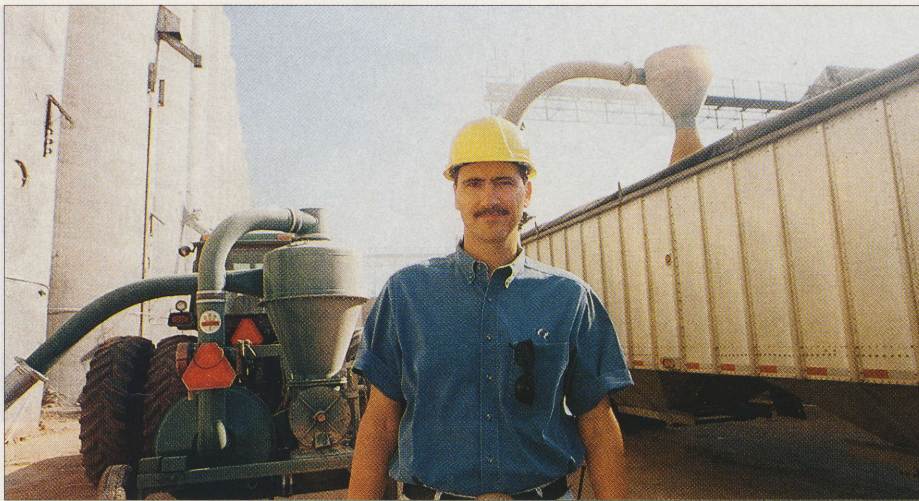


# Cleanup Job

A TEXAS GRAIN SALVAGER FACES HIS BIGGEST CHALLENGE AT DEBRUCE ELEVATOR



Don Paul Jones utilizes a Vac-U-Vator to salvage grain from the DeBruce Grain elevator at Haysville, KS. Photo by Connie Van Zandt, Wichita, KS.

The time will go down in the history of the U.S. grain industry – 9:20 a.m., June 8, 1998. A series of massive explosions wrecked much of the 21-million-bushel DeBruce Grain Inc. elevator at Haysville, KS, killing seven workers and injuring 10 others.

Don Paul Jones received the call from DeBruce's insurance adjuster at his Houston, TX, office before 11 a.m. Jones is the president and owner of Houston Grain Trading Inc., a leading grain salvage company. His clients include virtually all of the insurance companies serving the grain industry. His job is to clean up the grain from disaster sites – explosions, fires, tank collapse, tornadoes, etc. – and find a market for it.

Jones arrived at Haysville, 604 miles away, that evening. "It was pure chaos," he says. "The fire department had blocked off the site, so you couldn't get past the gate. They started rescue operations the next morning. I've never seen more emergency vehicles and ambulances in one place."

Jones' task was the biggest he'd ever faced. Grain in roughly 50 tanks

was actively burning or at least smoldering. Approximately 6.9 million bushels of wheat and some grain sorghum were in storage at the elevator at the time of the blast, the most Jones had ever been asked to salvage. "Before this, the biggest cleanup job I'd seen was the Goodpasture explosion at the Port of Houston in 1976, and that only involved 5 million bushels," he recalls. "I worked as a foreman on that cleanup."

## Cleanup Operations

Houston Grain Trading runs a lean operation. In addition to Jones, only two other Texans were on-site, his foremen. They hired locals as crew, as many as 25 people during the peak of operations. Jones' company supplied most of the equipment, either its own or rented from local construction equipment distributors. At the time Jones spoke with **Grain Journal** late in August, the salvage operation was starting to wind down after consuming most of his time all summer.

The work began with cleaning out tons of grain from tunnels beneath the elevator as work crews searched for

possible victims believed to be trapped there. Jones' crew utilized three pneumatic conveyors manufactured by Neuro Corp., West Chicago, IL (630-231-9020), pushing 8-inch-diameter sections of tubing deeper into the tunnels as the grain removal proceeded.

"These pneumatic conveyors put up with a lot of abuse," Jones comments. "It's not like we're running clean grain through them. I've found that the Neuro equipment is a lot sturdier for this type of application."

Removing grain from tanks holding smoldering fires is a little trickier. Jones' crew was helped by the fact that most of the fires were concentrated near the tops of the bins. The procedure here was to poke holes in the bottoms of the concrete tanks, then use a front-end loader to begin moving grain. Running the grain through a specially-designed thick-wire screen extinguishes any fire.

"I have two rules," Jones says. "One, never underestimate any fire. Two, be prepared to start removing grain immediately upon opening the tank and keep going until the fire is out of the tank."

## Biggest Challenge

Jones utilized the services of several local grain elevators to clean the salvaged grain to marketable condition.

The biggest challenge on this job, however, wasn't salvaging the grain from the DeBruce elevator. It was trying to market it into a down market – with wheat and sorghum prices at their lowest levels in years and some analysts predicting wheat could fall as low as \$2.25 per bushel.

"All you can do is negotiate the best price that you can," Jones says, noting that some of the wheat was food-grade quality and some feed quality.

*Ed Zdrojewski, editor*