



## Cleaning up in the Bakken: Semi truck washing business keeps Dickinson's Schrum family busy

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By Virginia Grantier

These days, a vast amount of trucks and other vehicles in this part of the world are the same color: It's that sorrel-brown look. Layers and coats of it — that muck that makes a pricey semi truck look like a tall hog after a roll in the wallow.

It's hard to avoid that in Oil Patch country, where on endless back roads the surface is glop sprinkled with dust-control agents — and that becomes almost like glue on a vehicle's exterior, says a local truck-washing expert.

But there is help. Making the dirt go away, over and over, is a local family that comes to the rescue. A very busy family.

Joel and Leslie Schrum, both barely 30, say their phones are constantly ringing these days. They say their Dickinson-based Badlands Truck Wash company is so popular that often it's a sunup to sundown work day. Sometimes, Joel, working on a 10-foot ladder, is only able to see what he's doing by using flood lights that beam from his custom-made 24-foot-long mobile trailer — which also has a 1,500-gallon water supply.

On Father's Day, Joel Schrum invariably will get his presents in the field, the family bringing them to him. Weekends in particular, Fridays through Sunday, are when companies liked their trucks washed.

"We're so busy," he said in a recent interview and lowered his head, his forehead almost touching the family's kitchen table as if he could use a quick nap right there.

### Family man

The Schrums, who have children ages 6 months to 9, bring the kids along when possible. Mid-day sometimes means family time as Leslie prepares picnics and goes with the kids to where Joel is washing. Leslie Schrum cleans, too, and their kids like to join in as well — just as a young Joel Schrum did when he was about age 8, after his parents, Bob and Jan Schrum of Dickinson, began the business in 1991. At that time, it was meant to be a part-time gig — some extra cash to add to what they both earned as truck drivers. "There was a dire need for the business. ... There wasn't any truck wash business (around)," Bob Schrum, 59, of Dickinson said April 21 in an interview.

Direness continues.

Badlands Truck Wash still services the farmers, their core customers before the oil boom, but now has a growing-mountain list of oil-company-related clients and other commercial and residential and business clients. They also clean industrial equipment for gas stations, restaurants and grocery stores and others, Leslie Schrum said.

But their specialty, and about 90 percent of the business, is semis. Truck-loving Joel can spend hours on just one — hand-washing it from top to bottom, sometimes using as much as 1,000 gallons to get layers of mud off. And typically, in about a week or a little more, that vehicle will need to be cleaned again. Leslie Schrum said recently that probably the best compliment they received was when the owner of an older, about 15-year-old rig, told them his newly cleaned and polished truck “looked like brand-new.” They have tried hiring employees to help. But Joel said he’s meticulous about his detailed washings and the employees didn’t like doing the washing by hand — sometimes they wouldn’t even show up. So, for now, it’s back to just a family thing.

### **Day in the life**

Joel said companies want to keep their fleets clean for several reasons — including that it’s easier to maintain them and to “watch for leaks” — and he said companies that maintain their fleet have higher safety ratings.

When the Schrums do have time off, they boat and fish.

“Always something with the kids,” Joel Schrum said.

Joel and Leslie didn’t plan to make their living this way. They were great friends at Dickinson High School, but after graduation went separate ways for college. Leslie left for Alaska to study natural resources management and Joel went east to study commercial art at the behest of his parents who saw his artistic gifts.

The two both ended up back in Dickinson. Joel came home to help his family, as a family member had muscular sclerosis. He would end up working at something he loved, driving trucks. He also sold cellphones. Leslie, back in Dickinson, walked into the store one day to buy one and they became reacquainted and eventually got married.

The hardest part of their business is when it’s hot. Heat reflects off the tanker trucks. They wear fluorescent-colored shirts to deflect some of it. The kids aren’t with them then, of course, in the sometimes 100-degree heat, Leslie Schrum said. Spraying himself with water doesn’t help, Joel Schrum said. It heats up too fast.

There’s no need for sunscreen either.

“I’m so full of dirt, I don’t need it,” he said.

When lightning storms come while he’s standing on a metal ladder holding a metal wand, that’s not good.

### **Thinking ahead**

Joel Schrum does all this while dealing with lungs seriously damaged when, as a child, he was accidentally exposed to fumes from a farmer’s truckload of anhydrous ammonia. He has had problems since, including a recent bout of pneumonia as the truck-washing season revved up. But he’s doing well, now.

He said he loves meeting people from all over the world that the oil boom is attracting and is glad that somehow his hometown of Dickinson is keeping its small-town atmosphere through it all. Their company sponsors numerous community activities — rodeos, T-ball, 4-H and so on.

When the washing season ends, in late October, it’s back to driving a truck. Joel thinks Leslie is brilliant at cake decorating and should go into that business. He related that she once created a cake for him to look just like a semi truck.

But all in good time.

The Schrums say that growing up in a family that drove trucks helps Joel to know what a truck owner/operator wants in a cleaning.

So right now, they’re cooking up a truck-washing empire. Chew on that.

### **Badlands Truck Wash**

**What:** Washing trucks and just about anything else

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