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Don McIsaac & his father Mac

## Fine tuning your septic system

STORY & PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Gloria McIsaac, who works alongside her husband Mac and son Don at McIsaac Septic Tank Pumping, has received her share of calls from people who believe their property is on a sewage system and are surprised to learn they actually have a septic tank.

For some, it's a bit of a rude awakening. They may notice a dark liquid-like substance in their yard where the septic bed is, hear gurgling noises and smell a foul odour. They're told to call a septic tank company and they discover they're not actually on a sewage system and that their septic tank probably needs cleaning.

That's when Gloria takes the time to educate people about the care and use of a septic tank. She finds that people, particularly those from the city, know very little about septic tank systems. And quite often they need to be taught to monitor their use of water. Using a lot of water may be fine in the city, she says, but that's not the case if you live on a property with a septic system. Tanks, which may hold anywhere from 800 gallons to 3,000 gallons, work well as long as people understand that they can only use so much water at any one time. "I tell them they've got to live differently," explains Gloria. "In the city, you are on a sewer system and you can use all

the water that you want."

The responsibility is borne by the homeowner when it comes to septic tank systems, something that may seem daunting to people just learning about these systems. So it's worth a call to a septic tank company to get more information. Three companies in the area — McIsaac Septic Pumping, Robert Noble Ltd., and Broughton's Pumping Service — provide pumping services to clean out septic tanks and they also haul waste from these tanks to sewage treatment plants. Licensed by the Ministry of the Environment, they're there to provide a service, but they can also answer questions about septic tank systems, and explain what homeowners can do to ensure their systems are operating efficiently.

Septic tank systems consist of a tank that's made of concrete, steel, fibreglass or polyethylene. The tank, which is essentially a holding tank that's buried in the ground, has an intake pipe closest to the house that carries waste from sinks, bathtubs, toilets and washing machines to the tank. The solid waste, which collects inside the tank, is decomposed by bacterial action and as part of this process solids settle at the bottom of the tank and scum floats to the top.

The tank is meant to collect waste

and prevent solid waste from reaching what are called leaching or tile beds. The septic system is also equipped with an outtake pipe that carries wastewater to the leaching beds, usually located in the backyard. The leaching bed — which is actually a system of perforated pipes or weeping tiles — treats the wastewater through a natural process that removes impurities such as suspended solids and organic chemicals.

These systems can function well as long as people are careful not to use excessive amounts of water in a short period of time. If too much water is used, solid materials may end up in the leaching bed.

Wayne McEnery, who owns Robert Noble Ltd., says it essentially comes down to common sense. He recommends using a reduced setting on the washing machine and doing loads of laundry over a period of hours or days. "I wouldn't recommend that people do nine loads of laundry on a Saturday morning, for example. That's just like putting five gallons of water in a two gallon pail."

What people put into their septic system can cause problems too. Javex, water softeners, cigarette butts, and harmful chemicals can all disrupt the bacterial action required to break down solids. It's also a good idea to keep from flushing sani-



Barry Broughton

tary napkins or plastics down the

let, both of which can clog the. But the most important homeowner can do is to ensure septic tank is pumped regularly. Three companies agree that one person should have their septic pumped every two to three months, although this can vary depending on the age and size of the tank and the number of people in a household.

Without regular flushing, material accumulates in the tank and it may end up flowing into the leaching bed, resulting in plugged pipes or a plugged bed.


Proper maintenance is important and without it septic systems can break down. Homeowners who don't maintain their systems can be paying for the installation of a completely new septic system, so that's quite costly.

With proper maintenance, however, a septic system should have a lifetime of twenty years, says McIsaac. "With rejuvenation, you can bring it back into working order."

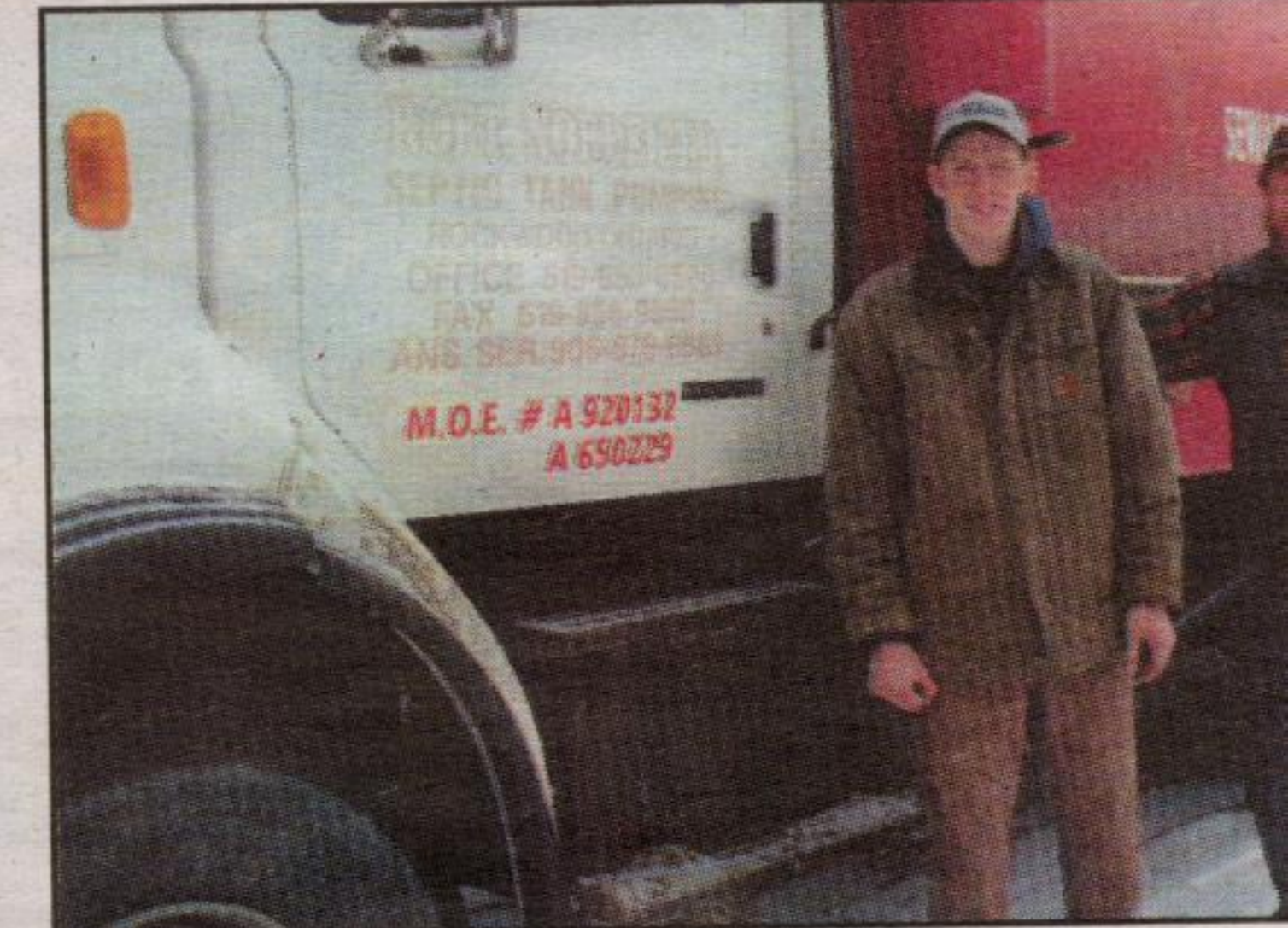
For more information on septic systems, contact McIsaac Septic Pumping at 519-853-2790 or Robert Noble Ltd. at 519-853-0500 or 0514. Broughton's Pumping Service can be reached at 905-827-2866-521-6196.

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Wayne McEnery and his son David

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