

When the Dust Settles

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An interview with Bob Chabot on the challenges of highway incident cleanup.

By Gary Lund / photography Centennial Sweeping



Bob Chabot established

Centennial Sweeping in March 1967. Beginning as a street-sweeping contractor for municipalities and road builders, the company was soon designing and building sweepers for use on the 401. Eventually the company became involved in cleaning up spills after highway crashes. Now Bob has a staff of 25 drivers, 15 mechanics, and office staff. In September 2006, Bob was honoured at the PTAO Tow Show with the Towman of Special Recognition Award. In this first of two articles, we spoke with him to learn more about his work, his philosophy, and what it takes to achieve success.

TOW CANADA: WHAT LED YOU TO BECOME INVOLVED IN HIGHWAY INCIDENT CLEANUP?

Bob Chabot: About ten years ago, the MTO (Ministry of Transportation of Ontario) was withdrawing from having staff to respond, and other companies were reluctant to take on cleanup work, as they were having difficulty getting paid. So the OPP came to us and a few other people and said "We need help." Some of the others weren't able to maintain consistency and reliability.

We were the right people at the right time, because we had all the machinery, and we're very well located. We're not too far from the 400 and 401, so we can access all the highways. We're right in the middle of the city, right in the centre of the square: 400, 401, 407, and 427. And our equipment is ready to go.

The police know where we are and what we are. Quite often they will come back to our base to finish an investigation - but not always. I just came back from the police station. On a job we did last weekend, we relocated everything inside the truck and took pictures. I gave the pictures to the officer on charge. This way the police didn't have to come and check it out. They trust what we do.

TOW CANADA: YOU'VE BEEN AT THIS A LONG TIME.

Bob Chabot: Yeah, I'm well known to the police.



Centennial Sweeping is located in the middle of Toronto, right in the middle of the busiest highway system in North America.

Speed is Essential

Bob Chabot: The other night, I was called out to a highway. A load had shifted on a truck. We had to move some of the skids and relocate them on the other side of the trailer so we could get the trailer off the road, because on the 400-series highways, they like to get the highway open as soon as possible.

We have a float truck with a front-end loader ready all the time. If we have a call, we just jump in the truck, turn the key, and away we go. When we get there, quite often the police will give us an escort without us asking for it. We just drive along the shoulder with the police escort and the re-open the road as fast as possible.

Friday night, we did a concrete spill two kilometers long. From the time we got the call to the time we got there, it took about 35 minutes. There's always one of us in town to receive a phone call. All the calls go on call forwarding to one phone for the weekend. We have many people on site with us, ready to go at all times.

Many Clients

TOW CANADA: WHO DO YOU WORK FOR?

Bob Chabot: I work for everybody in the industry - all the major towing companies, and all the major environmental cleanup people. I only do the road surface. They do the catch basins, the sewers, and the outfalls to the creeks. We do work for Diamond, Comtow, Abrams, JP, Hansen, Thornill, Jade, C&M.

TOW CANADA: SO YOU WORK ONLY ON THE ROAD SURFACES?

Bob Chabot: Yeah, I don't compete with my customers. You have to look at business, be realistic, and remember you're a helper to society. If you try to do too much, sometimes you don't do it right. This way, I do what I do, and all my people are well trained for our specific role.



A look at this mess makes one glad that there are cleanup companies ready, willing and able to cope.



A new perspective on the expression "bull in a china shop"

Equipment Ingenuity

TOW CANADA: PLEASE DESCRIBE THE VEHICLES AND EQUIPMENT YOU USE.

Bob Chabot: We built custom sanders that have fuel-pumping ability, along with heaters for the sand. When fuel is spilled on the road, warm sand mixed with Absorball is spread over the fuel. We adapted the sweepers to turn the brooms in reverse, to grind the sand and Absorball mixture in with the spilled fuel. When the fuel is absorbed, the sand changes colour to near black. Then we sweep the sand and keep doing it until the pavement is dry. Finally we put a fine layer of sand on top and leave it there.

To get the sweeper to operate in reverse, we had to change the hydraulic valves. Because sweeping in reverse grinds the sand into the fuel, it absorbs the fuel better, and we can limit the amount of sand we need to do a job. Otherwise we'd have to use ten times the amount of sand and then bring in dump trucks to pick it up. We've done spills one or two kilometers long quite often. The longest one was fourteen kilometers.

TOW CANADA: THAT'S A LOT OF SPILLAGE.

Bob Chabot: That one was used motor oil. We brought in three sanders, three sweepers, and two or three dump trucks. We put the product down and kept grinding it and grinding it until the road was safe. We always have to think about the fact that there's motorcycles on those roads, and they need to have a good, dry surface. If they expect the road to be dry and then there's a slippery spot, that's where they wipe out. We're always concerned about making sure the road is safe for the public.

TOW CANADA: YOU ALSO MADE SOME MODIFICATIONS TO THE SANDING TRUCKS.

Bob Chabot: The sanding trucks were modified to heat the sand, and modified to suck fuel. We have separate tanks and pumps. We suck hydraulic oil into one tank, fuel into the other. The fuel tank is large, so it can hold quite a bit. The truck looks like a regular sander, with a small box in the back. The box is high enough so that people can stand in it. It also has a small washroom in the back because sometimes we are stuck on the highway for eight hours. On the other side of that wall in the back of the truck, there's also food and water because a lot of people today have sugar problems. We can carry food in one side and environmental supplies (such as Absorball, brooms, and shovels) on the other.

As much as possible, we try to plan everything so we can be ready in about three minutes. Most environmental issues are very minor at first. If you react fast, you minimize the problem.

TOW CANADA: WHAT OTHER EQUIPMENT DO YOU HAVE?

Bob Chabot: We also have front-end loaders with special attachments that can pick up skids - the same as they have in sawmills. If a load of lumber rolls over, we can pick it up, sort it all out, and put it back onto the truck. If it's a load of gravel we use the same loader, with a bucket on it this time.

Working Conditions

TOW CANADA: WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WORST WORKING CONDITIONS THAT YOU FACE?

Bob Chabot: If it rains, or there's a big snowstorm, or there are fatalities, those are hard to deal with. But we don't get too many wrecks during snowstorms. Most of the wrecks we get are in good weather, and speed is almost always one of the factors. Because today most trucks are very safe - it's not like it used to be even ten years ago. For one thing, if a company has a bad reputation for truck maintenance, they cannot get insurance. And if they do get insurance it's so costly they cannot survive in business. So it's very seldom I see faulty trucks in an accident. Most accidents are due to a driver error, caused by speed.

TOW CANADA: WHAT IS THE MOST DANGEROUS HAZARD WHEN YOU'RE ON THE JOB?

Bob Chabot: We don't get that many. Usually we and the tow truck operator work very well together, and we don't take chances. With a front-end loader and a good set of forks, you can eliminate a lot of problems. We take the time to put a proper rig on, and we have the power when we need it. There are not too many unsafe situations. We've got a serious health and safety program. And we're always learning how to work better.

The most unsafe people are the small tow truck operators. Sometimes they don't wear safety shoes, they don't wear vests, they come in wearing a pair of shorts - and then they get hurt.

TOW CANADA: HAVE ANY OF YOUR EMPLOYEES EVER BEEN SERIOUSLY INJURED ON THE JOB?

Bob Chabot: Never. We always assess the situation at a job and ask what risks there are. If there's a risk with a certain way of doing something, there's no need to do it in that way. We use machines and tools to overcome the risk. It's not worth risking injury.

Protection is Necessary

Bob Chabot: Here in Toronto, you don't hear too many stories about injuries. The most severe incidents happen when people try to do jobs on the side of the highway without using crash trucks. They want to save money, so they don't do a proper lane closure or put a truck with an attenuator in the back with an arrow board. These are the people who get killed. A small tow truck parked on the side of the road to pick up a car has no protection, and then somebody hits the car while they are in the process of hooking up. There's been a couple of fatalities that I know of over the last few years, and they are caused by a lack of safety measures. If the safety measures had been in place, nobody would have been hurt.

Were not going to work if we don't have a crash truck. If the tow truck company doesn't have a crash truck, we'll bring our own. I did a job on the 401 and 427 one night. It was raining, and there was terrible visibility. That night, two crash trucks got hit, but nobody got hurt.

That's why you don't hear much today about cleanup crews having problems on the highway, because of the protection we use. There's traffic doing 120 klicks an hour down the road. If you want us to help out, we've got to be protected. If you don't want us to be protected, you go do it.