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Taming the Tough Texas Soils

Alligator Annie thrives on specialties in aerobic treatment systems, honest business practices, and good, old-fashioned customer service

By Doug Day



Ten years after starting Alligator Annie's, Alma Tippins has her heart set on building a new home on a lake, doing some fishing, and providing service to a few of her favorite customers.

But first, she has to find the right person to take over her aerobic treatment system installation and maintenance companies. Meeting her standards, however, may be as tough as an alligator's skin.

Alligator Annie's operates out of Nacogdoches, the oldest town in Texas, three hours southeast of Dallas in the middle of the Piney Woods region. Unlike the Wild West image of a flat and dry desert region, Piney Woods is more like nearby Louisiana — dense hardwoods, bayous, swamps, lakes and streams.

The 54,400-square-mile Piney Woods extends into Southern Arkansas, Western Louisiana and Southeastern Oklahoma. "Nobody thinks Texas looks

like this," says Tippins. "You have to be tough to live in East Texas."

The septic systems have to be tough, too. The sandy soil over solid clay may support the beautiful pine trees for hunting, 30 lakes for fishing, and America's largest brick manufacturer, but it doesn't do much for septic systems. "The soils are just wicked for conventional septic systems," she says. So, since she started in business, Tippins has built a career on advanced treatment units.

Building from nothing

She installed her first system on Feb. 12, 1996, after leaving a job in the forestry service. While she learned her new business, she did anything she could to supplement her income.

"I sold watermelons on the side of the road," she says. "I painted a burned-up building. I delivered telephone books. I worked in a ghetto apartment complex." She also built tornado shelters on the side. "I just did anything I had to do because nobody took me seriously," says Tippins. "They'd never seen a woman in a business like this."

From a total of eight installations in her first year, Tippins now installs about one system per week. Ninety percent of her installations are aerobic systems — mainly Cajun Aire — with a locally made precast concrete tank. She installs conventional systems when a design engineer recommends one, but won't offer a warranty because of the soil.

One system a week may not seem like much, until you learn that Tippins is a one-person operation. Her 10 grandchildren help now and then during the summer — they call her Grand-momma Cool. “They learn how to work hard and make money. And they learn that grandma ain’t grandma out on the job. Grandma’s a mean little boss,” she says with her light Texas twang.

She is a good manager, though, who looks for good people to work with her. She has developed a network of backhoe operators — one in every county in which she works — and they jump when she calls because she pays them very well, guaranteeing them eight hours of pay, even if it only takes a couple of hours of work.

Tippins went through a lot of them before finding those who “would show up on time, do what they’re supposed to do, and help me if I needed a little bit of help — people who would be dependable.” She also partners with a pumper: When he finds systems that need repair, he has people call Alligator Annie’s. When Tippins finds a system that needs pumping, she refers the customer to him.



The service business

When Tippins couldn’t find anyone to service aerobic units the way she wanted it done, she expanded her business and started Alligator Annie’s Aerobic Maintenance. “I did that because I could see a little bit into the future, and I knew my business was going to turn into a service business no matter what I did. And it has.”

Texas law is helping to drive the change. It requires homeowners with aerobic systems to have a service contract, or to be certified through six hours of training by the installer to do their own maintenance. Some may see the regulations as onerous, but not Tippins. “I love to teach people how to take care of their septic systems,” she says. “This just gives me more people to teach.” Tippins isn’t sure how many service contracts she has — only that they fill two boxes.

She never intended for the company to get big, though it probably could with the right person in charge. “I was just never willing to hire a bunch of employees,” Tippins says. “I just like doing things myself.” But the business is still growing, and she can’t stop it. While it’s getting too big to manage by herself, she still loves what she’s doing. “Everybody tells me they can tell I’m excited about taking care of septic systems.”



Old country girl

When you go by the name of “Alligator Annie,” you better be tough enough to live up to it — and Tippins is. “I’m not the least bit scared of tackling anything,” she says. But don’t be fooled: Tippins has two college degrees — forestry and environmental science — from Steven F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches. They fit well with “a lot of common sense” that tells her to treat her customers as she would want to be treated and to be honest with them always.

“I tell everybody up front everything they need to know,” she says. “I give them a firm bid. I don’t get on the job and then change the price. I use Schedule 40, 1-inch pipe; I don’t use cheap pipe. I put all of my electricity in conduit.”

She thinks she got her work ethic from her father, who had her sweeping floors in his office machine business when she was 12. “If you’re going to take somebody’s four or five thousand dollars, you need to give them the very best job you can possibly do,” Tippins says. “You just don’t need to take any shortcuts.”

She jokes that she “did everything backwards,” starting college at age 42. She was married the day she got out of high school, and spent the next 26 years raising her kids and — in line with the gas shortages and environmental awareness of the 1970s — selling wood stoves and fireplace inserts.

“I sold \$300,000 worth of wood stoves one year. But you don’t sell wood stoves when you have three warm winters in a row,” she laments.

Bankruptcy and divorce set her off toward a career in environmental law and to college in Nacogdoches. Law school didn’t pan out, but that may have been for the best: “I think I have more impact on the environment by cleaning up bad septic systems.”

So instead of law, she went to work with the Forest Service, looking for stability. “I couldn’t think of anything that would be more stable than a government job,” she says. She spent the next five years managing large recreational areas in Colorado, Texas and Louisiana. All had large wastewater treatment plants, and the government trained her to operate them. That would come in handy.



While she was running the Kisatchie National Forest in central Louisiana, also in the Piney Woods, Bill Clinton became President, and he and Congress went to work on the federal budget. One of their moves was to lay off 65,000 “non-essential” workers for 21 days, and Tippins was one of them. “I had spent five years of my life going to college to get a good job, to get security, and they laid me off,” she says.

It still doesn’t sit well with her, especially since the government ended up paying all the workers for the 21 days anyway. Even worse was returning to Kisatchie to find all the urinals torn off the walls and the plumbing broken. Furious, she went to her boss. “I told him to call that President Clinton feller or one of those Congressmen and tell them to get out here to fix the urinals because I’m going back to Texas.”

And she did — without a clue about what she was going to do. “I never, in my wildest dreams, thought I’d be doing something like this,” she recalls.

An unhappy customer

Her new career path became clear when she bought a house back in Nacogdoches and called to get the septic tank pumped. After finally getting an appointment with a pumper, he never showed up — and the light in her head went on. “I know how to take care of wastewater systems,” she told herself, thanks to her government’s training. And she knew how to treat people.

Still, she didn’t know anything about installing aerobic systems. There was, however, another woman a few counties to the north who had been in the business for many years and wasn’t shy about sharing her knowledge and providing advice. “She just said, ‘You take care of your customers, treat them right, and don’t ever lie to them.’” Those words, and some advice about installing aerobics, set Tippins off on her adventure in the onsite wastewater industry.



Ten years later, she’s getting ready to retire, or at least slow down. “Somebody told me when you get to be 62 the government would send you money, and I’m going to check it out,” she says with a laugh.

She hopes somebody with her approach to business will come along to pick up where she left off and keep building Alligator Annie’s, which has grown to a point where it’s getting too big for one person. “Nobody is going to quit going to the bathroom, that’s just not going to happen,” she says. “People are going to eat. People

are going to go to the bathroom. People are going to die. And the tax man, he’s pretty secure too.”

Her own future appears fairly certain as well. She's looking for someone to take over Alligator Annie's, hopefully by her 62nd birthday on July 16. But she's not going to sell to just anyone. "

"I'm not going to sell it unless I know in my heart that they're going to be honest," and run the business with the same approach she has had. She would like to sell to another woman.

" I think I could sell this business to a woman, and I think this thing could just keep chugging on down the road."

Meanwhile, she's going to build a two-story tree house on her property on Lake Pinkston in nearby Center, Texas, known for its trophy-sized bass. She also wants to keep a small septic service business on the side, but just for 200 of her favorite customers. "I'm going fishing on Wednesdays and Thursdays and I'll work on the weekends because that's when my customers are home," she says.

She knows it will be difficult to pick out her favorites customers. "The people I've met, all my customers, I love 'em," she says. At least 200 of them. But if they didn't bring her a glass of ice water while she was out sweating in the hot Texas sun or just weren't very nice to her, they probably won't be on the list. Because that's no way to treat anyone, even someone as tough as Alligator Annie.

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