

Project: Trash Talk: Workers in Vermont's Changing Waste Management Industry
Narrator: Patrick Palmer, Owner-Operator, Thornapple Farm and Draft Trash
Interviewer: Virginia Nickerson
Date: August 29, 2018
Place: Palmer's home in New Haven, Vermont
Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

00:00

Nickerson: This is Ginger Nickerson. And I am interviewing Mr. Patrick Palmer at his home in New Haven, Vermont, on August 29, 2018. So, Mr. Palmer, could you tell me roughly when and where you were born?

Palmer: I was born in Middlebury, Vermont, [REDACTED] 1947.

00:32

Nickerson: Okay. Great. Thank you. And so could you tell me what draft trash is?

Palmer: Draft trash is basically picking up curbside trash and recycling with horses.

00:56

Nickerson: What's your relationship with Draft Trash?

Palmer: I'm a half owner. I started in Bristol. That's like, Bristol's a [separate?] business. I started Bristol 21 years ago. Draft Trash I started with Nick Hammond about four years ago.

1:27

Nickerson: What was the name of the company that you started 21 years ago?

Palmer: Oh, Thornapple Farm.

1:35

Nickerson: So how did it come to be that you decided to start that business? Trash with horses?

Palmer: In Bristol, I was always looking for ways to use the horses to make money. Because horses are pretty expensive to keep. And I happened to read in a 1981 draft horse journal about somebody in Washington State using his horses as a supplement to his trash business. He did it in the summertime. And just a little later, maybe two or three weeks later, the new town manager in Bristol said he wanted bids put out for trash pickup. Bristol had, the road crew had been doing the trash pickup for the last 30 years, for 30 years or over. And the new town manager wanted the road crew working on the road every day of the week, instead of picking up trash one day a week.

So I did it twice to see if I could do it, to see if it was a feasible project. And then I put in a bid, and won the bid. There were three other people. I wasn't the lowest bid, but they wanted to try it out.

And then I did that, I worked for the town for about eight years. And then the town and village merged. And the townspeople didn't want to pay taxes for village pickup. So I was basically not fired, but let loose. So I went around door to door and said I was still going to do it, and they'd be paying me

instead of the town. And basically, that's the best thing that ever happened to me because it started becoming lucrative.

3:53

Nickerson: More so than when you were working for the town?

Palmer: Correct.

3:59

Nickerson: What was the year that you started collecting with the horses?

Palmer: Nineteen-ninety-seven.

4:11

Nickerson: And when did you have to, when did you get the special truck for collecting with the horses?

Palmer: Oh, I used a wagon, just a horse-drawn wagon, for about 20 weeks. And trying to decide how I was going to use the special wagon. Then I had the special wagon built to be able to pick up the trash. At the time, we had to separate all the recycling. So I had bins lined along the side for clear glass and colored glass. And then a couple of big bags in the center for paper and cardboard. And the trash was in the bag.

5:09

Nickerson: So do you remember your first day collecting trash with the horses?

Palmer: Yeah. The first day it was kind of funny because the different TV stations wanted to follow me around. And it took us twelve hours the first day, because what I did is go out and pick up the trash first, and then go around and pick up the recycling. And I had a nephew with me. And the interviewer, around five o'clock in the afternoon, an interviewer said, "Well, what do you think of this?" And the kid, who was 14, said, "I only want to go home." (Laughter)

5:54

Nickerson: So, over the years have you always had somebody who helped you?

Palmer: Yes. I've had quite a few people. Lots of times I get kids on the school to work program. They don't do well in school. So I work with them with the horses. And some people have picked up on that and are still working with horses, and some people aren't. Most of them aren't.

6:29

Nickerson: But some of them have gone on to continue working with horses?

Palmer: Correct. Yeah.

6:34

Nickerson: So can you tell me a little bit about the horses that you've used?

Palmer: I started, I like dapple gray horses, and dapple gray [Percherons?]. And that's basically what I've used. But occasionally when I've had a lame horse, I've used other people's horses. I had one person call me, a horse dealer, said that he'd give me the horses to work with as long as they got the proper work and training to be able to work on the streets and be a calm horse. But I never took him up on it. I have too many of my own now.

7:23

Nickerson: How many horses do you use to do this?

Palmer: In Bristol we use two horses. In Middlebury, because we have to go up Chipman Hill, we use three wide. Chipman Hill is a pretty steep hill.

7:40

Nickerson: And have you always used the same horses?

Palmer: Oh, no. Over, you're always looking for the perfect horse. And you never find it, because you never find the perfect person. But I keep looking. And I've gone through, oh, maybe 15, 20 horses over the years. Some work fine. I've had one pair that worked for me for ten years. and they were a real nice pair. But then they started having, because working on the pavement is hard on their legs and feet. They start breaking down, so then I stop working them, get another younger, usually younger pair. I usually like to get them around four years old. Because by the, their bones are hard enough to start working on the pavement.

8:48

Nickerson: How do you think the horses feel about doing the work?

Palmer: Oh, after the first couple of times, they don't mind it. People always say, "Boy, those horses are really traffic safe." It's because they've had trailer trucks and everything go by them. Fire trucks, garbage trucks, whatever, you know. They just keep on doing their job.

9:16

Nickerson: So they get used to it. And how did you learn to do the trash rounds? Was that a challenge to learn?

Palmer: No. Basically it's learning how to control the horses. I never had horses when I grew up. I married into horses. My wife is a, her father was a farrier. And whenever he went on a horse shoeing job, she'd go with him and fall in love with every horse. And he'd say, "Well, what's wrong with that horse?" Because there's always a hole in every horse. So she learned to point out all the bad things of every horse and right off tell what's wrong with it.

10:12

Nickerson: And then how about the, so that's the horse part of it, how you learned about the horses. How did you learn about picking up the trash and recycling?

Palmer: Basically by doing it two times and seeing if it could be done. There's not much to it, except you have to learn what has to be separated. Now it's single-stream recycling. But in the beginning, everything had to be separated. But we still separate all the returnable bottles, because that's just extra money.

10:53

Nickerson: So do you ask your customers to separate that? Or do you separate it?

Palmer: Oh, no. The materials recycling facilities that we ship to don't like the thin plastic bags, they get caught up in the gears. And so they prefer that we don't have plastic bags in with the recycling. So as we're stripping the plastic bags out, we find the returnables and put them in a different container.

11:25

Nickerson: And do you ship to more than one materials recycling facility?

Palmer: Now we only go to Rutland. We take it to the transfer station in Middlebury and then they take it, they ship it to Rutland, I think. But when I used to do Bristol, just Bristol, I'd transfer it over to Casella's truck and they would take it to Williston and do the recycling up there.

12:00

Nickerson: So could you walk me through a typical day?

Palmer: Okay. You get up about 4:30 in the morning. And the horses are usually out. They're out all summer long. They're out most of the time, but they're out at night all summer long. And I'll get grain, put the grain out, and ask the horses to come in. They're usually waiting at the gate, especially in the summertime. Because the bugs bother them at daybreak, or all day long, anyway. And then go in for breakfast. And then after breakfast go out and harness the horses up. Ask them to get in the trailer. They jump in by themselves, because they've done it so many times. And go over to Bristol.

There's two streets in Bristol, Basin Street and South Street, that are really steep that we started doing with horses but the safety factor, it doesn't make it worth it. Basin Street in particular is so steep that when we started doing it, we had to have somebody at the top stopping traffic so that we could get the horses into a dead run and run them. And I thought if one trips or falls, the wagon's just going to pull them back down. So we do that with a pickup while the horses are still, we leave the trailer at the parking area by the police station. And take the pickup and go out and pick those two streets up. Then go back and transfer it into the trash wagon. And we hook up the horses and take off. That's it. I mean, well, at the end of the day—

14:08

Nickerson: (laughs) So you go to your, so when you're picking up the trash—

Palmer: Well, we pick up the trash, we pick up the trash and recycling at the same time. The recycling goes in the front and the trash in the back. When we're done, we have to take the wagon down to the transfer station. So what I do is load the horses up, bring them back home, put them in the barn and then unhook the truck and go back and get the wagon and take it to the transfer station. And now the wagon has a dump body on it. The original wagon didn't. And it didn't bother us because we would just transfer it by hand into—

14:56

Nickerson: What's a dumb body?

Palmer: Dump body.

Nickerson: Oh, a dump body.

Palmer: And now, we take it to the transfer station and just weigh out the, weigh the whole thing and tell them that the trash is first. and we dump that into the trash bins or area. And then we go away again to weigh the recycling and dump that into the recycling area. Then we weigh a third time just to find out the tare, how much it weighs without the load in it. And we get charged by the ton, basically.

And the state wants us to make people think that the recycling is free. But we're still charged fifty dollars a ton. So we have to charge enough for the trash to include the recycling in it.

16:06

Nickerson: And are you picking up compost?

Palmer: We pick up compost. But I think the most we get is about 150 pounds a week. Only about three or four people use it.

Nickerson: So not that much.

Palmer: No.

16:23

Nickerson: What do you do with the compost, if I may ask?

Palmer: I put it in my manure pile. I have a bucket loader on the truck, or on the tractor. I scoop up a bunch, put the recycling there, and then cover it over. And it usually deteriorates in there.

16:44

Nickerson: So I know that garbage trucks have special things that lift up the garbage cans. And then they put the truck itself can compact the trash. Do you have to do all of that by hand?

Palmer: We do it all by hand. The recycling we have to compact. But while we're in there stripping the bags out, we walk around and compact it. Bristol doesn't have as much recycling as Middlebury does. And I don't know why. But Middlebury, sometimes we have more recycling than we do trash. You know, pound-wise.

17:30

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah. So you compact it. How do you compact it, the recycling?

Palmer: By walking around on it.

Nickerson: You just walk on top of it.

Palmer: Yeah.

17:38

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah. So that kind of leads me to my next question. Do you feel like there are any physical risks or dangers to you in this job?

Palmer: Not with the new wagon. The new wagon is pretty self-contained. The older wagon, we had it so that the sides could lift off. And this new wagon, everything goes out the back. And my helper in Bristol has even had her seven year-old grandkids in with the recycling, helping there.

One good thing about the trash wagon is I can take an 11 or 12 year-old kid. And after a couple of times of teaching them how to drive, have him drive while I'm outside picking up. Whereas somebody, you know, if they had to drive a truck, they'd have to be at least 16.

18:47

Nickerson: What are some of the other difference between using horses to collect trash versus a garbage truck?

Palmer: The saving of the fuel is one thing. Trucks don't love you. Horses will respond a lot better. I like, I wouldn't do it with a truck. I just like doing it with the horses. I just like the sound of them. And I like the physical activity.

19:35

Nickerson: And how do you handle if the horses have manure?

Palmer: Oh, we pick it up as we go. If they go, then we pick it up. And we put it in buckets.

19:57

Nickerson: And what kind of feedback do you get from your customers on how you're using the horses?

Palmer: Mostly positive. In Bristol we had, I know of two different people that were trying to decide whether to move to Bristol, Vergennes or Middlebury because they wanted to be close to their kids. And when they found out that the trash pickup was with horses in Bristol, they moved to Bristol.

20:26

Nickerson: (laughs) That's great. Do you ever have like little kids or people who get excited just to watch you?

Palmer: Oh, yeah. We always top for the kids, because those are future customers. And especially at the park in Bristol. They have a lot of, by the time we come through there, there's usually parents and kids on the swings. And we'll stop and they'll come over and pet the horses.

21:00

Nickerson: Yeah. It's harder to do with a truck.

Palmer: Well, nobody wants to go see a truck, usually.

21:14

Nickerson: So do you and your coworkers have any special language that you use to describe any of the things that you do? Terms that other people don't use? (Or stories?)

Palmer: Not really. Except when I want to stop the horses, I usually say a short, quick woo. Because when I give sleigh rides, if you go down a hill, or down in a valley or over a hill, people would go, "Wooooo" and the horses would stop. So I've had to train myself to say a short, quick woo if I want them to stop.

Also, they usually start going on okay. Because if one of us is on one side of the wagon and it's full and one is on the other side, you ask, "Is it okay to go?" And you shorten it to "Okay?" And the minute the horses hear "okay," then they start walking off.

22:14

Nickerson: And what did you do before you started collecting trash with the horses?

Palmer: Same thing now. Weddings, sleigh rides, wagon rides. Some demonstrations and some training.

22:34

Nickerson: So you've always worked with horses. You just added in the trash pickup?

Palmer: Just added in. The trash is a really good business because it's a base income, basically. Sometimes you wish it wasn't, when the weather's real bad. Like today would be real bad. But twenty below isn't that bad, because you just dress for it. And rainy day isn't bad. Twenty below isn't bad. The worst, I'd say, is around 32 degrees when it's sleeting and raining. Your hands get wet. And then it seems like there's no way to get warm.

23:15

Nickerson: Yeah. What's your favorite part of the job? Or the best part?

Palmer: oh. It's hard to say. I like working with the horses, but I also like to see the look on kids' faces when they come up to see the horses. Because they're always so full of wonder.

23:48

Nickerson: What's the hardest or most challenging or least favorite part?

Palmer: I don't think there's a least favorite part. But sometimes the most challenging is starting a new horse. Because sometimes they have different ideas than you do.

24:15

Nickerson: If you were to start the business over again, is there anything you would do differently?

Palmer: Oh, I don't think so. The big thing is getting people to believe that it can be done. I don't think we could have started in Middlebury cold unless, except that everybody knew that we did it in Bristol. And what we did in Middlebury is just go around with the horses and wagon as a good visual aid, and go door to door, and tell people that we were going to start.

And the reason we started Middlebury is because Middlebury did have a contract with Casella to pick up all their recycling. And then the state came down with this law that you had to include recycling, if you were picking up trash, you had to include recycling in it. So Middlebury just stopped giving a contract to Casella. And I thought that was a good opportunity to move in there. And it's not quite as lucrative as Bristol, but it's still a pretty good job. We do every other week in Middlebury and every week in Bristol.

25:41

Nickerson: Why is it not as lucrative in Middlebury?

Palmer: Well partly because you're going a lot more miles in. We do two days in Middlebury, and one day is 15 miles and the other day is 10, where in Bristol, [when you're done] it's eight miles. Almost every house has, you can pick up there. Where it's a lot more mileage between the pickups in Middlebury.

26:14

Nickerson: Yeah. Yeah. And did I read someplace that if people want to use you, they just put a sticker on—

Palmer: Yeah. We don't do billing. Martin's Hardware in Middlebury and Bristol sells stickers that go on the bag, go on the trash bag. And also, let's see, in Bristol, Bristol Beverage also sells stickers. And Middlebury Otter Creek Bakery does. So we don't have like a monthly income. It's like whenever they're out of stickers, we bring stickers down and they give us the money for it. Which to me is really nice, because I don't have to worry about sending out a bill every month, which would be expensive and time-consuming.

27:07

Nickerson: Yeah. So if I lived in Middlebury and I had been using a different pickup service for my trash and then I decided one week that I just wanted to switch to you, would I need to call you first? Or would I just put my bags out with the stickers on them?

Palmer: Some people put their bags out with the sticker on them because they know. But a lot of people call me to ask how it's done. And so then I explain.

27:40

Nickerson: Can you tell me how you started working with Nick Hammond?

Palmer: Oh, Nick was putting a roof on my house. And we started talking about, we knew that the first of, I think first of April that the law was going to change of, I don't remember which year. And he says, "I've often thought of doing Middlebury." And I said "Well, we can go door to door and see if it works." And I'd say we went three weeks in a row. Every Saturday. Because that's when most people are home, Saturday mornings. And after the first week, I thought, we've got enough people that are interested that we can do it.

28:38

Nickerson: So when you went door to door, did you do it with the horses?

Palmer: Oh, yes. Because they were a good visual aid. You know, they see the horses and the wagon. You know, you have the horses behind you on the street. A lot of people were interested right off.

28:58

Nickerson: What kinds of things did people say to you when you showed up at their door with the horses?

Palmer: Oh. "Oh, that's great." Other people said, "No, no." Like in Peterson Heights, we don't have any customers there at all. And they said they were happy with what they had.

29:20

Nickerson: Peterson Heights, is that a special community?

Palmer: It's a development. Right.

29:30

Nickerson: So if someone, well, what would you say are the special, any special knowledge or skills that you need to run a draft horse trash pickup service?

Palmer: You've got to understand horses. Any trash pickup? Or just horses?

Nickerson: Well, either one.

Palmer: It's basically labor-intensive. So if you're using horses, you've got to be able to understand horses. And treat them nice, because they're making your money. And basically know what the laws are. We have a license to do it. And you get the license from the state after they do a, check out your character, basically. Find out whether you're an outlaw or not.

30:44

Nickerson: And do you think there's room in Vermont for other people to start a similar business?

Palmer: I think any place in the United States, if I can do it in Bristol and Middlebury, which is only five miles each way from me, then I think anybody could do it in any community. And I'm surprised after 20 years that, and most people around the United States that are into draft horses know about it. And I'm surprised nobody else has picked up on it.

31:20

Nickerson: So if some young person in another part of Vermont wanted to start a similar business, what advice would you give them?

Palmer: Actually, I'd probably go help them. (Nickerson laughs) Basically to design your wagon so that you can pick up both their trash and recycling at once. And make sure you keep the mileage down, if you can. You know, the miles traveled.

32:02

Nickerson: Do you think there's a sweet spot, or an ideal number of miles?

Palmer: I know Bristol, eight miles is really nice. Ten miles isn't bad. But 15 miles is a little long.

32:19

Nickerson: Thirty years from now, do you think there will still be people in this area collecting trash with draft horses?

Palmer: I think so. I have two young people now that are interested that would keep doing it. Actually they have their horses at my place right now. But for a long time, when fuel prices were high, part of my spiel was that you'll never get a fuel surcharge. But now there's no use saying that. You know, the price of oil may go up again. But you've got to wait for that.

33:10

Nickerson: How many people do work, do you work with in these businesses?

Palmer: It depends on who wants to ride with me. In Bristol, the base is one other person and I. And Middlebury's the same. But occasionally I'll have some kids help me. Or somebody will say, "Oh, I've always wanted to do on that." And I'll say, "Well, anytime." And they call up and they go on it.

33:44

Nickerson: Yeah. The kids who work with you from the school to work program, do they say, do you seek them out, or do they seek you out?

Palmer: It's hard to say. I've had kids with the school to work program. And I've had kids just show up and want to do it. And I've had parents say, "Well, my kid would like to do that." And I'll say, tell them come on over.

Actually, one of the girls that works with me, her little sister would follow us around the trailer park in Bristol. She was five years old, so we'd put her on the wagon because we were afraid we were going to run over her. And she came along quite a few times. And then as she got older she started helping some. But her older sister just came out one day and said she wanted to do it. And her older sister is much better, and the younger sister just dropped out.

35:00

Nickerson: What other kinds of feedback have you gotten from the young people that you work with? Do they tend to stick with it for a while?

Palmer: I have, let's see, one, two, three, four, five, six, probably ten kids that are making their living working with horses now. Some with draft horses and some with lay horses.

35:33

Nickerson: How do they feel about working with the trash?

Palmer: Oh, they liked it at the time. It's just that they've outgrown it. Like some of the girls I've worked with—and it's usually girls—they're 23, 24 now and they either have their own business, like one owns

Steeple Ridge in [Charlotte?]. It's a horse business. She went to college or horses. And then a couple others work for a lady that has Clydesdales, or Shires, excuse me. They work part time there, and then they do part time other work.

36:30

Nickerson: So they stay in touch with you.

Palmer: Yeah.

36:38

Nickerson: So is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like people to know about your job?

Palmer: Well, it's a good way to train horses. And it's a good way to become known as a horse trainer. Because everybody says, "Oh, Pat, you have the nicest horses." And to me the horses just work. You can't afford to have a rude horse. You can't afford to have a kicking horse or a biting horse. Especially when you have the little kids come up to them. So some horses I've had only for two or three weeks and they haven't worked out. So I've sold them. Other horses, like I've kept them ten years.

37:32

Nickerson: How about the horses that you're using right now?

Palmer: One horse I've had, let's see, about six years. And the other horse I've had about four. And the one I've had six years is going to be hard to get rid of. He's a real nice horse. I only own one horse. The one I've had four years belongs to somebody else. And then the two black horses that are here belong to two of the kids that work with me at [unclear]. I call them kids. They're in their twenties now.

Nickerson: (laughs) It's all relative, right?

Palmer: Yeah. Anybody under 50 is a kid. (laughs)

38:23

Nickerson: So is that arrangement in part so that you can train those horses?

Palmer: Well sometimes, in the wintertime, especially, I need more than one team. And so it's a boyfriend and girlfriend, and they were arguing who was going to pay for the feed and who was going to pay for the farrier and stuff. And I said, "I'll do both if I can use the whenever I want."

38:57

Nickerson: Great. Well, anything else you'd like to add?

Palmer: Can't think of anything right now.

Nickerson: All right. Well, that was wonderful. Thank you so much. I really, really appreciate your time.

39:13

[End Interview.]