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Texas Truck A/C: From Trash to Treasure



by Phillip K. Kreymer

Is one man's trash another man's treasure? Nick and Marci Rosato, owners Texas Truck A/C & Heating Parts (TTA/C) think so. The company provides air conditioning service for heavy duty and off-road vehicles. Some of these vehicles can't come to the shop, so TTA/C brings heavy-duty service to the job. Whether it's a 'dozer preparing a construction site or a compacter smashing trash at a landfill, the TTA/C mission is keeping working equipment cool.

In 1996, Nick Rosato was working as a diesel mechanic for a large waste management company. The HVAC systems on the garbage trucks grabbed his attention and he was quickly hooked.

"The work looked simple, there was a need, and there was money to be made," said Rosato. It wasn't long before he decided to do the service work on his own, and the first item on his agenda was to get some time in the classroom.

"I enrolled in a local community college class, 'Theories of Air Conditioning.' The class lasted a month and was fairly easy for me," stated Rosato.

Ten years later he still recalls his first parts purchase, "...gauges, a vacuum pump, some refrigerant and a can-tap." Rosato cashed in his 401k from the previous

job to purchase his first service van, and for the next two years, TTA/C was a mobile service company, primarily servicing waste trucks.



Big equipment can pose big A/C problems. The wheels on this LeTourneau log stacker dwarf the service truck, but the A/C problem was resolved quickly.

Lightning Strikes

Much of the time was split between running service calls and picking up parts. By the second year it was time to hire the first employee, and James Adams has been with the company ever since. Today, he's the Road Foreman, responsible for scheduling day-to-day operations in the field. He's very familiar with the risks of field work.

In April, 2002, Adams was at a job site working on a

Texas Truck A/C: From Trash to Treasure

Caterpillar 966F Loader when a lightning strike knocked him several feet off the equipment. After being removed from the scene by helicopter, he spent five days in the ICU and another ten days in the hospital. He also went through many hours of therapy with doctors initially wondering if he would ever walk again.

Today he says, "Looking back, it was just all in a day's work." But he added, "This work can be very dangerous – hoods are known for crashing down, people fall off equipment; just a number of bad things can happen."

In the early days, field calls were 95% of TTA/C's business, but the company's need for having its own service facility was becoming obvious. Rosato rented a one-bay space "just to get by." Right idea, right time: the summer of '98 brought a streak of 29 straight days of 100-plus degree weather to the Dallas area. A successful season allowed TTA/C to expand into their new, multi-bay service facility.

move out to the field. Looking back, my college class was handy but nothing can substitute for the real thing," commented Rosato. "When it comes to the electronic systems, we do attend classes, and utilize the latest manuals available."

Talent breeds more business, and TTA/C has expanded from repairing existing systems to installing new ones. Caterpillar Skid Steers were originally manufactured without air conditioning, and TTA/C landed a contract with a local Cat dealer to custom fit the popular 'Steers with A/C systems.

The company has also performed a number of installations on cranes and other specialty equipment. James Adams says, "Crane installations can be quite profitable. They often require extensive hose runs and custom solutions. We had to redo the entire exhaust system on one crane to overcome obstruction issues."

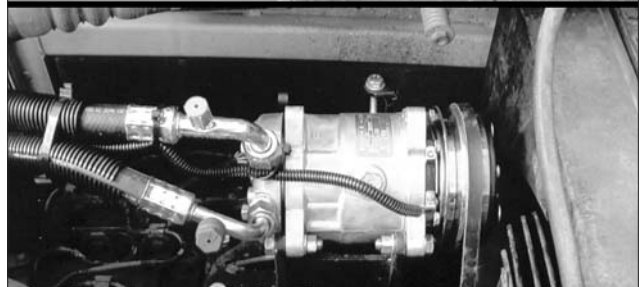
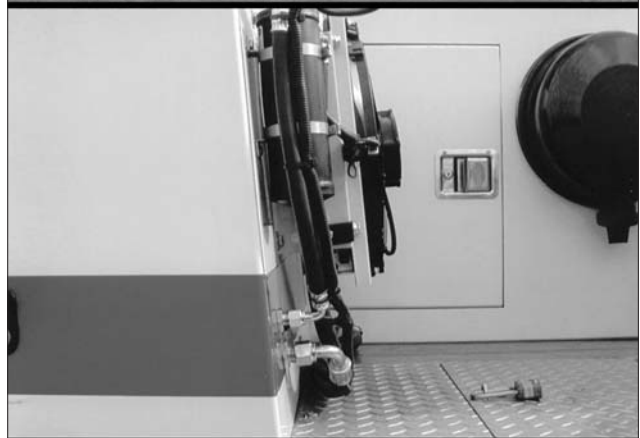


Some installations, like this Red Dot unit on a John Deere loader, are straightforward and keep the equipment in service.

Cats, Cranes and Circles

The physical expansion required a larger staff, and Marci Rosato was soon taking care of all the administration work for the company, including accounting, bookings and payroll. Additional office staff and field techs have been hired as the company grew.

"All our service technicians start at TTA/C working inside the service center. When they have the training, knowledge and plenty of experience with multiple applications, they



Custom installations can be profitable, but careful planning and system design is essential.

Texas Truck A/C: From Trash to Treasure

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 24

"We custom built our own unit for this application – the unit had to be smaller than usual, yet yield a great amount of BTUs and CFMs. This became our EV-1001, and it has since been used in numerous other large fleet applications."

In 2001, TTA/C added a warehouse and a larger parts department to support the service center and minimize down time for the equipment. Again, more staff was required, and Rosato sought Mike Morton (now sales manager), who had an extensive background in the heavy duty HVAC industry.

How extensive? Remember Rosato's first parts purchase of the gauges, pump, and can-tap? He bought it from Mike Morton. "We still laugh about it today," Morton says. "At the time, I was told some guy who was taking a college air conditioning class want-

ed to come in and buy some items. I just thought 'you have to be kidding me.'"

"From where we are now, it's fun to think back just five years ago," Morton says. "We had modest beginnings. Our warehouse and parts department consisted of 800 square feet above a section of the service center. My desk was in an open corner of the facility, and I managed an inventory value of just ten thousand dollars. For two years we didn't even have a forklift, so we unloaded trucks by hand."

He also notes "...how small our industry actually is and how full-circle we can come." TTA/C continues to expand, adding sales, marketing and customer service personnel, but, Morton says, "Looking back brings great memories of humble times and great achievements. And we are still setting new goals and achieving them."

Pieces of the Pie

Today TTA/C isn't just supporting the service center, but has become a true warehouse distributor (WD). That's enabled them to become more efficient at sourcing product and also opened the door to better buying power. TTA/C sells OE and OE-replacement parts to other WDs, retail stores, fleets, dealers, local shops, and has a "city sales" counter. "It's a big pie, and we have some of all of it," stated Morton. "But most importantly, we have not had to sacrifice our service to any of our customers."

Having the service center and the distributorship in-house allows immediate feedback on installations and on OE-alternative products. As more and more products are produced overseas, TTA/C quickly learns what works. They also keep a close eye on new OEM technology to insure that they can install what they sell.

From "one guy and a truck," TTA/C has grown to five full-time



Size matters – TTA/C's expanded shop can accommodate some large vehicles. In-house service reduces travel time and parts-chasing.

mobile trucks, four techs in the service center, and a respectable warehouse and parts operation. Although the mild summer of 2003 put a small dent in the bottom line, the company continues to grow, often at double-digit percentages. They're already looking at expanding the service facility and will be implementing a new accounting and inventory management system to improve service.

Nick Rosato's company has carved a niche barely envisioned a decade ago. He remembers that the work wasn't easy early on, either. "There were long hours and a lot of on the job training," he says. "There were nights we would work straight through till two and three o'clock in the morning. That's just what we did. Trash trucks and hard work made this company." ■



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