

## Small Enough to Care

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#### **Bennett Motor Express "can-do" for O/Os.**

*By Mary Hance*

While drivers at Bennett Motor Express are asked to refer prospective owner-operators to drive for the company, the recruiting brochure reminds them, "Only give this application to a driver that is as good as you! The point is this company sets high standards.

"We want to be a company that the drivers are proud to work for," says owner Marcia Taylor. "Our goal is to have the best owner-operators in the business. We're not focused on numbers but on quality. We are a specialized carrier, and we want our drivers to feel they have found a home with us."

Bennett Motor is a subsidiary of the Bennett International Group. It currently contracts with about 500 owner-operators. The company plans to raise that number closer to 600 -- a substantial jump from the 17 truck, 30-trailer company that Taylor and her late husband, J.D. Garrison, bought in 1974.

Based in McDonough, Ga., about 20 miles south of Atlanta, it is now a 48-state general freight trucking company. It is privately held and operated by Taylor and her three children. Its motto is "Large enough to serve, small enough to care..."

"I think the key to our success has been listening to customers' needs and trying to fill them," Taylor says. "It has put us into some unique business. We are a 'can-do' company."

The backbone of the company is the flatbed division. It also operates multi-axle, detachable goosenecks, and double drop extendable trailers for the unusual load segment, as well as 48-by-102 vans.

A small but unusual part of the business is the Drive Away division. It delivers vehicles ranging from fire engines and ambulances to cars, trucks and buses. A high profile assignment for this division was to bring in 1,500 buses for the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta (and drive them out when the games ended).

Generally, drivers earn 77 percent of the load if they provide their own trailers, or 67 percent if they use a Bennett trailer. Most are solo drivers, although there are a few teams.

"I tell people I wouldn't work anywhere else," says Barbara Tharp. She and her husband, Jerry, pull flatbeds for Bennett. "You can make what you want to out of it. Nobody pushes you around, and there is so much diversity within the company. You can go anywhere you want to go when you want to go. It is strictly your choice," Tharp says.

"A good driver -- a good businessperson -- makes \$10,000 a month or \$120,000 a year. A driver just starting out will make about half that," by running hard, says Lynette Alt, marketing director. The Tharps beat that, running 146,000 miles last year, which for them came out to about a dollar a mile. "You can make good money," Barbara Tharp said. "We had very little deadhead, and we were out a lot. We go where the freight goes. If you do the job and work with them, they will work with you."

The Tharps live near Birmingham, Ala., and have some 20 years experience over the road. They have been with the fleet for about two years and say they are impressed by its open-door policy, pay, efficient systems and flexibility. They can also take their dogs, Itty Bitty and Pirhanah, along on runs.

"It's a two-way street, they need you and you need them. If I get upset, there is a person there who I can vent to; they are very understanding. Nobody browbeats you. If you turn down a load, there is no payback down the road. If you say you need to be off, they leave you alone," Barbara Tharp said.

"I really like the pay system," she adds. "You can fax your bills in. It's easy to keep straight without stressing out. It is very seldom that you have to Fed-Ex anything. And they have direct deposit (through Comdata)." Taylor noted that some settlements are made within an hour of the delivery.

With terminals in 34 states, drivers can live just about anywhere. Other pluses are a discount fuel program at seven major truckstop chains, and loading and unloading pay. Bennett offers training tapes and classes to improve its contractors' business abilities. There is also a driver advisory board.

Taylor's leadership and ownership stand out in the male-dominated trucking industry. "Everybody respects her -- men and women," Barbara Tharp said. "She's also very accessible. If you need to talk to her and she is not in a meeting, you can get her on the phone. The company is strictly open-door and helpful. They try to make your end of the operation run smoothly."

Taylor was named Entrepreneur of the Year in 1988 by Venture Magazine. Bennett was chosen "Carrier of the Year" in 1998 by Ryder Carrier Management, and was recognized at the White House as part of the Working Women's Top 500 Women-Owned Business Conference.

For more information about Bennett Motor Express, call (800) 367-2249.