Gettin' the Smell, Mold, Soot, Smoke Out

A truck full of rotting scallop guts. A mansion where a corpse had decomposed for three months. Sewage in your basement.

When it smells really bad, people call Jim Barrett, president of Fire Restoration Services of New England (FRSNE), which has been cleaning up such stenches for 35 years, as well more mundane smells like skunk attacks and soot from a house fire or oil-burner "puff-back."

The Norwood, Mass., company also dries up water damage from roof leaks and floods, and expunges stubborn mold infestations.

"When we started in 1968, we relied mostly on detergent and elbow grease," says Barrett, a pioneer in fire-and-water-damage restoration. "Today our specialists use high-tech equipment and techniques like ionization, ultrasonics, freeze-drying and restorative drying."

The year's weird weather—particularly the frigid winter that caused ice dams to swell on roofs across Eastern Massachusetts, Southern New Hampshire and Rhode Island—has made 2003 the company's busiest ever. Much of its business comes via referrals from insurance agents, independent claim adjusters and the many insurance companies that list it as an approved provider.

When called promptly, the firm can remove water and dry out basements, carpets, floorboards and wallboards, preventing mold growth and saving insurers money and homeowners heartache and potential health problems.

"Insurers now realize that mold prevention is a lot less expensive than remediation," Barrett says. "They're proactive and want us to get involved at the earliest stages."

FRSNE often tackles bad mold problems. Then, its specialists may need to sand timbers while using a vacuum with a HEPA filter that captures mold spores. The firm works with independent certified industrial hygienists who monitor its work and take air samples.

The company handles everything related to fire and water damage, including restoring building interiors and exteriors, and contents like furniture, rugs, clothing, books, computers and consumer electronics. It has worked on commercial jobs such as the post-fire restoration of the John F. Kennedy birthplace in Brookline, Mass., plus universities, schools, hotels and retailers and commercial contractors.

FRSNE is a member of the National Institute of Disaster Restoration (NIDR), New England Institute of Restoration and Cleaning (NEIRC), and the Institute of Inspection, Cleaning, and Restoration Certification (IICRC)—trade organizations that update their members on the latest restoration techniques. A Certified Restorer, Barrett is a past president of both NIDR and NEIRC.

The three-month old corpse was the most malodorous thing Barrett ever encountered. The man lived in a big house in Wellesley, Mass., where he survived on a diet of vodka and eggs until his demise, Barrett recalls. The landscaping service kept the grounds tidy and no one noticed anything until a mailman got a whiff through the letter slot.

The scallop attack was the only stench that ever defeated FRSNE. A fired scallop-boat crewman got even with his captain by dumping a bushel of scallop guts into his pickup truck and letting the mess marinate in the summer sun.

"He knew what he was doing," Barrett recalls. "We just couldn't get rid of the smell completely." ❐

For more information, visit www.firerestore.com.

Today's Restorers Use High-Tech Procedures to Save Items that Couldn't Be Saved Before

Ionization. Ozone gas (O_3) is an active form of oxygen that safely deodorizes surfaces and kills bacteria. It is generated by an ionization machine. For instance, suppose you have a room or even an entire house that smells of smoke. The restorer turns on the machine and brings the ozone up to the appropriate level. Like magic, the odor disappears—completely and permanently.

On-site dry cleaning. Since soiled upholstery and fixed draperies can't be brought to the dry cleaners, restorers bring dry cleaning to the site. The restorer injects dry-cleaning chemicals and extracts them with a special vacuum tool. For fabrics that can't be dry-cleaned, a water-and-detergent solution is used instead. For some stubborn stains, both dry and wet cleaning are used in sequence.

Ultrasonic cleaning. This is used for items that can be immersed. It's an invaluable process for hard-to-clean items like jewelry, figurines, hummels, crystal and mini-blinds. The items are placed in a tank and the ultrasonics machine turned on. The ultrasonics causes tiny bubbles to explode on the surface and carry away the grime.

Freeze-drying. This process is used for restoring wet books, documents and valuable papers. It's crucial to dry these items before mildew sets in. Placing them on racks in a freeze-dry chamber safely dries them.

Restorative drying techniques use state-of-the-art extraction, evaporation and dehumidification techniques to restore buildings and contents to a pre-loss condition.

Psychrometry. The science of drying, measuring and analyzing the relationship between air, humidity and temperature and their effects on various materials. It uses the latest testing and monitoring equipment.

Blasting techniques. Restorers can clean building exteriors and interiors using machines that blast cleaning materials such as baking soda, sponge particles, ice crystals or a mixture of water and chemicals. ✇