

INSTALLER PROFILE



◀ Hunter Creech is at the controls of a Caterpillar 306 excavator and Stacy Creech looks on. The machine is equipped with a 3D GPS system from Topcon Positioning Systems. (Photos by Gray Whitley)

STAYIN' ALIVE

Diversity of services and stellar customer care help three-generation North Carolina company thrive in good and bad times

By Ken Wysocky

A bad economic downturn rarely is good news for business owners.

But for entrepreneur Stacy Creech, the owner of Creech's Plumbing in Wilson, North Carolina, the deep recession of 2009-10 provided an epiphany of sorts that forced him to rethink his one-dimensional business model.

The result? A gradual business makeover that changed the company from a plumbing outfit to a multifaceted, fully diversified business that inspects and installs septic systems, revitalizes septic drainfields, pumps septic tanks, cleans drains, performs trenchless pipe-rehab work and rents and services portable restrooms.

"After the recession, I wanted to diversify — add more services and keep work flowing," says Creech, age 48, who co-owns the company with his wife, Sheryl. "Too many people put plumbing work on the back burner during the recession, so I decided I needed more services so that when one struggled, others are doing good."

"Plus plumbing is a highly competitive field and as I get older, it's harder to, say, crawl under a house to work," he adds. "Now I can sit on a machine or stand up at work. I do things I enjoy and it's a lot easier on my body."

Today, septic-related work — installations, inspections, pumping, and so forth — generates about 63% of the company's revenue, plumbing kicks in another 23% and portable restrooms contribute the remainder.

"Diversifying the business made us a one-stop shop for customers," he says. "When you get meat at a grocery store, you also want to get your bread and other things at the same place. It's that kind of thing."

In 2022, the company installed about 40 septic systems, most of them higher-priced, complex jobs for residential customers.

"Our niche is commercial jobs and more complex residential projects," Creech says. "We don't focus on new-construction installs due to the demand of projects with challenging lots and solutions."

TAKING CUES FROM CUSTOMERS

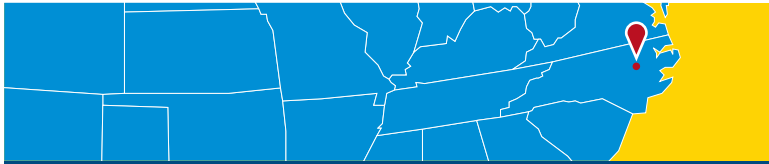
Creech grew up in the plumbing and septic world. His grandfather, Carney Roberson Sr., founded Roberson Septic in the early 1960s in Kenly, North Carolina.

When Roberson retired, his daughter, Myrtle (Creech's mother), established Creech's Plumbing, a plumbing and septic service company, with her husband, Donnie Creech, in Lucama, North Carolina.

In the early 2000s, Creech bought the plumbing side of the company from his parents.

"When I took over the plumbing side of the business in my early 20s, all I had was one helper, an excavator, a service van and a water jetter," he says.

In 2005, he moved to nearby Wilson and several years later, after the recession ended, he proceeded full-bore into other services. It all started



Creech's Plumbing Inc. Wilson, North Carolina

Owners: Stacy and Sheryl Creech

Founded: 1975

Employees: 12

Service area: Up to 100-mile radius around Wilson

Services: Septic system installations, repairs, inspections, pumping, portable sanitation

Website: www.creechsplumbing.com

» Hunter Creech uses a Crust Busters tank agitator during a residential pumping call.

when clients kept asking if he pumped septic tanks, so he finally decided to do so.

Then customers started asking if he rented portable restrooms because there was a need for a provider who could offer clean restrooms and good customer service. Creech decided he was that guy and bought 200 units from Satellite Industries.

"It was an easy decision," he notes. "When you run the numbers, it's a good investment. ... At the end of the day, it's additional revenue."

The company's restrooms are bright red, which matches its pump trucks, thus reinforcing brand recognition. The red restrooms also differentiate the business from competitors. "They're all over the place and act as mini-billboards," he says.

Then Creech noticed more and more customers' septic systems were failing, so around 2016, he started installing septic systems, a skill his father taught him years ago. "Installations just went hand-in-hand with pumping septic tanks," he says. "It was a very logical extension of our services and truly made us a one-stop shop."

ADDING EQUIPMENT

As the company grew, so did its fleet of machinery and equipment. For septic pumping, the business relies on two vacuum trucks: a 2023 Kenworth quad-axle T880 chassis equipped with a 4,500-gallon waste/250-gallon freshwater steel tank from Integrity Tank, a National Vacuum Equipment 4310 blower and an onboard jetter/washdown system from Pumptec; and a 2017 Kenworth T880 tandem-axle chassis equipped with a 4,000-gallon steel tank from Integrity, a 100-gallon freshwater saddle tank and an NVE 4307 blower.



To clean restrooms, the company invested in a 2017 Ram 5500 outfitted with an 800-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater aluminum tank from Integrity and a Masport pump and a 2023 Ram 5500 with an 800-gallon waste/400-gallon freshwater aluminum tank and an NVE B250 blower.

For installing septic systems, the company owns a 2021 Kenworth T880 dump truck with a dump body made by Godwin Manufacturing Co.; a 2020 Caterpillar 306 excavator equipped with a 3D GPS system



▲ Hunter and Stacy Creech use their EarthBuster drainfield rejuvenation equipment from K&P Enterprises. The attachment is mounted to a Cat skid-steer in the field.

from Topcon Positioning Systems; a 2020 Caterpillar mini-excavator; and a 2021 Caterpillar track loader.

All vehicles are equipped with GPS systems and dashboard cameras from Samsara.

The company also owns a 2015 Warrior water jetter (4,000 psi at up to 18 gpm) from Spartan Tool, used for cleaning sewer or drainfield lines; a Roddie R-8 pipe-bursting system; a pipe brush-coating system from Picote Solutions; and pipeline-inspection cameras from RIDGID and Hathorn.

In addition, the business relies on an EarthBuster drainfield-renovation machines from K&P Enterprises and uses SludgeHammer technology to clean and oxygenate drainfields.

“We do a lot drainfield rejuvenation jobs because a lot of our customers always are interested in solutions that cost less or require less government intervention,” Creech says.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Keeping a third-generation family business alive and thriving is a big motivator for Creech.

“I want to succeed because I feel that failure isn’t an option for family businesses,” he explains. “It might sound odd to some people, but I feel like I owe it to people who came before me, like my granddaddy and mom and dad, to keep things going.”

One factor in the company’s success is continual investments in good equipment, as well as adopting new technology before competitors do.

“There were times we almost lost it all. But you have to be prepared for economic downturns and uncertain markets, either by saving money or being really creative and diverse.”

Stacy Creech

“I always like a challenge of finding the next big idea coming down the pipeline and being the first one to go and get it,” he says. “Take pipe lining, for instance, which we’re considering getting into. If you’re the first one and you’re good at doing it, you can ride that wave the longest before it gets too competitive and less profitable.”

Creech also points to pipe-bursting technology, which he invested in around 2020. The company is booking a lot of pipe-bursting jobs this year, largely from referrals from area plumbers. As a bonus, technologies like pipe-bursting make jobs significantly less labor-intensive, which in turn makes finding new employees easier, Creech notes.

“I always want to make my guys’ jobs easier,” he says. “And kids these days love technology like pipe-bursting and inspection cameras. They’re great for attracting this younger generation because when it comes to equipment, they want to work with the best of the best, not junk.”

ALWAYS CHANGING

Another success factor is the ability to keep evolving, he says.

“Someone once told me you’re either moving forward or falling



◀ Hunter Creech checks the voltage at a SJE Rhombus NEX Series pump control panel as Stacy Creech and crew service and clean a home septic system.

▼ From left, Stacy, Sheryl and Hunter Creech are show with their vacuum truck built out by Integrity Tank with a National Vacuum Equipment 4310 blower and an onboard jetter/washdown system from Pumptec.

“Someone once told me you’re either moving forward or falling behind, that there’s no such thing as staying in place. ... You can’t just sit there and always do things the way you used to.”

Stacy Creech

behind, that there’s no such thing as staying in place,” he says. “You have to keep track of trends and adapt to situations. You can’t just sit there and always do things the way you used to.”

Creech also points out that it’s important for business owners to prepare for economic downturns.

“My business has not always been successful,” he says. “In fact, there were times we almost lost it all. But you have to be prepared for economic downturns and uncertain markets, either by saving money or being really creative and diverse.”

Providing comprehensive job training and coaching also has helped Creech grow the business. He says he makes a point of being in the field as much as possible to coach employees and ensure quality work.

VARIETY OF SYSTEMS

Creech says his company typically installs a mix of conventional gravity or pump-and-gravity systems. He prefers Infiltrator chambers or prefabricated permeable block-panel systems from T&J Panel Systems.



WE LOVE THE BIG JOBS

The most difficult installing project ever tackled by Creech's Plumbing almost didn't happen, says company owner Stacy Creech.

It started with a persistent general contractor.

"This guy kept calling us and I kept saying I wasn't interested," Creech says. "But he kept calling because no other contractors were interested in doing it, so I finally told him if \$150,000 to do the job didn't scare him, I'd consider doing it."

In the end, Creech decided to take on the job, which ended up costing around \$180,000. Furthermore, he now looks forward to such projects.

The job started in September 2019 at Raven Rock State Park. It required installing a 3,640-square-foot conventional gravity septic system to handle around 50 RV hookups at nine campsites.

Capable of handling 2,655 gpd, the system features a 6,000-gallon, dual-compartment concrete tank by Shoaf Precast and equipped with a 6-inch effluent filter from Polylok; an 8,000-gallon dose tank from Shoaf with dual dedicated 2 hp sewage pumps (110 gpm) from Pentair; 840 Quick4 Plus Standard chambers from Infiltrator Water Technologies; and a control panel from SJE Rhombus.

Wastewater from RV hookups travels 693 feet downhill through a 6-inch-diameter PVC pipe to the septic tank, while wastewater from a bathhouse travels 799 feet through a 4-inch PVC pipe to the tank. Two drainfields, located 100 yards apart,

each featured 14 roughly 120-foot-long trenches.

Aside from the sheer size of the project, it also was challenging because the park was nearly two hours away from the Creech shop. Furthermore, crews started working right at the start of the state's rain and hurricane season, he says.

"We were on site for a total of about 14 days spread out over three months because of bad weather," Creech explains. "The day we finished, a tropical depression came through and it rained for two weeks straight," he adds. "Had we not pushed hard to get it done, there might've been a five-month delay before the site would've dried out."

Even though he initially resisted, Creech is glad he took the job because he discovered he liked the logistical challenges posed by large projects.

"It's not so much the challenges on the installation end," he says. "It's doing the research to make sure the numbers we submitted for the bid were good. It could have been devastating financially if I would've messed up."

"There's a lot at stake when you put yourself out there with that much risk and it goes bad," Creech adds, noting the company had to buy \$100,000 worth of materials on credit ahead of time. "It was daunting at times, but it went well enough that we felt confident about taking on a similar job about a year later. Now it seems like we do a few big park installations every other year."



▲ Hunter Creech washes down a septic tank during a service call. The company's vacuum truck is equipped with an onboard jetter/washdown system from Pumptec.

"T&J systems require half the footprint of a conventional gravity system," Creech says. "They're not the predominant kind of system that we install, but they're growing in prevalence because they're good for smaller lots where you're trying to squeeze in an installation or for higher-value lots where people want enough room for pools and other things."

The company often installs anaerobic systems from American Manufacturing or pretreated drip systems from FujiClean USA because they can be installed much shallower.

"There's a lot of wet soil in our area of eastern North Carolina, with a lot of flat topography and high water tables," he explains.

"The day we finished, a tropical depression came through and it rained for two weeks straight. Had we not pushed hard to get it done, there might've been a five-month delay."

Stacy Creech

One thing is certain: Installers — and regulators, for that matter — must keep adapting to new kinds of septic system technologies and changing real estate conditions. For example, years ago, large 5-acre lots were prevalent. But now half-acre lots are more the norm, he explains.

"So we've had to adapt to accommodating smaller lots," he says. "But I respect the challenge."

OPTIMISTIC OUTLOOK

Looking ahead, Creech says he's doing everything he can to ensure he hands off a thriving company to his son, Hunter, 22, if he decides to stay in the industry.

"I always ask him if this is something he wants to do for the rest of his life," Creech says. "If not, I'm going to sell it and invest the proceeds — I've already had offers to buy it. But I'd love to pass it on like others before me did."

Creech says he's in an "onward and upward" mode. He's encouraged by the fact that there's plenty of work and the company has built a good reputation and respect from local contractors that can be leveraged for further growth.

"The service industry will always be here and needed," he says. "There'll always be a need for boots on the ground in this industry — robots or apps aren't going to do the work. So I'm cautiously optimistic looking forward. In the long term, there's a bright future ahead." ■

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