

DREAM CHASER

VETERAN DRAIN CLEANER JOHN REES' SUCCESS STORY PROVIDES A TEXTBOOK CASE ON HOW TO GROW A THRIVING BUSINESS IN THE INDUSTRY // By Ken Wysocky



Young drain cleaners aspiring to make their mark in the industry just might find inspiration from the example set by John C. Rees Jr., owner of A1 Quality Rooter in Meriden, Connecticut.

Rees established his company back in 1990, equipped with nothing more than a white 1986 Ford Econoline van, four cable drain machines, a toilet auger and just \$1,500 in his checking account. He says he made only about \$35,000 in his first year in business.

Today, the 61-year-old entrepreneur employs nine people, owns a large fleet of equipment — including five trailer- or truck-mounted water jettors — and is on track to generate nearly \$2 million in revenue in 2024.

His secret? Consistently invest in equipment that improves productivity and profitability. Provide great customer service. Assemble a team of hard-working employees who mesh well with the company's values and culture. And work your butt off.

"I just wanted to be the biggest little drain cleaning company in central Connecticut," Rees says of his

goal when he founded the company. "And I think I've accomplished that. It's all about dedication, hard work and having a great team behind you.

"Our depth of experience and our team culture set us apart from competitors. Everyone has a specific skill that they're really good at and that helps us work together as a team. Like they say, team work makes the dream work."

Rees says another trait also strongly contributes to his company's success and longevity: sheer will and a no-quit attitude about any job.

"We get a lot of calls for jobs that other contractors have walked away from," he says. "But we never walk away from a job. One way or another, we're the final call for customers — either we clean the line or we replace it. That's what we're known for."

A tendency to not turn down work — and investments in a variety of equipment that enables the company to provide a wide array of services — also helped A1 Quality Rooter build a solid reputation for quality work.

Residential work generates about 60% of the company's annual revenue, with commercial work (primarily apartment complexes and restaurants) and industrial jobs kicking in 30% and 10%, respectively.

"We do a little bit of everything, from clearing a sink drain for Mrs. Jones to cleaning catch basins, storm culverts and

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JOHN REES



« John Rees started A1 Quality Rooter in 1990 and is hoping to hand the business off in a few years to his son Johnny. (Photography by John Marinelli)

main sewer lines for large industrial clients,” Rees says. “We have equipment that can do it all.”

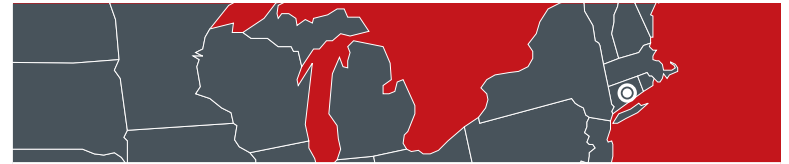
AN EARLY START

When Rees graduated from high school in 1981, his father, John C. Rees Sr., gave him two career options: Join the military or start working for a national drain cleaning company. Rees Sr. was in HVAC sales and knew the owner of a franchise, Rees says.

“So two days after graduating from high school, I was in a van getting trained to do drain cleaning,” he explains. “I wasn’t college material. I’d always been a mechanical kind of guy. So I took a chance on drain cleaning and actually found out I was pretty good at it. I liked it, too, because it was always hands-on work and you worked at a different location every day. It was always something different. Every day posed new challenges, which I really enjoyed.”

But even though he was making “pretty damn good money” on the commission-based job, Rees started thinking about starting his own business so he could keep that money in his own pocket. Technicians had to buy their own service vehicles and drain cleaning equipment, so he already had a good head start.

“I knew I’d eventually run my own business,” he says. “Why hand over the lion’s share of the money I make to the company?”



A1 Quality Rooter Sewer & Drain Cleaning Services

MERIDEN, CONNECTICUT

OWNER John Rees

FOUNDED 1990

EMPLOYEES 9

SERVICES Drain cleaning, catch basin cleaning, jetting, camera inspection, sewer line replacement

SERVICE AREA 50-mile radius around Meriden

WEBSITE a1qualityrooter.com



« An A1 Quality Rooter crew uses a Harben trailer-mounted jetting unit on a job. Harben has been Rees’ go-to manufacturer for jetting equipment over the years. “They can handle just about any kind of clog,” he says.



Rees poses with some members of his A1 Quality Rooter team, who he says have been integral to the company's success. "In the end, it's all about the team," he says. "I owe it all to the hard work and dedication of the team behind me."

Joe Petitte uses a Duracable DM138 drum cable machine to snake a kitchen sink line.



But I stuck with the job for nine years because I had a young family to support, so it didn't seem like the timing was right to take risks."

In addition, Rees was gaining valuable business experience, especially after he eventually got promoted to assistant general manager. There he learned about the clerical end of the business — how to manage the day-to-day operations, he says.

A LITTLE INSPIRATION

Rees says *Cleaner* magazine further fueled his aspirations to strike out on his own. It all started when he saw a copy of *Cleaner* on the desk of the company's general manager.

"I'll never forget it," Rees says. "I asked him, 'What's that?' And as he stuck it in a desk drawer, he said, 'This is not for you.' He didn't want anyone to know anything about the industry."

A couple months later, Rees again saw a copy of the magazine on the general manager's desk.

"I hate to admit it, but I took it and started looking through it," he says. "That's when I realized the reason why he didn't want anyone to see it. Reading *Cleaner* was a real eye-opener for me. I must've read each article about 10 times. One thing it opened my mind to was the idea of buying a jetter."

While still employed by the company, Rees borrowed some money, bought a used jetter made by Harben (a subsidiary of Flowplant Group), mounted it in his van and started jetting drains on the side.

"That motivated me to get serious about starting my own business," he recalls. "I was a young man full of piss and vinegar and ready to go."

BUILDING A FLEET

Over the years, Rees has assembled an impressive array of service vehicles and equipment. Continual technological upgrades have definitely played a key role in the company's growth, he says.

"One of the most important pieces of equipment in the drain cleaning business is hydro jetters and inspection cameras," he says. "Cameras weren't even invented when I started. Now you can't run a drain cleaning business without them. They're an absolute necessity.

"And the same thing is true for jetters, which greatly increased productivity. In the early 1980s, we did almost everything with rods and cables."

The company currently owns seven service trucks — four Ford Transit 350s, one Ford F-750 and two Ford F-250 pickup trucks, one equipped with a service body made by Reading Truck.

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JOHN REES



Joey Ryzoc uses an EnviroSight push camera to inspect a sewer line.



Rees looks on as Peter Orsini excavates a trench in order to lay new sewer pipe.

The company also relies heavily on five water jetters. Three are trailer-mounted 4018 GTK models from Harben, equipped with 300-gallon water tanks and Harben diaphragm radial water pumps; two of them generate 4,000 psi at 18 to 22 gpm and one produces 4,000 psi at 12 to 15 gpm.

The fourth jetter was self-fabricated in-house, using a Harben pump (4,000 psi at 18 to 22 gpm) coupled with a 300-gallon water tank and other components.

Rees also transferred a Pacific Tek vacuum unit from a trailer onto a Ford F-750 truck chassis, creating what he calls a “suck

and blow” vacuum system, used for hydroexcavating, jetting and vacuuming debris from manholes, catch basins and so forth. It features an 800-gallon debris tank, a blower from Roots (a brand owned by the Howden Group), a 300-gallon water tank and a Harben pump (4,000 psi at 18 gpm).

FILLING OUT THE EQUIPMENT ROSTER

For smaller jobs, A1 Quality Rooter technicians rely on about 15 drum cable machines of varying sizes built by Duracable Manufacturing Co.; about a dozen more in various sizes from MyTana Manufacturing;

JETTER LOYALTY

With 43 years of industry experience, A1 Quality Rooter owner John Rees has used a lot of drain cleaning machines over the decades and speaks highly about many of them. But one brand still tops his list of favorites: Harben (a subsidiary of Flowplant Group) water jetters.

Rees was already familiar with Harben jetters when he established his company in 1990 because he worked with one at his first job at a national drain cleaning company. And even before he struck out on his own, he bought a Harben jetter, mounted it in a van he owned (technicians at the company had to buy their one service vehicle and equipment) and used it to clean drains on the side.

“I bought it used for about \$17,000 in 1990 and have stuck with Harben ever since,” Rees says, noting he owns three trailer-mounted Harben jetters — 4018 GPT models equipped with 300-gallon water tanks and Harben diaphragm radial water pumps. One pump generates 4,000 psi at 18 to 22 gpm and one produces 4,000 psi at 12 to 15 gpm. And another self-fabricated jetter that’s skid-mounted in a truck features a Harben water pump.

“They’re virtually maintenance free,” Rees says. “They just run and run all the time. The eight-cylinder diaphragm radial pump has truly proven itself over time. They haven’t changed its design because it works too well.”

Rees also likes the pumps because they’re easy to rebuild.

“I can rebuild one in my sleep,” he says. “The parts are always readily available.”

In terms of performance, Rees says the Harben pumps are “untouchable.”

“They’re the reason why I own four Harben jetters,” he says.

The company’s technicians use the jetters every day to take out roots, remove debris and cut through grease clogs in sewer lines.

“They can handle just about any kind of clog,” Rees says. “We clean drain pipes all over southern New England, home to some of the oldest sewer infrastructure in the country. For us, it’s all about providing quality service, and Harbens help us do all that and more.”

Water jetters are a great investment, Rees says, because contractors can charge a higher hourly rate, while at the same time reducing time spent on jobs, which boosts productivity and profitability by enabling crews to do more jobs per day. Furthermore, jetters clean a pipe better than cable or sectional drain machines, which minimizes profit-killing callbacks.

“There’s a big difference between clearing a pipe and actually cleaning a pipe,” Rees explains. “A drain machine will clear pipes, but a jetter cleans them. And we’re in the drain cleaning business, not the drain clearing business. I don’t think you can run a decent drain cleaning business these days without a jetter.”

» Rees says he hopes to keep A1 Quality Rooter in the family by handing the reins to son Johnny (left) in a few years. Rees' grandson Nelson Rees Muniz (right) also has aspirations to work in the trades.

» After Rees' wife died in 2011, Helen Skillin stepped into serve as office manager and has been a vital part of the company since.



about 10 more manufactured by Spartan Tool; five to 10 from Gorlitz Sewer & Drain; and about eight built by Milwaukee Tool.

For inspecting pipes, the company has invested in push cameras from Envirosight, RIDGID and CustomEyes Cameras, as well as two RIDGID NaviTrak Scout pipe locators.

In addition, the company owns a Vactor 2100 vacuum/hydroexcavating truck built out on a Sterling chassis with a 1,200-gallon debris tank, a Vactor fan, a 1,000-gallon water tank and a Vactor water pump (2,000 psi at 35 gpm). It's primarily used for cleaning catch basins, culverts and large sewer lines.

“OUR VARIETY OF EQUIPMENT MAKES US A ONE-STOP SHOP FOR OUR CUSTOMERS. WE CAN DO JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING THEY NEED.”

JOHN REES

To install new sewer lines, the company invested in a Caterpillar mini-excavator; a Hitachi midsize excavator; two dump trucks, both Ford F-750s equipped with Jaco dump bodies built by Cottrell Truck & Equipment; and two Bobcat skid-steers.

“Replacing sewer pipes was an add-on business,” Rees says. “I was giving that work away to subcontractors and I couldn’t afford to keep doing that. Our variety of equipment makes us a one-stop shop for our customers. We can do just about everything they need.”

A DREAM TEAM

Rees can’t talk about his company without continually emphasizing the work ethic and dedication of his employees and the quality work they do.

Rees’ son, John C. Rees III (Johnny), 33, is a lead technician who Rees says had a tool bucket in his hand at age 10. Rees also depends on Joey Ryzoc, a service technician who’s also his nephew; Joe Petite, service technician; Peter Orsini, foreman; Juventino Flores, a laborer; John Uvino, service technician; and Lynn Daly, dispatcher.

Rees also has high praise for Helen Skillin, the company’s office manager, who he calls “my work wife.” Skillin stepped in to manage the office after Rees’ wife, Janice, died in 2011.

“I can’t say enough about her,” Rees says. “She’s a highly devoted and dedicated woman who’s been invaluable and critical to our success. When I started the company, it was just me, Janice and a typewriter — no computers. When she passed away, I was a lost soul. But then Helen walked in the door to help me out on a part-time basis and she never left.”

CAN GET SATISFACTION

While Rees had big ambitions when he started out nearly 35 years ago, he’s still amazed at how it all turned out.

“When I go out in our yard now and see all the guys and all the equipment we have, it’s very satisfying and gratifying,” he says. “I think we’ve done OK. I never would’ve imagined all this, but here we are. I guess we’re doing something right.”

“But in the end, it’s all about the team,” he continues. “I owe it all to the hard work and dedication of the team behind me, especially my son, Johnny, and my father, who was my mentor.”

Looking ahead, Rees says he’d like to see A1 Quality Rooter branch out into five more New England states. But he also plans on retiring in about five years, then handing the reins to his son. His grandson, Nelson Rees Muniz, is attending a trade school to become a plumber, so another generation of ownership could follow after Johnny.

“Johnny just needs a little more time to gather some more experience, especially managing all aspects of the company,” Rees says. “But he has the chops to do it. Things will be in good hands going forward. I know he’ll keep providing good quality service to our customers.” **c**

FEATURED EQUIPMENT

BOBCAT CORPORATE

800-743-4340
www.bobcat.com

CUSTOMEYES CAMERAS

636-875-7758
www.customeyescameras.com

DURACABLE MANUFACTURING CO.

800-247-4081
www.duracable.com
(See ad page ??)

ENVIROSIGHT LLC

866-348-6071
www.envirosight.com
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GORLITZ SEWER & DRAIN, INC.

877-446-7548
www.gorlitz.com
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HARBEN, INC.

800-327-5387
www.harben.com

HITACHI CONSTRUCTION MACHINERY CO.

866-973-0394
www.hitachiconstruction.com

HOWDEN, A CHART INDUSTRIES COMPANY

860-688-8361
www.howden.com

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800-729-3878
www.milwaukeetool.com

MYTANA LLC

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www.mytana.com
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800-884-5551
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800-458-2226
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