," he says. "A good event can turn bad on you ... if they get a bigger crowd than expected," the younger Reynolds says. "You better have the service capabilities for what you put out. Use your numbers charts and sell them on what this event really needs to do." But overall, vandalism hasn't been a major concern for any of the events the company has serviced over its five decades in business ... even the three major Woodstock music festivals — held in 1969, 1994 and 1999 — where units were serviced twice a day.

TRACK THE PAYMENTS

Reynolds Jr. says the company never got paid for supplying the restrooms in the parking lots at the third Woodstock festival, but that's a rare occurrence. "That's probably happened twice in the last 10 years," he says.

PREPARE FOR THE TIME COMMITMENT

Long hours are never far behind during special events. When Reynolds Sr. serviced the streets of Washington in the week following Martin Luther King's 1968 assassination, he says the money was good, but the hours were brutal. "My men slept under our trucks," Reynolds Sr. recalled. "On some of the larger events, the hours of servicing can be challenging," his son agreed.



Yard man Stephen Smith, left, discusses a route with pickup and delivery driver Bob Rogers.



Route driver Tammy Gundelfinger prepares to clean the scarlet-and-gray Five Peaks units used at Ohio State University football games.



Route driver Rick Smith unloads Five Peaks restrooms from a flatbed trailer.

don't travel as much as he used to," Reynolds Jr. says.

"We've watched it grow; it's a lot of fun," Reynolds Jr. says of working with his father and sisters in their Ohio office. "We grow a little bit each year ... it's a steady pace."

Today, Rent-A-John (the name change was needed because another

Columbus-area business used the Johnny on the Spot name) has a contract to service all home Ohio State University football games — one of their bigger special events, bringing 100 or more units. They've also worked Pope John Paul II's visit to Washington, D.C., in 1979. But Reynolds Jr.'s most notable experience

was being at two Olympics. "I got to experience something others don't get to see," he says.

Learning the ropes from a pioneer certainly helped the Reynolds family continue to foster a reputation their father — and no doubt their clients — appreciate.

And, coincidentally, it seems like

the younger Reynolds' career has finally come full circle. Last year, as he loaded up the truck with his wife and three kids and headed off to service a rock concert, he realized, with a bit of delight, "My God, I've turned into my dad." ■

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