

Business of the Week  
**Armstrong Disposal**  
By Dan Williams, V.P., Petersburg Chamber of Commerce

**Background:** Business has been picking up for Armstrong Disposal in Petersburg, Menard County and beyond. While recycling is a popular practice for many, we often don't think of what is involved with trash pickup. We're just glad when it is picked up and out of sight, especially after a holiday. June marks the 35th anniversary of Armstrong Disposal and the family business continues to grow.

**Owners:** John and Char Armstrong live in rural Oakford. Thirty-five years ago they bought their first truck and started a route. John and Char loaded their baby in their car and drove to Kilbourne going door to door to introduce themselves and start picking up accounts. John worked with his father who was in the salvage business early in his life. Then in 1976, he decided to start his own company and they've been expanding into new areas ever since.



John was born at home in Petersburg and attended local schools. His parents owned land in rural Oakford where they live today. Char Taapken grew up in Cass County, near the Menard County line. She went to school in Chandlerville and graduated from PORTA where she was prom queen her senior year. Her father Floyd Taapken Sr. nicknamed "Toad," was police chief in Petersburg. John and Char married in 1978 and have two children.

**About the Business:** Most of us are happy that our trash is picked up weekly but there is much that goes on behind the scenes. Disposal sites face increasing regulations and disposal fees go up every year, according to Char. They currently dump in Springfield but before that site was available, they had to travel to Pike County for a while which was a four hour round trip, not to mention time waiting in line to offload.

After originally starting with a Kilbourne route in 1976, they later added Petersburg and Oakford. Much of their business came from word of mouth and their excellent service. Over time, Char traveled to other area towns to promote the business and today they service customers in Petersburg and Lake Petersburg, Greenview, Salisbury, Athens, Tallula, Cantrall, Sherman, Pleasant Plains, Ashland, Kilbourne, Oakford, Chandlerville, Bath, Mason City, Middletown, Easton and New Holland.

Char attributes their success to their customers. "If it weren't for them, we wouldn't be in business. It's especially rewarding when we receive a card, note or telephone call, for doing something special for someone," Char said. She enjoys meeting her customers when they come by the office or call in. She also takes pride in trying to recommend the most cost effective options for their customers to help them save money.

Armstrong provides free red totes (trash cans) to their customers and they come in two sizes. The large holds 95 gallons and comes with wheels and a heavy-duty lid. This holds the equivalent of three trash cans. This is a convenience for their customers and keeps the trash contained until it is picked up. They also offer a 65-gallon size that equals two trash cans. They rent "roll off" dumpsters that hold 20, 30 and 40 yards of waste. These are typically for commercial accounts, house clean outs and construction sites. If a customer asked for a roll off container for asbestos disposal they can do this, however it takes time. "It takes 8-10 weeks to get an EPA permit. Then we can match the container with the appropriate personnel and safely transport it to an approved site," according to Char. They also have small dumpster rentals in a 2 cubic yard size. When a customer requests a different size container for their disposal needs for either a 4 or 6 yard container, the container can be ordered.



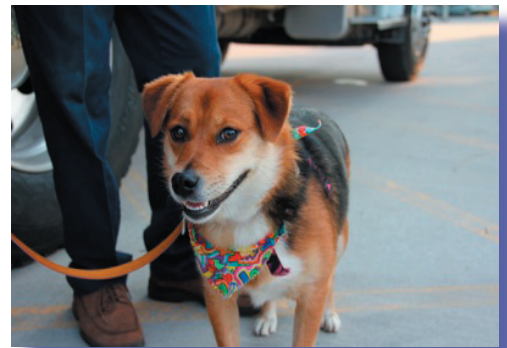
Their trash pick up rate is \$18 per month in Petersburg and the Lake area and vary slightly by community. They buy the red totes by the semi load and are free to customers.

**Challenges:** Like any small business, the challenges include regulations, taxes, high cost of workers compensation insurance, rising gas prices and in their case, weather. Trucks can break down in extreme heat and cold. John and crew perform daily maintenance and repairs themselves to keep the fleet in good working order. They recently ordered a new truck that can hold up to 25 yards of waste. They operate three trucks on Monday and Wednesday and two on Tuesday and Thursday. Yet despite the increases in costs, Armstrong has been able to hold the line on disposal fees for their customers, up to this point in time. Should they ever have to do a rate increase; the customers will either receive a notice in the mail, or a telephone call with at least a 30-day notice. "We have never not given notices to customers about crucial information such as this."

**Rewards:** John and Char always come back to comments about their appreciation for their customers. Last week, Char rode with John one day just to see the route and the customers they serve.

**Community Involvement:** "God has blessed us and we want to help our community. With out them, we'd have no jobs. So we try to give back and support our friends and neighbors," Char said. She also reports that they donate trash pick up for Harvest Fest and offer discounts for area churches. They are also happy to help with local benefits and support the local food bank.

**Employees:** Armstrong Disposal has four full-time men, two full-time office staff and two part time employees. Char stated that "Mike is John's younger brother and he came to work for the company in 1992. Their mother Beverly was so proud that her eldest and youngest sons are working together." Shawn was hired to work in the office in late 1994 and was the first time Char had any help in the office. Their nephew Michael is working on getting his CDL license and will then be promoted to becoming a driver. "We are always getting comments about our staff, and how much the customers appreciate the work they do," Char said. John and Char are pleased to have such great employees: Mike, Michael Armstrong, Shawn Boggs, Mary Sinclair, Zane Kyes, Frank Armstrong and Matt Wallick.



**Hours:** The office is open from 8:30 am – 4:00 pm, Monday – Friday on Oakford Street in Atterberry. They can be reached at (217) 632-3870 or 800-942-3939. They also operate a website ([ArmstrongDisposal.com](http://ArmstrongDisposal.com)) that accepts payments online, including major credit cards ,eCheck and ACHdirect withdrawals from accounts. They can take your payment over the phone if you want, with a credit or debit card or check. There is never a fee to use these methods of payment. There is no contract and they've made it simple and convenient for their customers.