

COVER STORY



Bennett owner-operators run a variety of Class 8 and light to medium duty "hotshot" tractors. Vehicles here are (from left to right) Nissan UD Express, Peterbilt 379 and International 4900.

This Georgia Fleet's Got It All

With Driveaways, Hotshots, and Heavy Haul Rigs, Diversity Proves an Asset

By Tom Berg
Senior Field Editor

Next time the United Parcel Service driver drops off a package at your office, give a thought to his step van. How did it get from where it was manufactured to its home base, not far from you? Custom-built UPS "package cars" are too big to ship on flatbed trailers, so they're driven—often in pairs, one towing the other, since they're also too bulky to saddle mount.

Where do the drivers come from? Bennett Motor Express, a Georgia-based fleet whose many activities include a driveaway division. Bennett's 225 independent-contractor drivers deliver step vans, utility trucks, school buses and other specialty vehicles from builder to buyer. They also shuttle rental trucks among operating locations.

How did Bennett get into this business? "It's a spin-off from hauling parts for truck building," explained Barbara

Phillips, vice president of safety and compliance director. "They were impressed enough with our service that they said, 'We need someone to get this (the completed vehicles) delivered. Why don't you handle it?'"

Some 1,200 to 1,500 vehicles are moved by Bennett drivers each month,

Ms. Phillips said.

Most driveaway drivers are former truckers who want to do something less stressful or retired people who want to see the country.

"It is kind of an interesting operation," said Marcia Garrison, president and owner. "You don't think about it, but how do all these things get to where they're needed? I never thought about it until we got involved in it."

"Marcie" Garrison took over Bennett Motor Express upon the death of her husband, J. D. Garrison, in 1981. The two had bought it from George Bennett, its founder, seven years earlier. Then a contract carrier with 15 tractors and 30 trailers, the fleet has since grown greatly. Mrs. Garrison credits a loyal troop of managers who stayed with her through the years.

Among them was Ms. Phillips, whom J. D. hired as safety director shortly after buying the company. Mrs. Garrison also singles out Regina Foster, office manager; William T. Ford, a former driver who is

AT A GLANCE

Fleet: Bennett Motor Express, Inc.
Address: P.O. Box 569, McDonough, Ga. 30253
Phone: (770) 957-1866
Chief Officer: Marcia Garrison, president and owner.
Number of Employees: 100
Fleet Size: Seven tractors; 800 trailers, including 48-foot vans, dropdecks and flats, plus lowboys, doubledrops and other specialty trailers; 400 contractor-owned tractors.
Terminals and Agents: In 30 states, including 13 southeastern states.
Operation: Irregular route general commodity common and contract carrier, serving 48 states and most Canadian provinces.

now executive vice president and her "right hand man"; and T. D. Davidson, treasurer, "who has tried to retire for years but I won't let him."

Several spouses and other relatives were hired into the "Bennett bunch" at headquarters, enhancing the family atmosphere at the company's bustling offices at McDonough, some 37 miles southeast of Atlanta astride Interstate 75.

Two of Mrs. Garrison's sons are active in management: David Lowry is special division manager within the driveaway division, and Danny Lowry is national corporate accounts manager in the sales and marketing department. Her daughter, Lynette McBrayer, runs a Transport Travel, a ticket and tour agency spun off from the travel needs of Bennett's managers.

A lot has changed at Bennett Motor Express since '74. "George" is no longer part of the corporate name, but George Bennett's son, Tommy, is an owner-operator in the flatbed division. The company now has about 100 employees and more than 1,200 vehicles flying its logo.

It has a lot more shipper customers now, but the originals—Ford and Sunshine Biscuit—are still among them.

Cargoes now include heavy machinery, pipe and other building materials, new trucks, foodstuffs, general commodities and whatever else will go aboard or into its 800 trailers — vans, dropdecks, flatbeds, lowboys, and extendable flats and doubledrops. Bennett runs throughout the 48 states and into Canada. Many rigs are downsized "hotshots," which are ideal for carrying light but bulky cargo.

Also on the roster are 1-ton pickups and "toter" tractors used to deliver RV trailers and mobile homes—another aspect of the company's business. Still another division, B.M.E. Expedited Express, uses pickups and light vans to deliver time-sensitive shipments door-to-door.

Like the driveaway contractors, most power unit drivers are independents. With only seven trucks and tractors of its own, Bennett is almost entirely an owner-operator fleet because Marcie Garrison believes in them.

Although o-o's allow expansion with a comparatively small investment in equipment, many fleet managers prefer company tractors with hired drivers because they are easier to control. But control has never been a problem with Bennett owner-operators.

"They're professionals. They have a truck payment to make, and know they have to provide good service for them to make those payments," she said. "We're very service oriented. Our basis was contract carriage, and while we've gone into other things now, that's still our attitude. When you have an agreement to provide service, you do it or lose the business."

Most Bennett contractors have one or two trucks, and husband-wife teams are "excellent" because "we don't have to worry about getting them home," Mrs. Garrison said. Solo drivers get home about every week, though some stay out longer by preference.

Though there is some turnover among o-o's, about 80 percent stay two years or longer and "we've got many of

Please turn the page

Flexibility in Equipment



A brand new utility truck delivered by an unidentified contractor (top left), typifies Bennett's driveaway business.

Loads are an endless variety of agricultural and industrial vehicles and equipment.

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'em that started on day one," said Ms. Phillips. One, with 22 years service, predates the Garrisons' ownership.

Dispatchers do not identify o-o's by a number. "They have a name," Marcie Garrison states, "and we look forward to them coming in here."

Many were arriving at Bennett headquarters during Southern Motor Cargo's visit in mid December, all primed for the company's annual Christmas party. This is held at a country club or restau-

rant each year, and is definitely a "fun" event, several office staffers told SMC.

"A lot of them drive in by car and even fly in, just to come to the party," Ms. Phillips relates. The party in McDonough is preceded by a "safety and appreciation" meeting, and similar meetings are held at Bennett's operating locations around the country.

The fleet divides the country into five operating regions—Central, Midwest, Northeast, Southeast and Texas—with employee managers on site. Agents

represent Bennett in 30 states, 13 of which are in the Southeast.

Dispatchers in McDonough work with agents in securing loads. Geography rather than cargo types tend to occupy each dispatcher. Owner-operators, as they move around the country, are handed off among dispatchers so the truckers can stay loaded and make money for themselves and the company.

Drivers call in daily, which has proved sufficient for Bennett's dispatching needs. So far, Ms. Phillips said,



David Lowry checks stowed ramps, which add cargo versatility to Bennett's dropdeck trailers.

Bennett's 'Universal' Trailers Spend Less Time Deadheading

In the summer of 1986 David Lowry, a driveaway division manager, looked at Bennett's dropdeck trailers and decided they needed to haul more than machinery and other oversized loads.

So he began equipping them with roll-on/roll-off ramps to accommodate vehicles, and "bridge" supports which extend the length of the trailers' nose decks so long flatbed-type cargoes could be handled.

When not needed, the aluminum ramps and steel bridges are stowed on racks beneath the chassis.

The "universal" trailers can, within limits, act as lowboys and flatbeds as well as dropdecks. They thus spend more time hauling freight and less time deadheading, Lowry says.

"They worked out so well that at first we tried to keep them a secret," he said grinning. "We wouldn't allow any publicity on 'em. Of course, other carriers saw them and picked up on the idea, so they're not a secret anymore."

Lowry had three types of ramps

built at Metro Trailer Manufacturing in Romulus, Mich. Of extruded aluminum, the ramps are 9, 10 and 12 feet long with Z-skid, flat and channel cross sections, respectively, to accommodate a variety of tires.

Propped up by steel supports, a pair of ramps can handle 3,000 to 5,000 pounds at the center. Each trailer carries one pair of each ramp type.

Bennett's own shop built the truss-type load supports for 4-inch channel iron. Each is 18 inches high and 102 inches long, with a wood cushion insert along the top. One per trailer is usually enough to support a long load; if not, drivers stack up extra supports from wood beams.

Bennett owns 34 of these dropdecks, and o-o's have bought another 40. Nameplates are Transcraft, Utility and, like the one pictured, Fontaine. All are 48 feet long by 102 inches wide, have a 24-inch kingpin setting and uses a 10-foot, 2-inch tandem spread to make load distribution simpler.

With the spread, each axle can legally carry as much as 20,000 pounds, compared to 17,000 pounds on a close-spaced tandem.

A group of 15 Fontaine DFT-3 trailers, bought in January 1989, include these specs:

- Frame—Steel Rails and 4-inch crossmembers on 12-inch centers
- Decks—11-foot top, 37-foot bottom with 19-inch drop
- Axles—Spicer with Timken bearings
- Suspensions—Turner T-9 air-ride with manual dump valves
- Brakes—Bendix 16.5 x 7-inch quick-change
- Tires & wheels—255/70R22.5 low-profile radial, Bridgestone and others; 8.25 x 22.5 Budd 10-hole steel disc
- Landing gear—Binkley Challenger, 50,000-pound two-speed
- Weight—12,400 pounds bare, plus 800 pounds of ramps, supports, dunnage, tarps and other equipment.



Barbara Phillips

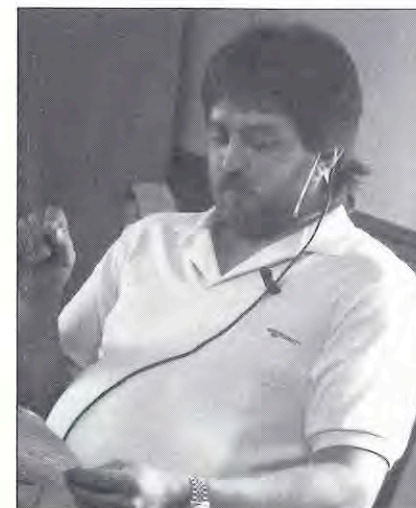
there has been no need for satellite communications gear or other forms of two-way communications. However, about 50 owner-operators have cellular phones, allowing quick access to them for urgent calls.

Flexibility in equipment allows the carrier to handle many types of loads. Early on, J. D. Garrison modified dropdeck trailers with roll-on ramps to handle wheeled vehicles and machinery, and "bridge" racks to support long loads which otherwise need flatbeds. Thus the dropdeck became "universal" trailers that stay loaded more of the time. That generated more business.

A diverse group of shippers and commodities is an asset, Mrs. Garrison feels.

"We have never depended on one segment of industry" she said. "You get in trouble that way."

About 25 percent of Bennett's revenues come from Department of Defense shipments, which have been strong



David Lowry

since the Mideast crisis began last August. Hauling of Saudi-bound military supplies, equipment and tactical vehicles to East Coast ports has helped the carrier stay busy during a time of business downturn in some parts of the country.

Owner-operators choose their own power units, based on need and preference. Some like the lower operating costs of smaller trucks and tractors, including the hotshot vehicles based on medium truck chassis. Others go the traditional Class 8 tractor route.

Bennett maintains its trailers at a small shop next to headquarters. Other work is performed by vendors throughout the country. Though some trailer maintenance is demanding, maintenance overall is less a

project at Bennett than most other fleets. In the driveaway division, of course, it's no problem at all, since other peoples' vehicles are involved.

How do the driveaway people get from one job to the next? By Greyhound and Trailways bus, explained Ms. Phillips. Most contractors buy a \$300 annual pass which gets a person unlimited travel.

A driver makes 65 cents a mile, from which he/she pays for fuel and living expenses, and travel between assignments. They thus net 20 or so cents a mile—as many fleet drivers now make, and without the loading/unloading hassles.

Think about that next time you see a UPS truck.

Marcia Garrison

Presiding Over Continued Expansion

Quiet and ladylike in demeanor, Marcia Garrison nonetheless has been strong enough to preside over continued expansion and prosperity at one of the South's largest and most diverse fleets.

Called "Marcie" by employees at the company's sprawling and busy headquarters at McDonough, south of Atlanta on Interstate 75, she got

SOUTHERN PROFILE

into trucking through her late husband, J. D. Garrison. A former owner-operator who had gotten into carrier management, he and Marcie, who worked at the same company, learned a lot about running a fleet before they bought George Bennett Motor Express in 1974.

Together they ran the carrier as it grew and prospered until 1981, when J. D. passed away. By then a loyal management staff had been assembled, and they stayed. The fleet now numbers more than 1,300 pieces of equipment, has 100 employees and operates in 48 states and Canada. Expansion was made easier by going the owner-operator route.

"I believe in owner-operators," Mrs. Garrison said, remembering the days when J. D. was an independent, often running coast-to-coast with Marcie sometimes accompanying him. "We have excellent owner-operators. They're professionals."

Low turnover among Bennett o-



o's are testimony to the carrier's policies. Many of them call her Marcie, too, and seem to trust her and her managers.

Mrs. Garrison trusts God—on her desk are neatly stacked copies of the Bible, New Testament & Psalms, God's Minute, God's Promises, and other religious works. But she's also optimistic about American business.

"I know people have been talking about how bad the economy is," she said during SMC's visit in mid December. "There are some areas of the country that are soft, but overall it's strong."

Military shipments destined for the Persian Gulf have helped, of course, but the business acumen of Mrs. Garrison and her staff also get the credit.