



“Transportation Solutions since 1966”

Styer Transportation Company

History Newsletter

Author, Mel Simon

The Company name is Styer but your last name is Simon. What’s the deal? I wish I had a nickel for every time I was asked that question. As we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Styer this last year, I thought we were long overdue in putting the history of Styer together.

Here is what we know.....

Melvin Simon Sr. (Melvin aka Curly) had just returned home from serving in the United States Marine Corp during the Korean War. Melvin was looking for a job and stopped at a trucking company in Lakeville, MN named Wren Inc. Although Wren was not actively looking for a driver, they took a



chance on Melvin. The truck sitting in their lot the day Melvin stopped in was the same model Melvin had driven during his stint

in the Marines. John Wren, about 15 years old at the time and who later took over ownership of the company, recalls that Melvin was looking very sharp in his Marine khakis and thought it neat that Melvin’s commute to work would be a short one. Melvin and his wife, Arlene, had recently taken up residence in the one bedroom apartment above the Wren shop.



Melvin soon proved his worth and became a trusted manager for the Wren family for the next 40 plus years. Melvin worked closely with Charles Wren who assumed

ownership of Wren Inc. after the death of his father Vincent who had founded the company. After some time, the name of the company was changed from Wren Inc. to Lakeville Motor Express. Charles’ half-brothers John, Steve and Pat all worked together as Lakeville Motor Express grew.

At roughly the same time, Leroy (Red) Kehrer, also recently out of the military, was attending Traffic School at the University of Minnesota. Red worked part time for Lakeville Motor Express while working full time for John Deere. Not too many years later, in the early 1960’s, John Deere moved their operation from 1st Ave in downtown Minneapolis out of the Twin Cities commercial zone to Bloomington. In the regulated freight environment, this was a game changer for Lakeville Motor Express.



Since Red was working at John Deere, he was well aware of their need for a carrier to haul John Deere parts to their dealer network in southern Minnesota. Through Red's research, he uncovered operating authority for a company named Styer. Connie Styer was a Kentucky (brand name) trailer salesman and was working for Boyer Trucks on NE Broadway in Minneapolis. At that time, the State of Minnesota would only transfer authority for goods and points served for the previous two years. This all worked out very well for John Deere as they had agricultural parts, lubricants and paint going to dealers throughout the state. The Styer authority was for irregular

route which meant that you didn't have to serve any community for which



you didn't already have freight. Regular route carriers, as you may suspect, were very protective of their territory and did not want an irregular route carrier serving a community for which they were providing service.

During the two year period after obtaining the Styer authority, Charles Wren worked to add as many commodities as he could in order to diversify the shipper base. As part of this effort, some of the product they started hauling was liquor to Farmington for the VFW and American Legion Clubs as well as bakery supplies for the Farmington Bakery. The VFW and Legion Club deliveries were "bad news" as the cases of booze were delivered to the basement which meant the driver had to navigate narrow slippery cement steps. If the driver was lucky and found another able body to take with for the delivery, the driver could utilize planks on which to slide the cases down to his partner. Rumor has it there was an occasional miss of the fast moving cases at the bottom of the stairs. With John Deere moving to Bloomington, there was also a need for their daily mail run.

All the boxes and loose pieces of parts for dealers throughout the U.S. were sent through the U.S.P.S. as well. LME had a new Ford 150 pickup with high stake



side boards that carried those parts from John Deere in Bloomington to the Minneapolis Post Office on a daily basis. John recalls being given the responsibility of getting the mail to Minneapolis before 4:30 every day after school.

As John Deere began shipping from Bloomington, Junior Hammer, Don Malecha and Crude Hammer picked up the loads and delivered them throughout Minnesota. As the John Deere business increased, LME was forced to go outside the company to add power and drivers. Enter into the picture Irv Simonson and his crew from Southern Minnesota. Simonson Freight Service began doing the bulk of the John Deere shipments at this point. The spring was an exceptionally busy time of year for John Deere. Swanson Truck Leasing provided LME with older model International trucks to LME in which they could put their own drivers to supplement Simonson as needed.



During these early years of handling John Deere's account, John recalls that while home on leave from the Army he took a load to northwestern Minnesota that had about 16 dealer stops. These loads typically required the driver to be out for 2 or 3 nights. One of the deliveries on this load was to the John Deere dealer in Hallock, MN. As luck would have it, a fuel line for a John Deere tractor that was shipped as a loose piece, was bent beyond repair by the time it made it to Hallock. The dealer, not wanting to deal with the regular claims handling process, requested that John pay \$5 for the part. John took the bargain and avoided having to deal with the freight claim. Out of curiosity, John asked the receiving clerk what this part would cost the farmer. He was told the markup was 100-150%.



With today's automatic transmission, auxiliary power units, televisions, microwaves, refrigerators and other amenities, it is fun to hear of stories before all these modern day comforts. John Deere would receive baling twine from Europe that came into the U.S. through the docks in Superior, WI on Lake Superior. Styer would send two trucks with open top trailers to pick up the twine. Since money was tight, the drivers didn't have enough money for even the shadiest motel. One of the two tractors had a sleeper so after dinner (hamburger of course); both drivers shared the bunk to get some shut eye. By getting to the port in the evening, they were first in line the next morning so that they could get loaded and head south with the twine. MN DOT would occasionally put up portable scales. Sometimes the weight of the bales was a guess so

having to go through the scales could get a driver nervous.

On one particular trip, it was Don Malecha and John Wren making the pickup. John, who as family, was put into service at an early age and didn't yet have a chauffeur's license. Apparently the DOT wanted all truck drivers to have a license, so, in order to provide some incentive to get one, gave John his first ticket.

Styer continued handling John Deere as their primary customer. In the mid 1980's Melvin retired his position as Terminal Manager for LME and Styer received his full attention. Styer had also moved their operations to a Shakopee warehouse where they were warehousing and shipping John Deere Lawn and Garden equipment in addition to ag implement parts.

In 1988, Russ, Melvin's youngest son, began working at Styer and learning the ropes from his Dad. Styer continued their work for John Deere and additionally picked up other business, notably, Midwest Airfreight Shippers Association run by a friend of Melvin named Louie Roehl. During the 1990's Styer grew to nearly 30 trucks all operated by Simonson Freight Service under the management of Irv and his son Randy.

By the early 1990's, John Deere's distribution facility in Bloomington, MN was still accounting for over 80% of Styer's business. By 1994, Russ was handling much of the day to day operation and Melvin decided that he wanted to retire for good. At the time, Styer was owned by John Wren and



education.

Melvin was managing the operation with Russ' help. Also at this time, Melvin Jr (Mel) was looking for new employment and hoping to further his

After meeting with John and Melvin, Mel took the position of President of Styer and began his MBA studies at night at the University of Minnesota. Mel and Russ managed the operations as Styer continued to grow, allowing them to reduce the percentage of business with John Deere.



In January 1998, Simonson Freight Service closed abruptly.

With the assistance of John Wren and his management team at Lakeville Motor Express led by Tom Hughes, Styer acquired 28 tractors of their own and continued operating with most of the drivers from Simonson Freight Service. It was a chaotic couple of weeks including the rental of passenger van in which Melvin drove six drivers to Chicago to pickup trucks. Before too long, operations were back to normal.

By the time John Deere closed their distribution center in the early 2000's, the percentage of business for Styer was down to nearly 20% and Styer was able to weather the storm of their largest customer leaving the Twin Cities. By now, John Wren's son Joe had become more involved in the management of Styer.



Since that time, Styer had grown to over 100 trucks by 2007 and then through some hard work and tough decisions, Joe, Mel and Russ reorganized and refocused operations in 2009 to adjust to the significant downturn in the economy. Today Styer is operating 60 tractors and service a number of Minnesota and Illinois based customers.



We would like to thank the many people who have shared their knowledge of the history of Styer Transportation. Special thanks go to John Wren, Marge Kehrer and Russ Simon.