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Matriarch Built a Flush Family Business Without Plumbing

By Joe Holley
Washington Post Staff Writer
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After Thelma May Rainwater divorced her husband and sent him packing, she made sure she held on to her marriage's most valuable asset (aside from her daughter): portable potties.

Mrs. Rainwater, who died Aug. 12 of complications from Parkinson's disease at age 86, was the retired owner of Don's Johns Inc., the largest portable toilet rental firm in the Washington-Baltimore area.

When she took over the business from her ex-husband in 1977, she had maybe a half-dozen employees and less than \$200,000 in revenue. These days, the Chantilly-based firm employs more than 70, will report more than \$10 million in revenue this year and dispatches some 7,000 units to fairs, carnivals, conventions, weddings and other special events.

For the inauguration of President Obama in January, the company had 5,500 units stationed on the Mall and elsewhere. Obviously, Don's Johns is a going business, thanks in large part to Mrs. Rainwater's steady hand over the years.

She was born Thelma May Bell in Arlington County. Shortly after graduating from Washington-Lee High School, she married Don Rainwater, a charming merchant marine from Oklahoma who was so charismatic he could sell not only the proverbial icebox to an Eskimo but a portable toilet as well, given half the chance. For the three decades, Mrs. Rainwater went along with her husband's dreams and schemes, some of which -- to paraphrase the old Charlie Rich tune -- were more than fleeting things.

Don Rainwater bought a 180-tree apple orchard in Oakton. He invented the "No Stoop Seeder Feeder Weeder," essentially a bamboo pole that allowed the un-athletic gardener to seed, weed and fertilize without bending over. Driving a bulldozer on the National Airport construction site, he was inspired to invent a device he called Sav-a-Roll, which made it easier to clean bulldozer tracks. He bought turquoise and amassed an impressive collection of wooden cigar-store Indians.

Mrs. Rainwater, meanwhile, stayed home and raised poodles, built dozens of terrariums, wrote poetry and volunteered at her church, Fellowship Baptist in Oakton. When her husband got into the restaurant business, opening Dallas Chili and Steakhouse on Duke Street in Alexandria, she was hired on as head waitress -- although she occasionally went on strike when he barked at her from the kitchen once too often.

In 1964, Don Rainwater saw the future in a relic of the past when a man he knew asked to borrow some money to set up an outhouse rental business for construction sites.

"Sounded like a good idea, so I decided to do it, too," he told The Washington Post in 1974. "Started with 12 wooden shacks with 55 gallon buckets in 'em."

The business caught hold, particularly after switching to molded fiberglass units in the 1970s. Uncharacteristically, Rainwater stayed with it. (He died in 2001.)

Thelma Rainwater was 50 percent owner. She knew the business, having kept the books over the years, but when the marriage fell apart, her attorney told her she had to make a choice: the house or Don's Johns.

"Lady, you'll be lucky if you get just one," he told her. "It's a man's world."

Mrs. Rainwater made her choice. "I want them both," she said -- and then she fired the attorney.

This small, basically shy woman got what she wanted and kept Don's Johns going while fighting a year-long portable-potty feud with a rival company trying to drive her out of business. Despite the difficulties, Don John's survived and thrived.

"She was one of the strongest women I've ever met," said her son-in-law, Conrad Harrell, now vice president of the company.

She was very conservative, both politically and fiscally, granddaughter Kristie Harrell recalled one morning last week in the conference room of the Don's Johns operation on John Mosby Highway. She was a staunch Republican, whose *bête noire* was Bill Clinton, and before him, the Kennedys.

Kristie Harrell, who took over as company president in 1993, worked side-by-side with her grandmother for almost 15 years. Whenever the company needed new equipment, Mrs. Rainwater always counseled restraint.

"I don't think we can buy that," she would say. "Winter's coming on." (Winter is slow for the portable toilet business.)

Harrell finally reminded her grandmother that business just kept getting better year after year. "When and if we experience a downturn, that's when we'll worry about winter," she told her.

Mrs. Rainwater continued coming into the office and maintaining the accounting books, by hand, until 2005. Her granddaughter didn't switch to computers until Mrs. Rainwater retired for good.

"For her sake, I didn't want to change the system," she said. "I didn't want her to just slide away."

"Toilets, animals, politics -- that was her life," Conrad Harrell recalled.

"What about family?" his wife asked.

"Family and business sort of went together," he said.