

Honey wagons still roll in area

By Tom Beer
staff writer

THE FUTURE LOOKED bleak for M & M Septic Tanks back in the late 1950s and early '60s when the great exodus from Detroit to the suburbs was just beginning.

"Twenty-five years ago, they told my dad (Ed & M co-founder James McIntosh) that he should move out of Farmington because sewers were going to eliminate the need for a septic company," said Gary McIntosh, who runs the business now.

Well, the people came and so did the sewer lines, but the M & M Septic stayed. Today they're doing business out of the same old cinder block building on Northwestern Highway — and business is "real good," according to McIntosh.

SEPTIC TANKS — "on-site sewer systems" in the language of the bureaucrats who control them still are very much a part of the Oakland County scene, even, surprisingly, in the more urbanized sections. A septic system is simply a concrete tank buried underground near a dwelling. It's where the waste materials go when a toilet flushes or a bathtub empties or a washing machine drains.

Along with the tank is the adjacent septic field — several underground pipes leading away from the tank.

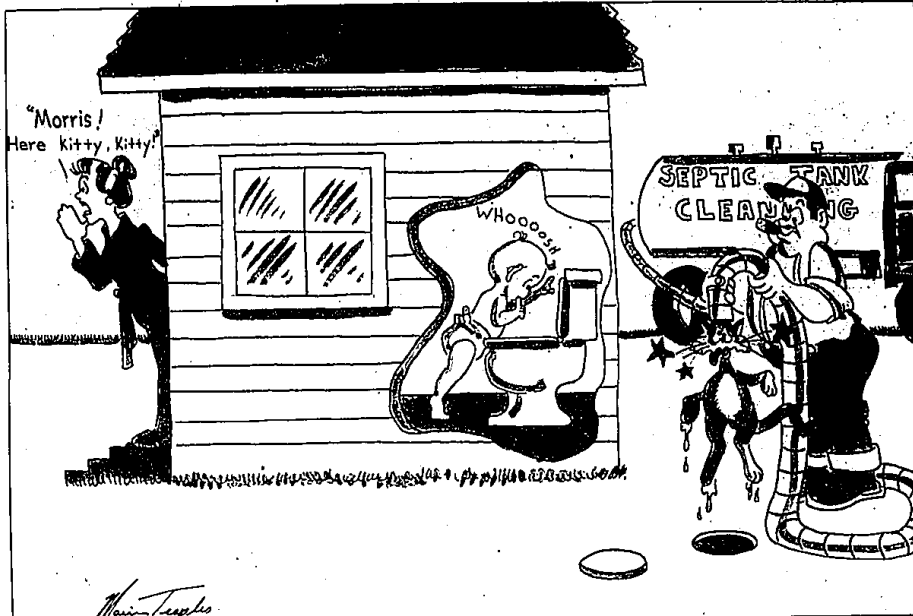
While solid wastes stay in the tank as sludge and scum to be broken down by bacterial action, liquid wastes are piped into the field where they leave the pipes through perforations and (hopefully) drain off or percolate into the soil.

When the tanks and fields become full after years of flushing and draining, people like McIntosh and their "honey wagon" trucks are called into action.

"HOME SEWAGE Disposal," a pamphlet published jointly by Michigan State University's Cooperative Extension Service and the state Department of Health, calls septic systems "only a second choice to public sewage systems" in built up areas.

"But, when properly built and maintained," the publication said, "a home system offers a fairly good means of sewage disposal for single isolated homes, farm homes, estates, and the like."

Septic tanks are especially prevalent in Franklin Village, a wealthy enclave with 994 single-family



homes and no sanitary sewers.

"If you count the number of our homes, you'll know how many septic tanks we have," said Village Clerk Rustle Shand with a laugh.

IN THEORY, several subdivisions are without sewer lines. The city's water department lists 897 water-only (no sewer) homes among its 24,310 customers.

Bloomfield Township is "82 percent sewerage," according to an official, "but they're still quite a few (septic tanks) and they're scattered."

Even divided places like Pontiac, Birmingham and Southfield still have a fair number of septic tanks. The dwellings predate sewers or are

located below the main sewer line and pumping the wastes up is expensive or impossible.

The Oakland County Health Department, which licenses and inspects the installation of septic systems, issued 987 permits for new systems in 1984 and 582 through June of this year.

ARTICLE THREE of the county sanitary code requires that property intended for septic use meet certain criteria concerning soil (sandy is good; clay bad), water table and slope.

Also, county health inspectors the tank trucks — euphemistically called honey wagons — which pump out the septic systems for the state

Department of Natural Resources, which licenses the vehicles.

"We'd like to get out of the septic tank business," said Mel Goldman, the county's chief of environmental health for field activities. "If we get out of the septic tank business, it means the entire county is sewerage and we don't have these individual problems."

Goldman continued, "We've had some cases where people have saved for years to buy a lot... didn't check it out before they bought it. Then they do gather enough money to build that dream or retirement home."

"THEN WE (county health personnel) go out and find that the

place is unsuitable for an on-site sewer system. Bureaucracy is supposed to be hard-hearted and all that, but we are individuals and we can feel what these people feel."

Goldman called septic systems "a temporary expedient" until sanitary sewers become available.

"It would provide a healthier environment in the county if we had no septic tanks," he added. "They all don't work forever."

When sewer lines become available and if a homeowner decides to hook up (municipal ordinances may require this), a septic tank is pumped out and crushed or filled, with sand.

BUT UNTIL THEN, the tanks will

continue to be used — and filled with waste. That means business for pumpers and haulers like McIntosh, Bob Bolton or Aaron Baughney. Pumping out septic tanks isn't the dirty job it might seem to be, they all agreed.

"It's a little smelly when you first open up the tank," said McIntosh, "but you don't have to wallow in it. In all my years in this business, I've never seen anyone get sick from this job."

Added Bolton, of Bolton Brothers Septic Service in Pontiac, "Some people really get into the job, I guess. But where I dump they call me Mr. Clean."

Said Baughney of A-1 Sanitation of Pontiac, "It's not a dirty job if you know what you're doing. I mean you can turn watering your lawn into a dirty job if you don't know what you're doing."

IN THE septic tank business, dumping always follows pumping. The haulers dump their loads into a special interceptor stations which have pipes leading to Detroit's sewage treatment system.

One such station is at Eight Mile and Lahser roads, another at 13 Mile and Stephenson, and yet another near the Oakland County Courthouse.

Of course, Detroit has the haulers — \$49 to dump a gallon into the system; up recently from \$10 — and that charge is reflected in the rates the customers must pay.

Bolton recently raised his rates from \$40 to \$95 for pumping a 1,000-gallon tank. McIntosh charges \$103 for a tank pump. If a septic field "clogs" (becomes clogged and unusable), it can cost as much as \$2,000 to relocate it.

But hooking up to a sewer line, assuming one is available, can cost as much as \$5,000. And then a fee must be paid the municipality on a regular basis. So on-site sewer systems are likely to be around for a long time.

"We're installing two septic systems to every new sewer we hook up," Baughney said. "Sewers just are not available everywhere."

Hot pursuit Volunteer firefighters needed

By Dennis Coffman
staff writer

For anyone who ever wondered what it would be like to fight a fire, the Farmington Fire Department could have the answer.

There are 12 openings in the department for "paid-callback" (volunteer) firefighters who get 200 hours of paid training.

Volunteer firefighters then get paid according to the number of fires they fight, which generally amounts to \$3,500 to \$4,000 a year. "But we're not emphasizing the pay," said Lt. Tom Shurtliff, who has been running the recruitment program. "The pay would just compensate them for their time. We want to emphasize that this is a way to get involved in the community."

The jobs are open to men and women 18, in good physical condition, with no upper age limit. They should live in Farmington Hills, Farmington or surrounding communities such as West Bloomfield or Novi.

"Actually, the Grand River-10 Mile Road fire station is really closer to Novi than to parts of Farmington Hills," Shurtliff said.

One added benefit: Prospective firefighters can use the training they receive as volunteers to apply for one of the 12 regular firefighter positions in the department, or to apply to other departments.

"As a matter of fact, currently we are hiring only those in our regular department who have been volunteer firefighters," Shurtliff said.

THOSE INTERESTED in becoming volunteer firefighters should attend a meeting at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in Farmington Hills City Hall, Orchard Lake and 11 Mile roads, or contact Shurtliff at the fire department at 553-0740.

Successful volunteers are usually people between the ages of 24-39, Shurtliff said.

"We'd prefer that they be family-oriented, stable in the community, perhaps buying a house — mature people who are fixed in the community."

It also wouldn't hurt if the prospective volunteer had some first aid, paramedical or even firefighting experience or training, though that is not necessary.

Applicants must hold a Michigan driver's license with an acceptable driving record, have a high

school diploma or G.E.D. equivalent, have a satisfactory work record and clear police record, be in acceptable physical position, live or work in Farmington Hills or a nearby community, and be able to respond quickly to fires.

Volunteers are issued pagers. These are essentially "beepers," but with voice instructions dispatched by the fire station nearest to the place where the volunteer lives.

Volunteers, after they are paged, pick up their firefighting apparatus at the station and head for the fire.

THE DEPARTMENT is especially interested in people who can respond during daytime hours. Housewives could make ideal daytime firefighters. "Our trouble is getting female applicants," Shurtliff said.

Hiring will take place in September. The recruit training school will begin in October.

Volunteer firefighters receive 90 hours of fire-suppression training, followed by emergency medical and advanced first aid training.

"They get well over 200 hours of training," Shurtliff said.

They are paid for training and for responding to fires. They are covered by workers' compensation, disability benefits and life insurance.

The pay and benefits ought not to be the determining factor for anyone who wants a job as a volunteer firefighter, Shurtliff said. The desire to provide a potentially life-saving and property-saving service to the community should be the most important reason for a man or woman to sign up for the program, he said.

The Farmington Department of Public Safety, Division of Fire-Emergency Medical Service, has been using paid-call employees since early 1983, when 18 were sworn in. There are now 30.

THEY ARE BACKED up by a staff of 12 paid fire fighters. Two career firefighters staff each Farmington Hills fire station from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., conducting inspections and responding to emergencies.

Because of the volunteer system, the city claims its fire department costs less than those serving other comparable communities without sacrificing protection.

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YMCA highlights

FARMINGTON YMCA MAINTENANCE WEEK — The Farmington YMCA will be closed Aug. 18-19 for annual maintenance. Your annual memberships are valid at the other branches of the Detroit Metropolitan YMCA. We apologize for any inconvenience this may cause, but this shutdown is necessary to be able to continue the quality services you have grown to expect from your Farmington Area YMCA. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

PRIME TIME CHILD CARE — The Farmington Area YMCA is pleased to announce during the 1985-86 school year, our child care service will be available at the following elementary schools: Eagle, Flinders, Longacre, William Gross, Woodstock, and Woodstock. Registration begins Aug. 14 at the Farmington Y, 23100 Farmington Road. Space is limited in our Prime Time Child Care. The YMCA is closed Aug. 18-19.