Life on the Road: Four Truckers' Stories

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)
by
Jane E. Eagley

Thesis Advisor
Jean Harper

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 2001

May 5th, 2001
Abstract

This paper is an attempt at a better understanding of trucking and the trucker's lifestyle. While truck drivers make up a considerable proportion of blue-collar workers in the United States today, as a society we are often unaware of many of the aspects of their lives. Through interviews with four different people who drive or have driven trucks professionally, I have gained a certain understanding of the trucker's way of life. In this paper, I try to explain what I have learned from my interviews, supplementing them with information obtained through traditional research of the motor carrier industry. Overall, this paper is a combination of a researched study, a documentary, and a personal reflection on the role of truck drivers in society today.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Jean Harper, for her patience and guidance as this paper took form. She has helped me find what I really wanted to say amidst a great wealth of possible approaches, and has offered invaluable advice in the final stages of editing. I am also very grateful to Bob and Bev Vincent, the trucker and the trucker's wife, who provided me with interviews and delicious Sunday afternoon dinners. Finally, I would like to thank Joe, Debbie and Don Carson, who were generous enough to share some of their stories with me in their interviews.
Life on the Road: Four Truckers’ Stories

As many children are, I was fascinated at an early age by two things: dinosaurs and trucks. Both were big and powerful, I suppose. Trucks were especially interesting because, unlike dinosaurs, they were easily observed. Better yet, people could interact directly with them. As I grew older, my fascination with dinosaurs wore off a bit, but not my love of big rigs. Driving a truck would be so much fun, I thought. I wanted to get a commercial driver’s license (CDL) and hit the road for a year or two. I imagined myself seeing new places every day and meeting new people everywhere I stopped. I even had a mental picture of my truck: it would be a bright green tractor with lots of chrome and a shiny white trailer. The interior of the tractor would be full of gages and levers, and I would be an expert at maneuvering them. I could see myself driving down the highway with the sun shining down through the open window and the windshield. People would smile and wave whenever they saw my bright green rig drive by. Unfortunately, I soon found out I was not allowed to drive a truck until I was 21 years old, the minimum age requirement for the CDL. I had to find something to do until I reached that golden age, so I started college.

As I became more involved in school, the idea of becoming a trucker seemed less realistic. Now that I am finally old enough to drive a truck for a living, I have already made plans to go to graduate school and continue my education. It doesn’t look like I will be driving a semi soon. Maybe when I retire, or after a midlife crisis, but not now. Instead, I have decided to do what I can from the realm of academia, and that is to dedicate my final project as an undergraduate student, my Honors Thesis, to learning more about trucking and particularly the people who drive the trucks.

I. Debbie, who did what I wanted to do

Debbie Carson went to truck driving school in St. Louis, Missouri. She was 21 years old, barely the legal age to obtain a commercial driver’s license. She was tired of living at home with her parents, and quite frankly, they were a little tired of her. She had been thinking about moving away for some time, but she had no car of her own and no place to go. It looked like she was stuck with her parents until her job as a waitress brought in enough money for her to buy a car and rent an apartment. Then she got to thinking about driving a semi for a living, and the more she thought about it, the more perfect it seemed. She could move out of her parents’ home, get a job, and take a long road trip all at the same time. In January of 1987 Debbie started a six-week course to become a professional truck driver.

The first place Debbie worked for was Holland Special Delivery, a Michigan-based
freight transportation company with terminals throughout the country. She was hired as an “over-the-road” driver, carrying loads from coast to coast. Although her six weeks of training in St. Louis had earned her a CDL and the right to drive a semi by herself, Debbie was assigned to ride and drive with a trainer for the first few months. The practice of assigning new drivers to trainers was quite common during the sixties and seventies, but in the last fifteen years companies have been faced with a driver shortage and have revised their policy. For the most part, new drivers today are allowed to drive unsupervised as soon as they obtain their CDL.

For Debbie, driving coast-to-coast, from New York to California and back, was exciting at first. It was an adventure, the ultimate escape. Every night Debbie parked and slept in a new place. She was provided with a “condo” tractor for her trailer, one of the more extensive sleeping berths available. It had a twin bed, enough headroom to stand and walk about, and racks for a TV and a small refrigerator. Best of all, it wasn’t under her parents’ roof.

The independence of driving a truck is remarkable. As a job, it has no set schedule. The driver makes decisions about when to drive and when to stop for a break. As long as the load makes its destination by the time it should, no one tells the driver what to do. Like many drivers, Debbie valued her independence tremendously. This was her first chance to be out on her own and to make all of her own decisions. It was a liberating sensation. Many new drivers experience this feeling of liberation when they first start driving, and they want to hold on to their newfound independence as much as possible. Perhaps this is why many drivers, new and old, are opposed to the limitations companies are now able to place on their freedom through new technology.

The first innovation used widely in trucking was the Qualcomm system, an electronic communication channel for companies and their drivers. Before the incorporation of the Qualcomm system, the driver had to call his or her dispatcher when he or she was ready for another load. The dispatcher would then tell him or her to call back in an hour or so, and try to find something that needed to be hauled. Every hour, the driver would call back, until it was finally set up. It was a tedious, inefficient process. Now, instead of that old system, Qualcomm consoles are used in most trucks.¹ Drivers are in constant contact with the company via satellite. Through data management software, the company is able to find return loads for its drivers much more quickly than before, and through the Qualcomm system, the drivers are notified immediately.

Most drivers were quite happy to use the Qualcomm system, because it saved them a lot of time waiting for loads. Other technological innovations have not been so well received, however, and are often viewed as an intrusion on drivers’ privacy. Engine “governors,” for example, are sometimes thought to be more of a nuisance than anything else by drivers. The
governor is a device that limits the maximum number of rpm's an engine can reach. All diesel engines have governors, so that they will not rotate too fast and damage themselves. However, commercial truck governors are often specifically set by the manufacturer to limit the maximum speed of the vehicle. Drivers feel that this limitation makes them less safe, because they are unable to accelerate in passing or in an emergency.

An extension of the Qualcomm system is the onboard computer, which is becoming more common in the industry. Onboard computers enable companies to precisely monitor the speed and itinerary of their trucks. They are comparable to the black boxes on airplanes. Some drivers feel that the “big-brother”-like supervision provided by onboard computers is unnecessary and demeaning to them.

Debbie learned about the Qualcomm system and the other on-board technology from her trainer as they drove together. However, there were still many things she didn't know about her new job when she started driving solo, two months later. She got in trouble often for parking in an inappropriate place. She got pulled over by the Department of Transportation (DOT), the government’s regulating body for trucking, for overloads or improperly loaded freight. She learned, little by little, all the intricacies of life on the road. Most of these things she learned not in truck driving school, and not even with her trainer, but on her own, by trial and error.

Debbie learned about adjusting the brakes on a truck the hard way. Large trucks generally have air brakes on each axle (even the trailer axles). They look like the drum brakes on cars, but they operate slightly differently. Whereas a car uses hydraulic force (from compressing brake fluid) to push the shoes into contact with the drum, creating the friction to stop the vehicle, a truck’s brakes use springs, and thus are engaged by default. To separate the drum and the shoes, the truck uses compressed air. This system provides a level of safety superior to that of cars: if the air line in a truck leaks or becomes damaged, the brake springs force the brakes to engage until the problem is repaired.

However, air brakes require more adjustment than hydraulic car brakes, mainly because of the heavy loads they need to stop. When stopping the vehicle, the brakes generate large amounts of heat caused by friction. This heat can be sufficient to expand the brake drum, and consequently the shoe cannot reach the drum as easily. If the drum expands sufficiently, the shoe will be quite unable to reach it, and all braking function will be lost. Experienced drivers know that they should readjust their brakes before going down sharp slopes, so that the shoes can still reach the drums when they expand.

Debbie drove through the mountains of Virginia for the first time when she had been driving for almost a year. Now, she realizes she should have adjusted her brakes, but at the time,
it didn’t even cross her mind. She just drove as usual. Up and down the mountains she went with her 40,000-pound load, and soon enough her brakes began to get hot. Going down a particularly sharp slope, she began to smell smoke, and the next thing she knew, her brakes were not responding. Her truck kept gaining speed, and there was nothing she could do but attempt to steer. At 90 miles per hour she whooshed through the valley and began to ride up the hill on the other side. She kept trying the brake pedal, hoping for a rapid recovery, but to no avail. Then the heavy load she was carrying began to slow her down. At first she was grateful, only to realize that she would soon come to a stop unless she could give the truck a little boost with the engine. She tried to put the truck in gear, but she couldn’t do it. She was too upset to work the clutch. The truck came to a stop, hesitated for a couple of seconds, and then gently began rolling backwards. Terrified, Debbie gave up all hope of finding the gears and jumped out of the truck. Before it had gained much speed, it veered to the right and got caught on a guardrail. Fortunately, there were no cars around. Debbie had no desire to try to drive the truck any more, so she called a garage and had it towed. The mechanic at the garage repaired everything and taught her to adjust her brakes in the future. After a few hours she had calmed down enough to drive again, so she climbed back in the truck and delivered her load.

Debbie’s story is certainly dramatic, but it is not that uncommon. Many new drivers are put behind the wheel without having learned everything they need to know. More experienced drivers feel that it is the young ones out there who give all drivers the reputation of being unsafe. Six weeks is hardly long enough to learn to drive a big rig. Most drivers say it takes at least two years; some even say it’s more like five years before a new driver can be considered safe. Yet about 16% of the drivers on the road today have been driving for five years or less, and most of them drive alone.

As a woman trucker, Debbie represents a minority in the industry. Even today, truck drivers are predominantly white males. Women make up only 5.3% of drivers, or about 160,000, which is still a threefold increase from twenty years ago. However, Debbie doesn’t feel that she was ever the victim of discrimination. There were other women around the terminals and the truck stop, just not as many as there were men. The male drivers generally showed respect for their female counterparts, and most believed that they were safer drivers. In fact, even today men looking for a driving partner often request that she be female if possible.

Debbie drove a truck for five years. She quit in 1992 after marrying her former trainer, Joe Carson. Before she quit, she and Joe drove team for a couple of years, but eventually she decided to stay home and take care of their house. She now works as a real estate agent. She doesn’t really miss trucking. It was fun at first. It was adventurous. It was a good way to see the
country while she was young. But she's not so young now and it's not so appealing anymore. It really should be a job for the young, she says. It's a very independent job; it offers freedom and no ties to anything or anyone. It's perfect for young rebels who want to see the world. It doesn't make for a good family life, though.

II. Don, who has lived out a dream through the Union

Don Carson always knew he wanted to be a truck driver. He remembers drawing pictures of trucks in grade school. He was fascinated by his father's dump truck. The childhood fascination with large steel and iron vehicles never faded. Growing up, Don hung around his father and his uncle, both of whom drove big rigs. When he was 21, finally old enough to become a driver himself, Don started riding with his uncle.

His uncle was a grain hauler for a grain elevator. He took loads of grain from central Indiana to Chicago. Sometimes he would find an additional load in Chicago to be delivered on the way back. When things were slow at the elevator, he would even drive an empty truck to Chicago, find a load, and drive it back. Driving an unloaded truck is called deadheading. It's not as common today as it was twenty years ago. It is not as profitable now because fuel prices have gone up, while the average per-mile pay has remained steady or in some cases has gone down. In addition, the data management software shipping companies now use allows them to have a return haul ready for every truck that arrives at its destination. Back in the early 1970's, however, when Don first started riding along, the four dollars-per-mile he and his uncle could earn on the way back more than made up for deadheading all the way to Chicago (some 300 miles from central Indiana).

Riding along with a senior driver, as Don did with his uncle, has been the traditional way to learn to drive a truck since the industry's beginnings in the 1920's. This informal apprenticeship is being phased out today in the name of efficiency and safety. Most new drivers joining the ranks today have learned to drive at a truck driving school or a company-operated training facility. They have had four to eight weeks of intensive classroom training combined with a couple of weeks of behind-the-wheel practice. They are certified drivers in two months, sometimes less. What they lack, and what can only be learned by riding along, is the feel for the road. These new drivers barely get a chance to leave the safety of a parking lot before they are turned loose with a loaded semi. Don remembers being terrified on his first runs to Chicago. Even with his uncle beside him, and knowing the route well from months of riding along, it was nerve-racking. "I remember going to Chicago the first few times. I was a nervous wreck. You get what they call 'white knuckle fever.' You grip the wheel so much your knuckles turn white.
It gets better. After a while it’s just a lot easier.”

From his uncle, Don learned how to drive, but he also learned quite a few other things about being a professional driver. He learned how to deal with traffic and with other drivers who weren’t always polite to him. Once, when Don was still in training, he rode with his uncle on a late-night haul to Chicago. It was around one o’clock in the morning, and they were driving along a two-lane highway surrounded by cornfields. There weren’t very many other travelers, and they were making good time. Then some young men in a car caught up with them and decided to play a game with the semi. They passed the truck, then slowed down until the truck passed them, only to speed up and pass the truck again, then cut in front and slow down again, starting the process over again. Their version of automotive leapfrog wasn’t funny for Don or his uncle, who had to continually shift gears up and down. The young men were getting into the game now, yelling things up at Don and his uncle each time they passed them, and cheering at their own maneuvers. Eventually Don’s uncle grew tired of them. The next time they pulled up alongside the truck and began demanding that they be let into the lane, Don’s uncle put on his turn signal and slowly began easing into the other lane. The young men had not expected such a move and were shocked to see the big semi moving into their lane. They had no other option but to drive right off the road and into the cornfields. The last Don saw of them, looking back, was a cloud of dust and cornstalks flying up. That incident taught Don to respect the power and the sheer size of the truck he drives. He realizes that driving isn’t a game, and he could easily hurt someone by being careless.

Don drove for his uncle’s grain elevator on his own for a while, and then he went to work for a small company in Crawfordsville, Indiana. He carried a variety of different shipments for that company. In the winter, he hauled propane, which is used by the area farms to heat their facilities. In the spring, he carried anhydrous fertilizers. In the summer he made a variety of different runs, like aluminum aircraft parts from Indiana to Kansas or propane from Canada to Detroit. The summer trips usually were longer and took several days. Don would sleep on the road, in his truck’s sleeper. At first it was exciting, but after a while it became routine. It wasn’t as much fun after he got married, either. By then, he wanted to be able to spend more time at home with his family. Although he was living out a childhood dream, those were hard times for Don. He gave up many hours of sleep to get loads where they needed to be. “I worked awful hard for a lot of years and not much money. It didn’t pay a lot. But the company I’m at now, it’s paying off.”

Now he works for United Parcel Service (UPS) as a tractor-trailer driver. He considers getting hired by UPS to have been his lucky break. He is treated fairly and paid much more
adequately than before. He makes daily runs and is home every evening. If he were to take longer trips, he would be provided with a hotel room every night—he wouldn’t need to sleep in the truck like before. If he is delayed because it takes longer than expected to load his truck, he gets paid for the time spent waiting. If he has a flat tire on the road, the company sends someone to fix it, and the whole time Don remains on the clock.

These advantages Don has gained as an employee of UPS are not really due to the generosity of the company itself, but rather to the Teamsters union. The approximately 200,000 employees of UPS are all members of the Teamsters union, making UPS the largest single employer of Teamsters in the United States. Don and his coworkers feel that their strong unionization is vital in maintaining fair working conditions at UPS. Many scholars not only agree to the importance of the union within UPS, but would also argue that UPS has played an important role within the union in recent years as well.

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) began in 1903 as an association of blue-collar workers. During its first twenty-five years of existence, the Teamsters union remained small. As the economy plummeted in the late 1920’s and laborers across the country looked for a way to better their impoverished lives, membership in the union rose dramatically. The union was able to retain these new members through aggressive negotiations with companies, which brought about a number of improvements for the workers. In the years following World War II, the economy soared, and workers and employers alike were better off each year. Although union leaders still met with the companies and still negotiated contracts with them, they faced very little opposition from employers: the profits earned by companies during this period were large enough that there was plenty for everyone. Union members grew complacent, watching their lifestyle improve year after year. The economic boom could not last forever, though, and in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s a recession took hold of the economy. The Teamster leadership that had sailed along quite nicely in times of prosperity proved unable to negotiate aggressively or to stand up for workers’ rights. Teamster members, hardly satisfied with the union’s contracts, began to organize their own strikes (“wildcat strikes”) and to demand a greater say in union affairs. This grassroots movement was known as the “rank and file” takeover of the Teamsters union.

In 1997 Don and his coworkers were directly involved in the rank and file organization of the Teamsters. The UPS contract with the Teamsters was up for renegotiation in August of 1997. A full six months before the expiration of the contract, rank and file union members began campaigning among their fellow workers. They informed UPS employees of the provisions contained in the contract and the possible changes that could be made. They listened to ideas and
demands made by the workers and passed the suggestions on to the negotiators. By the time the contract expired, the employees of UPS were fully aware of the situation. When the company did not accept the terms proposed by the Teamsters, the employees of UPS immediately went on strike. Their walkout was remarkably effective: the company had no other option but to accept the Teamsters' terms after fifteen days. Don participated in the 1997 strike and considers the contract that was obtained to have been an important victory for him and his coworkers. Don is a union man through and through. He feels the strengthening of the rank and file members of the union is vital and he is proud to be a part of UPS, where rank and file organization has been so effective. The union has allowed Don to fulfill his childhood dream of driving a truck while making a good living.

III. Joe, who will always be a trucker

Joe Carson is Don's brother. He is also a trucker and a member of the IBT union. However, he does not consider trucking the fulfillment of a childhood fantasy, as Don does. For Joe, trucking is the only decent living he can make anymore, but it's not a good life. There is a sense of fate about Joe, a sense that trucking is his inescapable destiny. He once told me, "if I could do it all over again, I would stay in school, and then I'd be...I'd be an educated trucker!" He laughed at his own comment, and so did I. The underlying message is much more serious, though. Joe cannot see himself as anything other than a truck driver. Much as he dislikes the job, it's the only one he can envision himself doing. There is no alternative.

Joe also took up trucking as soon as he was old enough. Like Don, he had been around trucks his whole life. He didn't seek out the help of his father or uncle to learn the trade, however. He only decided to start trucking because he could make money at it, and he didn't want to waste any time. He went to a trucking company and offered his services as a driver, lying about his experience. They took him for a test run in a truck, and he knew enough about driving it to satisfy them, so he was hired. Since then he's changed companies a number of times, though he's never owned his own truck. Each new job he has vowed to make his last, but each time he quits he realizes he has to go back for the money.

Like many blue-collar workers, Joe feels trapped. He makes too much money to quit and start anew in some other line of work, yet he despises what he does. He isn't fighting the situation anymore. His sense of resignation can be perceived immediately. He is a trucker and a trucker he will be until he retires. Even then he will be a retired trucker.

It isn't a good life, he says. It's not a good life because of the abuses companies lay on their drivers. He tells stories of arriving at his destination at four in the morning, and being
forced to sit outside the gates for four hours until the dock opened, only to be reprimanded for being late at his next drop-off site.

It isn’t a good life because of the isolation. Driving a truck is a one-person job. “You spend a lot of time by yourself. It’s kind of boring. I have a hard time keeping my mind occupied,” says Joe. There are hardly any opportunities for social contact in this line of work. The isolation is often given as the greatest reason for driver turnover in the industry. Some of the major companies have turnover rates as high as 84% per year. Young drivers start out hoping to make large amounts of money, only to find that the time required for making that kind of money is more than they can give. They are away from home for weeks at a time to earn a measly three or four days off. The time on the road is lonely.

Gary Straight, a retired truck driver who converted his Peterbilt semi into a motor home and drove all the way from Florida to Alaska, described the driver’s rapport with the road as a love-hate relationship. They love to be on the road, moving, independent. It is personal time, time for meditation and peaceful reflection. Yet it is inescapable. There is no way of saying “enough quiet time, now give me some company.” The isolation and loneliness are intrinsic components of the job.

Even with the uncomfortable lack of companionship, Joe echoes many drivers when he says he prefers to drive alone. Team drivers, first of all, do not really share a lot of quality time together. While one drives, the other must sleep, otherwise, the purpose of driving team is defeated. Furthermore, there is an element of trust. Few drivers are able to sleep at ease knowing that someone else is behind the wheel of the rig. They want to be in control at all times. So they don’t usually sleep well in a team.

Joe did drive team for almost three years. Two of those he drove with his wife, Debbie. It’s a good opportunity to make money, because both drivers’ incomes go to the same household. Two experienced drivers can bring in as much as 90,000 dollars a year. However, team drivers are expected to stay on the road as much as possible, making constant runs back and forth across the country. Trying to maintain a home at the same time is difficult. The best way to do it is to give up home ownership for a time and drive, putting all the money made in a bank. There are no bills to be paid other than those directly associated with the truck, and money can be saved up fast. Couples that travel together also avoid being separated from each other for long periods. However, as Joe was quick to point out, team-driving couples don’t really get to spend a lot of time enjoying each other’s company, because they need to moving almost constantly.

Some drivers prefer to take pets along, particularly dogs, although some cats get to ride as well. Owner-operators who spend weeks at a time on the road benefit most from pet
companionship. A dog can be someone to talk to, someone to play with, and someone to go for an evening walk with, even if it's just around the parking lot. Company drivers making longer runs also take along animals at times, although the companies themselves do not approve. It is also true that some drivers are allergic to animal hair and can have a breakout if they drive a truck that has recently been occupied by a pet.

A story that circulates among truckers exemplifies the solitude of driving a truck. The story goes that a trucker stopped at a rest stop to get some sleep, and died of a heart attack in his berth. For four days he lay there, unnoticed, and was only found when his dispatcher worried about the load not arriving. There was no one else to care about him; he was completely alone. Truckers tell each other that story, reinforcing the idea that they are in a world of their own when they drive. If they disappear into the void of the road, they will only be missed when the merchandise they are transporting is missed. If not for his load, the man in the story might have remained undiscovered at the rest stop for months. Whether the story is true or not, it is believable to truckers because they know how isolated they can become when they drive.

The road's isolation is powerful, but it's not the only thing that makes Joe doubtful about his quality of life as a trucker. He also complains about the unhealthy lifestyle it creates. It is a sedentary job. Aside from helping unload or load occasionally (it is becoming rarer and rarer for truckers to have to help with this), the driver's job is mainly sitting in a chair. Joe assured me that most drivers die early of a heart attack as a result of the unhealthy lifestyle they lead. In addition, he worries about the back problems derived from sitting in the cab of a truck for eight hours at a time, subject to the jarring motion of the road.

In fact, the health (or lack thereof) of truck drivers has recently been addressed by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. An extensive 2000 report reviewed the reported health levels of truck drivers in the literature versus those of the general population, in addition to performing some new wellness studies and proposing a course of action for bettering the situation. The study found that the health of truckers is significantly worse than that of the general population in several aspects. It found that smoking, obesity, hypertension, and stress levels are all higher and more prevalent among truck drivers. The stress levels of truckers as evaluated by the best single scale of psychological stress were 91% higher than in the general population.10

When questioned about their health and lifestyle habits, most truck drivers responded that they didn't exercise because they didn't have time, that they ate poorly because healthy food was unavailable, and that they snacked often on the road to alleviate boredom. The factors drivers cited as causing them the most stress were dealing with cars on the road (impolite
behavior), harsh weather, insensitive managers and bosses, and the pressure to deliver loads on time. Finally, the study used job turnover rates as an indicator of job dissatisfaction, finding that the turnover rates for different segments of the for-hire driver industry (tanker drivers, flatbed drivers, etc) varied from 49% to 69%, as compared to a national turnover rate of 8.4%.

The FMCSA report also reviewed the wellness programs already offered by some of the trucking corporations for their employees. The study noted that these programs often serve the truck terminal employees, but fail to reach the drivers, whose needs are different and more difficult to meet, given their mobility. Joe, however, was unaware of any wellness programs aimed at drivers. It seems that most drivers are equally unaware of such programs. The FMCSA study also reported that truck drivers would be more likely to exercise if they were provided with facilities at their regular stops, with paved areas for walking near parking areas, or with more time.

The final result of the FMCSA driver wellness report has been to initiate a program called "Gettin' in Gear," the objectives of which are to inform drivers and their supervisors about health issues and to offer suggestions for a better lifestyle. The program is just becoming implemented in April 2001. It will be interesting to see if it can significantly affect the lifestyles of truck drivers. Joe seems less than confident in the goodwill of the companies. However, he does concede that there is an increasing shortage of qualified drivers, and it is to the companies' benefit to retain as many as they can.

The companies themselves seem to have realized that job dissatisfaction will lead them to a crisis. They have begun investing in better equipment for the company trucks, trying to make them more comfortable. They are investing in automatic transmissions, better seats, better sleeping berths. They justify the extra expenses by reminding themselves that better seats can decrease visits to the chiropractor and workers' compensation claims. Most companies now use the air-ride suspension system, which places an air bag under the seat to absorb any bumps along the way. Seats are also available with a variety of comfort-enhancing options, like thigh supports, lumbar adjustments, and armrests. And although manual transmissions are still more common, they are becoming increasingly easy to shift. Traditionally a manual shift required "double clutching," which meant the driver had to push the clutch in twice for each shift so that the gears would be at roughly the same speed when they engaged. In the last ten years trucks have become available that don't require double clutching and shift much more smoothly. These "no-double-clutch" transmissions are denoted by the name "Super," as in Super 10 (a ten-speed transmission with no double clutch). Most trucks still include a regular clutch and a number of gears (ten to eighteen, usually) that must be shifted through. Automated transmissions may be
fully automated, with absolutely no clutch, or may require the clutch only when starting and stopping.11 Although there is a sense of pride in knowing how to shift properly, companies are investing more in automated transmissions, because new drivers learn faster with them.

As for the pressure put on drivers by the companies, Joe certainly considers it a factor. Most of the young drivers out there are “brainwashed” into thinking that they absolutely must make it on time, he said. They are under tremendous pressure to perform, and if they are late they don’t make as much money. Since joining the union, Joe isn’t so concerned about squeezing in extra miles. Even before, he says, he always made sure he got enough sleep before driving. “It’s my life behind the wheel, so you know, I’m not going to fall asleep driving down the road. They can yell and scream at me all they want. Their freight will get there instead of wrecking.” Unfortunately, many younger truckers aren’t as headstrong as Joe. They push on in a sleep-starved state to make impossible deadlines.

For Joe, there are a number of specific circumstances that make him displeased with his job. There is, however, one underlying reason. He is very proud of the work he does. He is a professional driver, and he makes sure freight arrives when and where it needs to. He is a safe and courteous driver on the road. He is aware of the important role trucking plays in the economy today, and he knows that without him and the other thousands of men and women driving semis across the country, everything would come to a standstill. Yet he receives no recognition of this important role. His managers do not seem to care about him, in spite of his importance. He is treated as a replaceable, unskilled laborer. The Department of Labor classifies truck driving as “unskilled.” That label is an insult to Joe and many others like him, people who have put years into learning how to handle a truck safely and efficiently. Society, as dependent as it is on its truckers, places no value on them and makes no attempt to elevate their status. He doesn’t need higher wages or better benefits; he needs respect and recognition from society for the important role he plays.

IV. Bob, who fell in love with the easy money

Bob Vincent started riding along with his father’s cousins in 1973. He had always been closer in age to his first cousins once removed than his own father was, and they got along well. David and Bob’s other cousins were all truck drivers. They were owner-operators, that is, they owned the trucks they drove. They were a wild bunch. They traveled all around the country, hauling freight for the same company, meeting up occasionally along the way. Bob started riding along for fun. He had always enjoyed their road adventure stories, and they liked having him along. At first the most he did was help load or unload the trailer. He wasn’t getting paid for his
rides, so every so often he would take a few weeks off and do some construction work to earn a little money. Then he would join David again for another few weeks on the road. By riding along he learned a lot about driving and the trucking industry in general. After a while, David began allowing him to drive in parking lots or late at night on the country roads. A year later, Bob bought his own rig and leased out of the same company his cousins did.

Leasing out of a company is one of the options owner-operators have. Because they have their own truck, owner-operators have more options than company drivers. Many companies, in addition to having their own fleet of vehicles and the drivers to operate them, hire owner-operators on the side and pay them by the mile or sometimes by a percentage of each load carried. Unlike the company driver, the owner-operator still has the final say in when he or she works. The owner-operator contacts the company dispatcher when he or she is ready, and requests a load. In many instances the owner-operator can even request a certain destination.

Bob and his cousins leased out of such a company. They would all request loads to Florida, and once they had delivered their loads, they would take a few days off to visit the coast.

Bob became involved in trucking because it is “easy money.” There is very little physical labor involved, and driving in itself is not difficult. In 1975, when Bob started driving his own truck, he made $1.50 per mile on average, which was plenty for him at that point. “Being single and young, I would work my butt off for two weeks and make a pocketful of money and I wouldn’t work for a month.” Bob compares his lifestyle back then to that of a cowboy. He would pick up a load and take it to its destination, following the route he pleased. When he got there, he would get paid and then was free to decide whether he wanted another load to go somewhere else or whether he preferred to stick around and relax for a while.

Five years later, in 1980, Bob sold his first and only truck and joined the ranks of the company drivers. His decision was a reflection of the changing economic situation in the trucking industry. Since the late 1930’s, the trucking industry had been regulated by the federal government. The Interstate Commerce Committee regulated the trucking industry through its executive branch, the Department of Transportation (DOT). The government determined the rates, loads and routes carriers could follow. Since 1960, the regulation of the trucking industry had become quite intense (this was the so-called “Era of Strict Regulation and Vigorous Enforcement”). By 1980, the industry was swamped in regulations, many of which seemed outdated or contradicted each other. Consumer advocates and academics began to speak of the unnecessary waste of regulating the industry. In 1980 an independent commission, the National Transportation Policy Study Commission, presented the argument to Congress that the motor carrier industry ought to be deregulated. As a result, the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 was passed,
which removed virtually all government control over the industry. Although deregulation initially allowed more owner-operators to enter the market, by eliminating many of the restrictions on the loads they could carry, it also promoted free market competition among the motor carrier companies. As a result, company drivers were offered more and more benefits. When Bob sold his truck in 1980, he did so because he could earn more and obtain better benefits working for a company than driving his own truck. He gave up some of the freedom he had had as an owner-operator, but he didn’t mind so much. He was beginning to settle down and wasn’t so interested in maintaining his “cowboy lifestyle” anymore.

Bob enjoys driving a truck. He likes the time alone. It gives him a chance to think. Bob is an amateur philosopher of sorts. He has thought about his life as a trucker a lot and has gained a deep understanding of the driving industry. He understands that actually driving the truck is the least part of the job. The job is also planning the trip, maximizing the number of miles in the ten hours of lawful driving time each day, and finding a good place to park for the night and sleep. It’s inspecting the vehicle and helping load or unload. It is being willing to be away from home for days at a time. It’s being aware that there really is no schedule, and that a 400-mile run might well take all day, what with loading, driving, stopping at the scales, being inspected, and unloading.

Like many experienced drivers, Bob worries that companies are hiring new drivers and letting them start driving solo too soon. A six-week driving course is hardly enough to learn how to manage the truck on the road. When men and women alike start driving, they develop and sort of “macho attitude” about driving. It goes with the big powerful vehicle. After driving for a few years, however, the attitude changes completely. After driving for that long, they begin to respect the power of their vehicle much more. “You gain respect as you go,” Bob said. “When you first start driving the thing you don’t have a clue what it can do.” Unfortunately, it often takes an accident or a near-miss for a new driver to understand the importance of driving safely.

There are stereotypes about trucking, Bob is well aware. Prostitution, drug abuse, and a rough lifestyle are all associated with trucking in many people’s minds. Bob is quick to point out that such things exist in any segment of society, not just in trucking. Prostitution and drug use exist, there’s no denying it, but they are no more prevalent at truck stops than they are in any major metropolitan area. He realizes also that in spite of the stereotype, people often don’t know much at all about truckers. Even though they see the semis go by on the highways every day, they fail to look up and see the driver behind the wheel. They don’t seem to notice that there are more and more women drivers nowadays. They don’t see the retired couples, who at the age of 65 are just beginning a new career. They don’t take into account the fact that most of the drivers
are working very hard to make a living and support their families. They don't understand that truckers are people just like everyone else.

Bob is cynical about some aspects of his job. For instance, he doubts the effectiveness of the hours of service regulations as a safety measure. As the rules stand now (and proposed changes are currently being reviewed by Congress), drivers are allowed to drive for ten hours, and then must rest for eight hours. These rules actually date from the late 1930's. Most drivers pick up their loads in the morning, drive their ten hours, and then need to find a place to park for the night and get eight hours of rest. There are two problems with this setup. The first is that companies have deadlines for their freight to arrive. Even if delays in loading and traffic on the road slow the driver down, the load is still expected to arrive on time. Oftentimes drivers must choose between obeying the law and risking a pay cut from the company or breaking the law in order to make the destination on time. The second problem is parking. By evening, most of the trucks on the road are nearing the end of their ten-hour driving shift, and the drivers are looking for a place to spend the night. Everyone stops at about the same time, and the parking lots get crowded. Drivers who fail to plan ahead may find themselves in a jam, unable to drive on because they have already driven ten hours, and also unable to find a place to park. On the road, Bob often found humor in watching drivers try to squeeze into busy parking lots at night. "These parking holes are jam-packed and the later it gets, the harder it is to find a parking place...it just gets hilarious."

Bob uses a self-effacing tone when he talks about driving. "A monkey can drive a truck. I mean, that's nothing to be proud of," he said. However, he does take pride in the fact that he has been driving for twenty-five years and has never had an accident. After driving three million miles, he's never even scratched his truck. Yet he feels like his luck must be running out. Over the years, he has seen too many accidents and heard too many gruesome stories to keep driving without worrying about it. He hasn't grown tired of the job. He still thinks of it as easy money. He just doesn't think he should push his luck any further. He is ready to retire.

I have learned a great deal about trucking by now, perhaps more than I would have learned had I actually become a driver myself. I have become the inexperienced expert. Although I now know more about the companies, and the unions, and the rules and regulations that govern trucking, I realize that the most important thing I have learned has nothing to do with those things. I have learned that the ideas about trucking I had in my mind, the stereotypical ones shared by almost everyone, were not at all accurate. Driving a truck for a living is much more complicated than I ever thought. The people who do it serve an incredibly important role.
and we, as a society, neglect to recognize it. When we think of significant contributors to society, we think of scientists, artists, even politicians, but never truckers. Yet their contribution is at least equally important. Not only that, but every driver I met was kind and helpful. They genuinely wanted to talk to me about their experiences, to share them and help me understand them. Bob was right, truckers are people too, and more importantly, they are people who deserve respect on and off the road.
Notes


9. Gary Straight, Straight from the Road, self-published audiotape, 1999. Straight’s narrative about his voyage across the continent is full of thoughts about the life on the road.

10. Roberts and York, Final Report. In addition to the preliminary studies that document the way of life of truck drivers, the report includes proposals for improved wellness and a healthier lifestyle among men and women in this profession.


Interview with Debbie, January 21st, 2001

JE: Could you state your name?
DC: Debbie Carson.

JE: So how long were you involved in the trucking industry?
DC: I started driving a truck in January of ’87.

JE: How did you get involved in it?
DC: I went to truck driving school with my best friend, and from there—we went to truck driving school in St. Louis, Missouri, it was like a six-week course—and from there I went to a place called Special Delivery, and I went coast-to-coast. I drove coast-to-coast, from California to New York.

JE: Wow. So why did you decide to become involved in trucking?
DC: Just young, just looking to see the country. I thought that was the best way to see it.

JE: Did you enjoy it, was it fun?
DC: Yeah, it was a lot of fun, until I’d been in every state.

JE: So that’s why you gave up, that’s you stopped driving?
DC: No, I stopped when I got married, and I wanted to be home.

JE: Understandable. I know, since Joe told me that you drove as a team, and obviously you also drove by yourself before that...did you meet Joe when you were driving?
DC: I met him at Special Delivery, at the first job I had, driving coast-to-coast. He was my trainer. We split up, he went on his way and I went on mine, but we worked at the same company. And then he went on to another company, and I stayed there, by myself for a little while. Then I met up with him again, went to work with him again at American Transport. We drove team for a while. Then I left American Transport and went to work for Roadway.

JE: And then you drove by yourself again?
DC: Uhm-hm.

JE: Tell me what it’s like to drive a truck.
DC: It’s a lot of hours, same old, same old all day. Just driving. A lot of hours.

JE: Do you think the pay is adequate?
DC: I don’t think that drivers are making as much as they should. The fuel price is up there now and they should just get paid more.

JE: In general company drivers are more adequately paid that independents?
DC: Yeah...it depends on what company you work for. If it’s a union company, I think they make a little more.
JE: Were you union when you drove?
DC: Yeah, I worked for Roadway. For a while. I worked for several companies.
JE: Do you think it was any different for you, being a woman driver? Or was it by that time pretty much equal?
DC: Yeah, it was pretty much ... I mean there was a lot of women drivers out there.
JE: So you never felt out of place or anything?
DC: At Roadway, maybe, because we only had eight women the first year I was driving. The bosses there kind of had something about women.
JE: What about at truck stops, I see that they have showers and other things set up for the drivers, did you ever use those, can you use those, being a woman?
DC: Yeah, some of them are ... they have the women's facilities and the men's facilities. Some of them are pretty clean, some of them are not so clean.
JE: What about team driving, what was that like? Did that work out?
DC: Before or after we got married?
JE: I guess both, and what's the difference?
DC: I think it was all right. We both ran a lot of miles as a team. We ran about 7000 miles a week. So ... it was just like any other job, somebody would get up and start driving, and that person that wasn't driving was in bed. So it wasn't as much quality time, you know, as it would be if you were home.
JE: That's what I was going to ask you, did you really get to spend time together?
DC: Not really. We weren't together but we were working.
JE: What kinds of loads did you carry, and did it really make a difference to you, what you were carrying?
DC: No, it didn't make any difference. We drove tanker together, too, and I didn't know anything about that, so he did most of the loading and unloading.
JE: But the driving is just the same?
DC: Yeah.
JE: Would you like to tell me a little bit about that waiting period that we were talking earlier, about waiting for a load?
DC: Well, some places they used to, before they got the Qualcomm system, where you just punch in when you're done, and it gets you a load back right away. But used to, you had to call them, you had to call the dispatcher. And he would say, "call me back in an hour or so." And you might do that all day long. And you can't really sleep, you've got to get up and call him back in
an hour. It's a lot of wasting time. If they would just say, "call me back in the morning," it would be a lot better.

JE: Then you could just go to bed?

DC: Yeah, exactly.

JE: What about being on the road, what about cars, do you feel that trucks kind of get the bad side of the deal, that cars tend to ignore them?

DC: Yeah, I think cars, when they're out there they don't realize how hard it is to stop a truck. And they just, you know, some of them tend to cut you off. They just don't realize — you've got to be alert and watching around you all the time.

JE: Did you ever listen to the CB radio, and was it for fun, or strictly because it was useful?

DC: Most of the time when I used the CB would be when I was really sleepy or something. Just bored. I would get on the radio and start talking to somebody. I'd talk to somebody, and they'd just talk for miles. You know, somebody to talk to and keep you awake. It passes the time.

JE: What's it like to drive by yourself for so many hours? Does it give you a chance to think, or is it just boring?

DC: It's boring, it gives you a lot of time to think.

JE: What's the inside of a truck like, comfortwise, how would you rate it?

DC: The condos are kind of nice. You have plenty of room, a place to put your refrigerator back there, your TV.

JE: Do the companies provide generally good trucks? Can you ask for a better truck or are those reserved for coast-to-coast?

DC: I think it just depends on where you work. If you work for a place that runs coast-to-coast, or all over the place, they usually have condos, what they call condos. And they're pretty big inside, there's room to walk around inside those things. But if you're working around the state of Indiana, you might just have a day cab. You won't have a sleeper. But again, it just depends on the kind of company you work for.

JE: What about parking? Bob mentioned that it was a big problem for him, when you're out on the road and you can't find a place to stop after your so many hours of driving. Did you ever have a problem with that?

DC: Yeah, especially at night. After midnight, there's a lot of trucks at the truck stops at that time, cause they're all sleeping. It's really hard to find a parking place, especially when you're tired, and you just want to go to sleep so bad, but there's no place to park. Even on the rest areas, they park all up and down the ramp. It can be difficult finding a place.

JE: And you get in trouble with law enforcement if you just pull over, right?
DC: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've done that. When I first started driving I was pulled over on the shoulder and... that's a no-no.

JE: Do police officers tend to treat truck drivers differently from everyone else?
DC: I don't think so. Of course I've not driven a whole lot. The DOT liked to pull me over a lot, though.

JE: Really? What do they pull you over for?
DC: Overweight, overload, mostly.

JE: Are there any interesting stories, like maybe the one about you going down the mountain, could you share that with me?
DC: Yeah, I was going to Richmond, Virginia, and I hadn't been driving very long. A year, maybe. I didn't know not to adjust the brakes. I didn't even think about it—adjusting the brakes. I thought they were automatic brakes that adjust by themselves. Well I was going down a mountain, I had about 40,000 pounds probably, and my brakes started smoking, and I started sailing. I had no brakes. So I started pulling up the other side, and I couldn't get my truck in gear, because... I don't know why, I just couldn't get it in gear, and I had no brakes anyway, it was just barely rolling. I didn't have enough brakes to stop. And it started rolling backwards, and I said, "I'm out of here." So I jumped out. And the back of the truck hit the guardrail, and that's what stopped it. And there were no cars behind me. I was glad.

JE: So did you just get in your truck and start it up again?
DC: I called a wrecker, I had a wrecker come out, and pulled my truck into the shop. They adjusted the brakes and replaced the mudflap. And after about two or three hours, after I quit shaking and crying, I got back in the truck, and jumped my load over there where it should be delivered. It was scary.

JE: That's something. Before we finish, is there anything you would like to say about the trucking industry?
DC: I think if someone want to see the country, as far as driving, it's the best way to do it.
JE: So it's a good job?
DC: Yeah, it's a good job for someone that's young and if they want to get out and see the country.
Interview with Don, January 21st, 2001

JE: I would like to start by having you state your name.
DoC: Don Carson.

JE: How long have been involved in the trucking industry?
DoC: Twenty years.

JE: Twenty years. And how did you get started?
DoC: Hauling grain when I was 21.

JE: Did someone take you in a truck and show you?
DoC: I've always wanted to be a truck driver. I remember in grade school drawing pictures of trucks. My dad was a truck driver.

JE: Oh, so you had access to a truck.
DoC: Yeah.

JE: Did he teach you to drive it?
DoC: No, no, it was really a dump truck. I had an uncle that taught me, after I turned 21, how to drive to Chicago.

JE: Did you own your own truck ever?
DoC: No.

JE: You work for companies then?
DoC: Yes.

JE: Did they have training programs for you to go through, also?
DoC: Yes, the company I work for now does. They have a real good training program. The others were just kind of how I started up. Self-taught. I mean, they had a senior driver, usually.

JE: Is that the way it worked back then?
DoC: Yeah, and well, the major companies, I'm sure they had training. But how I started out, it was working for the elevator, and they had a senior driver who would take you out and show you.

JE: So you hauled grain for a while, and then...who do you work for now?
DoC: I work for UPS, I'm a tractor-trailer driver.

JE: Do you do daily hauls or are you away for more extended periods of time?
DoC: I'm back home every day.

JE: Have you ever spent time on the road? Extended periods?
DoC: When I worked for a company in Crawfordsville, it was seasonal. We hauled anhydrous in the spring for farmers, propane in the winter, and then in the summer you hauled flatbeds...
loaded with aluminum aircraft parts to go to Kansas and all over and propane out of Canada to Detroit to make fuel, and a lot of things. A lot of frozen food too.

JE: So did you spend time on the road for those longer hauls, did you spend several nights?
DoC: Yeah.

JE: Did you sleep in the truck then, or did you get a motel room?
DoC: In the truck a lot.

JE: Was that comfortable? Was it something you enjoyed or were you just trying to get it over with?
DoC: At first it was exciting but then it got routine. You didn’t like being away from home.

JE: Did you have a wife or a family to come home to?
DoC: Yes.

JE: What about the truck stops, can you describe them to me? Or do you not even go there any more?
DoC: Yeah, it’s just a giant parking lot and a place to fuel up and get something to eat. If you have a regular run you have a routine place to stop along the way. You get to know the people. I don’t know, I’ve been going to them for so many years now...they’re just giant gas stations.

JE: What’s it like to drive the truck, is it different from driving a car?
DoC: Yeah, the equipment I drive now is 65 feet long and several tons, and you get to be—I like to be up high in a truck, you can see more. More of what’s going on. Get the big picture. There is a lot of truck traffic out there. I’ve been doing it so long, it’s just, when I’m driving in a car...I feel better in a truck.

JE: Feel more comfortable?
DoC: Yeah. And you know, it has its good points and its bad points. Weather. Ice and snow and fog, it’s worrisome.

JE: What about cars around you when you are driving, are they a problem sometimes? Do you feel that they don’t pay enough attention to trucks?
DoC: I see a lot of things sitting up high like that. I see people in four-wheelers go by, and they’ll be working on a laptop computer, they’ll be reading a newspaper, talking on the phone, reading a book...it’s just mind-boggling when they just don’t realize they’ve got a 5,500-pound piece of equipment there, and in just a matter of seconds they can get in trouble. I’ve seen a lot of accidents. This winter a lot of four-wheel drives that think that they’re bad, I come along and they’re off in the ditch. 90% of them going to Chicago I’ve seen this winter were four-wheel drives.

JE: Getting too confident, I guess.
DoC: Yeah, they think, “I’ve got a four-wheel drive.” But no matter what you drive, you have to pay attention. There’s all kinds of things to consider.

JE: And more so in a truck, I imagine.

DoC: Yeah, the stopping distance is longer. You got a heavy piece of equipment there. And you have to watch out for the other guy. A lot of them, they just don’t pay attention. Even truckers, there’s a lot of them too, that don’t.

JE: Would you say newer truckers, because of inexperience, or older ones who are getting too used to it?

DoC: I think it’s the newer ones. I feel that it takes well—we have a pretty extensive program in training, and they say it takes seven years to finally get enough experience to where you’re pretty good. And you have these training schools around now, that you’re out I don’t know how many weeks, not very many. They help. They might give them a little overconfidence. I remember going to Chicago the first few times, I was a nervous wreck. You get what they call “white knuckle fever.” You grip the wheel so much your knuckles turn white. It gets better. After a while it’s just...a lot easier.

JE: Since deregulation, you’ve been in the industry a long time, have you noticed a change, and is it something you could describe?

DoC: Well, it’s harder for the independent driver. When I first started, we would deadhead for 300 miles, because we got four dollars a loaded mile. We could go to Chicago empty and come back and make our deliveries round and we’d make pretty good money. That was in the mid-seventies. Now drivers are getting, if they get a dollar and a quarter a mile, they’re making it now. Fuel costs have gone up something fierce. There’s so many trucks for sale cause they go out and make 1000 dollars a week but it costs them 1200 to run it. That’s not going to work long that way.

JE: No, I guess not.

DoC: So it’s just... they can’t make any money at it.

JE: Has deregulation helped with safety in any way, or do you think not so much?

DoC: Well, I’m not sure. It’s kind of one of those unsure deals. Deregulation has hurt the independent drivers and a lot of companies, because of people that go out there and say, “well I’ll haul that for $1.10.” They should keep it regulated, I think. The CDL that they’ve come out with, I think is a good deal. Because you’re responsible for the safety of a lot of people, you can really hurt a lot of people out there in that truck. They want you alcohol and drug free. You got a—I probably haul 500,000 dollars of equipment a day up and down the road, the freight and the equipment I use. They’re not going to let just anybody...
JE: So you'd say that's pretty controlled—drug and alcohol usage?
DoC: They're working on it. It's not easy to get away with it as it used to be. It used to be you'd hear them talking about it on the CB all over. Stop and buy pep pills or whatever you want about anywhere. But you don't hear much anymore. I'm sure it's out there, still. They're pretty tight. They started, a few years back, random drug testing at the company, and they didn't do that for the first six or seven years. Unless you had an accident where there was an injury to you or somebody else—then they tested you. But now they've started a program where you're tested and then it's random, every month. You might get hit you might not. That's a good deal it keeps you...
JE: Keeps you clean?
DoC: Yeah, it keeps the drivers clean and the ones don't fool with alcohol or drugs, they don't have to worry about it, they can get tested anytime. There's a few that try to fight it. They think they can take something that'll cover it. They get fired. We've lost a few.
JE: How do you feel about the speed limits being set at less for trucks? Is that a good safety measure or does it just disrupt the flow of traffic?
DoC: I don't see any problem with it. I think it's...I'd say it's pretty good. And a lot of states—it depends on the state too. Kentucky has it at 65, that's fast enough. A lot of places out west they have it even higher than that, probably deserts and places like that. I don't see a problem with the speed limit. Sixty miles an hour—what is it, ten miles and hour, five miles an hour less here in Indiana? It might make a big difference. I'm not sure if they've done any surveys on it. They have some rules that I disagree with.
JE: Like, for example?
DoC: If it's raining, you're supposed to reduce your speed by a third. If you're in a 55-mile-an-hour zone, and you reduce it by a third, what's that bring it down to? Forty, thirty-five-forty. That's—now the rest of traffic's going fifty-five. Even out on the interstate, if you're going sixty and you reduce it by a third, they're still getting around at sixty. If you have an accident, and you're going...they can hold that against you if you're going over that. I don't know how much they enforce that, the "reduce it by a third," but it is one rule.
JE: Are there any other rules that seem a little odd, or that don't seem to help?
DoC: Yeah, on our physicals. We have to carry a form. Our physical papers themselves, on us. Not just the card that says you're qualified for the next two years before you're next physical, you have to have the whole physical form. I think that's kind of odd. Why? You get checked at the scales. What do they care, as long as you've got the card that says you're qualified and you're not expired? I don't know why they did that, it's a nuisance for the company.
JE: What about law enforcement, not just DOT, but law enforcement in general? Do you think that truck drivers are treated unfairly on the road, or any differently on the road?

DoC: No, I haven't. Of course I've been seventeen years with this company, so I do the same run all the time. You know, I've never gotten pulled over for speeding or anything. I've gotten pulled around to the back of the scales and checked. They do carry out checks, equipment checks, to see whether the company you work for is keeping the equipment up to where it will stop or go or it's not leaking fluids all over. And if the brakes work.

JE: If your company is not keeping thinks up to date and you get checked for it, is it a problem for you as a driver or do they pretty much refer it back to the company? Do you get in trouble for that or not?

DoC: No, if it doesn't pass the inspection, than the equipment stays there. It's impounded until... it gets towed off if something's real bad. If it's something not too bad they give you a card to take in and they fill it out after they do the repairs and send it back in—"yes, the repairs have been done." And if you're stopped again and the repairs haven't been done, somebody's paying a fine.

JE: But it's usually going to the company rather than to the driver?

DoC: Yeah.

JE: I'm going to change subject a bit. What about women in trucking, have you seen a change in attitude? There's obviously more today than there were a number of years ago, has there been a change in attitude from other drivers?

DoC: Well, not really. There's more women drivers. I've never had a problem with a woman driving a truck. If they can do the job, I don't care what kind of job it is. If you can do it, do it. I don't care—male, female, short, tall, whatever.

JE: Has there ever been some kind of discrimination in general or not even that?

DoC: I haven't seen that where I work. Sometimes I think they go out of their way to make sure they have a couple extra women. I don't know if they have a quota or they just want to make sure they have women on the team. It's hard to find them—qualified I mean.

JE: Even today?

DoC: Yeah, even today. You know, there's so many rules and regulations, especially the DOT and there's the CDL license—you have to keep your license clean. It's hard to find a good qualified driver. They go through a lot of people to find one.

JE: Are there any minorities that you don't see represented in trucking for any reason? Or is it a general job?
DoC: I think it's kind of a general job. Where I work out of there's...we don’t have any Asians. But I don’t know if there’s any that have applied. The drivers I see in Chicago there’s just all kinds of them, blacks, whites, Asians, women, Indians...

JE: Do you enjoy driving?

DoC: Yes, I do.

JE: It sounds like you always wanted to do it.

DoC: Yeah, I don’t know why, it’s just something. It was my fantasy when I was a little kid, and it stuck with me. I worked awful hard for a lot of years and not much money. It didn’t pay a lot. But the company I’m at now, it’s paying off. I’m fortunate that I’ve got this company. There’s a few companies out there that are good places to drive for, and then there’s a lot of them that you work awful hard for and you don’t make much money. They keep pushing the hours.

JE: Have you seen a problem with that, trying to get you to get a load somewhere in less hours than you really can?

DoC: Not since I’ve been with this company, but years ago, when I started out, yeah. I’d put in 50 hours straight, getting two or three hours of sleep a day.

JE: Where do you sleep when you’re taking these long hauls—is there a problem finding a place to sleep or to pull your truck over and take a nap?

DoC: You can usually find a place. You can pretty much sleep anywhere when you’re going coast to coast. We have overnight hauls now, but they furnish motels at the end. The driver will stop and get out and take ten or eight hours’ break, then go back. A lot of them are hired that way. The independent guys are out there, they may drive hours to the next stop, then sleep a little bit...that’s where a lot of the trouble is, the independents are trying to make a living at it, and they can’t do it because of the money, so they’re doubling up, they’re not getting any sleep, they’re taking caffeine pills or whatever they can get a hold of. They’re only trying to support a family, to make a living. They can’t do it.

JE: Have you come across team drivers, especially husband-wife teams?

DoC: My brother and sister-in-law were for a while. And other people I’ve talked to. After about three months of team driving, whether they’re married or not, that seems to be all they can handle. I did it for four weeks, and that was enough for me. You can get dead tired, and crawl up on that bunk, and you can sleep maybe three or four hours. Maybe four.

JE: Why’s that?

DoC: Because there’s somebody else up there driving, and the road, you know. You’re a little insecure about how this guy is driving—did he get enough sleep? Is he doing like I’m doing? Sleep three hours and lay back here another four. I don’t like that at all.
JE: Are there any interesting anecdotes or stories you could tell me about the job? Have you run into anything odd, strange, funny?

DoC: That I've seen? That I've been involved in?

JE: Yes. Or that you've heard of.

DoC: Let me think about that.

JE: Okay, think about it. Is there anything you feel needs to be said about the industry? Like Bob was telling me that really truck drivers are just people, and others seem to forget that.

DoC: Yeah, people get annoyed at you. They think you get in the way. Four-wheelers, they get bent out of shape if you are in the left hand lane passing somebody that's doing a little slow, all these people just—you put the turn signal on, and the people that are behind you, that gives them the signal to speed up. They can't wait a few seconds. It's getting a little crazy out there.

Road rage, you see it a lot. People just get really bent out of shape. I see it a lot in cars. I'm sure there's truckers, you see it on the news. They get the road rage and drive through a building or something. It's a little more newsworthy, I guess, when a big truck does it.

JE: Do you think it's any worse now?

DoC: No, I don't think it's any worse. I'm sure they're trying to get them with all the regulations and stuff. The road rage I think is getting worse. That's their spot, that piece of highway that they're on is theirs. I think it should be tougher. It's tough for us to get a license and maintain a license. We have to, we have training, we have quarterly rides, to make sure you haven't picked up any bad habits. We have forty hours of class training, we have forty hours of road training. It's just a real good deal. And we have follow-ups all the time. Cars—once you get your license I don't think you have to take a test any more. I think they should make it, should be tested every so many years. Make it so people have to read the book and realize what they're doing, driving that 5,000-pound piece of equipment down the road. It's scary, it's getting scary out there. Like you said, I sit up high and I see people doing things...they're putting on make-up. It gets...I have a story for you, from when I was riding with my uncle, when he was training me. We were going down a two-lane highway, and this car comes up and passes us. A car with boys, I guess, young men. They get in front of us and slow us way down, and we have to downshift the gears. It's a loaded truck, it takes time, it's hard. They let us pass them. Then they'd pass us again and get in front of us, slow us way down to about ten miles per hour. Here it is one-two o'clock in the morning, we're just trying to make it to Chicago. Get our job down. We pass them again, and they come up beside us, roll the window down, and they holler up, "Get out of that lane, we want to use it!" My uncle says, "Okay," puts the turn signal on, and just rolled over into the left-hand lane. He crowds them off the road and all I've seen were corn stalks flying up when we...
finished. We let them have the lane. It was bothersome in a way. But they spun out into a cornfield. That was back in the seventies, that was one of the first, I don't know if that was considered road rage or what. They were cooling with us, that stopped it. I was scared. I was 21, I was over there scared to death, what's he doing? He'd been driving for years. "You can have that lane."

JE: Well, that's a great finish, so thanks a lot.
DoC: Hope it helps.
Interview with Joe, January 21st, 2001

JE: Please tell me your name first.
JC: Joseph Otis Carson.
JE: Thank you. How long have you been involved in the trucking industry?
JC: For the last twenty years.
JE: Have you driven for the same company the whole time or have you changed jobs?
JC: I've changed quite a few times.
JE: Were you ever an owner operator?
JC: No.
JE: How did you learn to drive?
JC: Self-taught.
JE: Did someone take you aboard and teach you things or did you just hop in and go?
JC: I lied my way in.
JE: Really? That's one way of doing it.
JC: I told them I knew how to drive one, so I did.
JE: And they just let you go?
JC: They took me down the road to see if I could drive it.
JE: And you more or less could?
JC: Yeah, well, I've been around trucks all my life. I grew up around them.
JE: So what is it like to drive a truck, can you describe it?
JC: You spend a lot of time by yourself. Or what are you talking about, actually driving it?
JE: Just everything, being in the truck for all those hours...
JC: It's kind of boring, I have a hard time keeping my mind occupied. It's a boring job in a way. It was exciting for about six months. I've been in every state except Vermont. Of course not Alaska or Hawaii either. But every other state, driving a truck.
JE: And you probably don't get to see too much of those states when you drive through, do you?
JC: Well, I've been by Niagara Falls, and the Grand Canyon, either one, so many times, and you don't have time to stop, you have to just keep on going. So it's really not a glamorous job like a lot of people think. But you do get to see a lot of the countryside. I've seen a lot of things that other people haven't seen. I have gotten to drive through Yellowstone. And Debbie was with me when we drove through Yellowstone. It was about this time of year, so the snow was deep. We barely made it and all that other kind of stuff.
JE: When you drive, do you usually spend a lot of time away and then come home for a period?
JC: Well, now I've got a union job, so I'm not gone over three days at a time.
JE: But that wasn’t always the case?
JC: No.
JE: So what kind of effect does that have on family life, was that difficult?
JC: I wasn’t married at that time.
JE: Is that one of the reasons that you’ve taken a union job now, that you’re married and want to stay home more?
JC: I took that because of the money.
JE: So there’s more money in a union job?
JC: Oh yeah, solely money. That’s the only reason I’m in it really, for the money.
JE: Do you think that truckers are paid enough for the effort it takes to be in the truck all the time?
JC: The non-union guys, no. Not even close. With the union you’ve got retirement, you’ve got good insurance, you get paid for your time. You know, what Bob was doing, he’d bounce up against the dock, and maybe be there six hours and not get paid anything. If I’d done that, I’d get paid for six hours. I get paid for my time. Like a flat tire. I have a flat now, I get paid. Before I didn’t get paid nothing. You know, until they get it fixed and I get going down the road I get paid. I’m on the clock.
JE: So the union’s definitely an advantage.
JC: And it’s still not enough. You know, for the time you spend away, the wear and tear on the body and everything like that. Back problems, jar you apart. Sitting for long periods of time. You know, usually most of them die at what, about sixty? Heart attack. Cause they sit for long periods of time and don’t move around. And your legs, they pump to your heart.
JE: Have you heard of any companies that are making an effort to improve health? I’ve read an article, but I don’t know if it’s widespread or not, that they were trying to provide more facilities for the drivers where they stop. Have you come across any of that?
JC: What do you mean?
JE: Gyms, healthier foods…
JC: I haven’t seen any of that.
JE: I was just curious.
JC: Most of the places you go, they have those junk food machines and that’s what a lot of drivers eat out of.
JE: And truck stop food also?
JC: And truck stop food.
JE: What kind of loads do you carry?
JC: I carry all kinds of loads. I'm a freight hauler now, so I carry anything that anybody wants to send from one point to another.

JE: Is there anything that you prefer to haul, or prefer not to haul?

JC: Well, it's not a hard job for me anymore, 'cause I don't unload any of the trailers or anything like that anymore. I just pull up, get out of the truck, a van comes and picks me up, I go to a motel. And when they call me on the phone, eight hours later—or longer—I get up, they take me back, get into a different truck, and go wherever they're sending me, to another...See, I go from terminal to terminal now. So my job is really easy. That's why I said it's boring now. There used to be a challenge to it.

JE: Did you used to have to help load and unload?

JC: Yeah.

JE: You say you go from terminal to terminal, does that make it easier? One of the things that Bob was telling me is that sometimes when you're sent somewhere you don't know exactly where it is, and it's hard to maneuver a truck around looking for it. But going to a terminal would make it easier?

JC: Yeah, cause after a while, you've been to all of them, so you know exactly where you're going. Just get out of the truck and go to a motel room.

JE: Do you pay for the motel rooms or is it part of the union?

JC: It's part of the company.

JE: Have you had a sleeper in your truck before?

JC: I've done that too.

JE: Is that less comfortable?

JC: I'd rather go to the motel room.

JE: What is the sleeper like, though? Is it just too small?

JC: Some of them are nice, but again, it's like sleeping in a coffin sometimes. All small and everything. Of course most the time you're so tired you just sleep back there anyway.

JE: Did you always get enough sleep before joining the union?

JC: Oh, I did. Even before. It's my life behind the wheel, so you know, I'm not going to fall asleep driving down the road. They can yell and scream at me all they want. Their freight will get there instead of wrecking.

JE: Did you ever have trouble with a company because of not being on time?

JC: No, no. They might have been upset or something a time or two but I put them in their place. Because when it comes down to it, the driver's the last one who decides when it's safe to go
down the road or not. It could be snowing, raining, icy, foggy. You decide—I always did. When I’m going to pull over and go to sleep. Even when I was going to be late, that’s just tough.

JE: Do you think that’s something that most drivers do?

JC: No, I think some of them are pressured.

JE: Would you say that most drivers on the road are experienced or inexperienced?

JC: There’s a lot more now that are inexperienced. There is an awful lot of truck traffic out there that are students.

JE: And these people are learning through the companies?

JC: Yeah, school in the union or whatever. Most of them go to those truck driving schools.

JE: Would you say that the trucker’s job is different from just having a job 9-5, and is that a difference you could describe?

JC: Well, I’ve learned to treat it like a job. But it is definitely a lot different. ‘Cause you know, you spend lots of time by yourself.

JE: Does that give you time to think, does it make you more of a thoughtful person?

JC: It’s a possibility. Cause you’ve got a lot of time to think about everything. Like I’m back in the eighties right now. Thinking about the 1980’s, what I used to do back then. Just to keep my mind occupied going down the road, just to keep from getting bored.

JE: What kind of things do you think about, do you just let your mind wander, or do you play license plate games or anything?

JC: Well, you have to keep your eyes moving, because if you get in a trance, you can just fall asleep and run off the road. You have to pay attention to what you’re doing.

JE: Is it difficult to maneuver with traffic?

JC: A lot of four-wheelers try to cut you off because they’re trying to get off their exit, so yeah, it’s difficult.

JE: Would you say that car drivers don’t respect truck drivers very much?

JC: I don’t think they realize what they’re doing. Some of them could get killed real easy. You get run over by one of those, you’re done. And I don’t think they realize, you know, maybe they’re late for work or whatever, but go down to the next exit, don’t be cutting off, or stopping in front of a truck, because they don’t stop that easy. Some of them put their lives on the line quite a bit. ‘Cause I don’t think they realize what a truck’s all about—how heavy it is, how hard it is to stop, and what it would do to you if it does run over you.

JE: What about women in trucking—I know Debbie’s driven before—have you come across a change in attitude towards women in the last twenty years? Has it become more common to see women drivers?
JC: Oh, yeah, it’s a lot more common than it used to be. But it’s a lot easier, cause the trucks they have nowadays drive like a car. They run smooth, power steering, and everything else.

JE: Is there a change in the attitude as well? Was there a sort of discrimination against women?

JC: There probably was at first, but I’ve never really seen much of it in the last twenty years. There’s a lot more women in the industry now.

JE: What about team drivers, have you seen quite a few teams, especially husband-and-wife teams?

JC: Well, Debbie and I used to be that.

JE: And does that work out well?

JC: It does, but on operations like that they just want you to be gone all the time. They never want you to see the house. And there’s good money to be made in a team operation like that, because all the money comes to the same house.

JE: Did you have a house at the same time that you were trying to keep up?

JC: Um-hm.

JE: How long did you drive as a team?

JC: We probably got two to four years in together. I did two before she—see, she drove for Roadway too. Two years before that, and probably—yeah, probably four years altogether. Three and a half, anyway.

JE: Have you come across companies who are trying to control their drivers through satellite tracking and all that?

JC: They all do that. Most of them.

JE: Is that an issue for drivers, or does that not bother you?

JC: It doesn’t bother me right now, because my company doesn’t do it. Some of them, you know with satellite communications it’s easier to pick up loads. It’s just more modern. Then again they know where you are at all times, but it is their load so they should know where it’s at. You might have two million dollars worth of stuff on there. There’s no reason why they shouldn’t want to track it. And if you’re doing something wrong or whatever, then you shouldn’t be out there anyway.

JE: What about law enforcement, do police officers tend to treat truck drivers differently, or unfairly in any way?

JC: Well, they used to really ride truck drivers hard, because a truck driver would just pay it and go on. Since the CDL’s come in they’ve eased up on truck drivers.

JE: Do you have any stories you could tell be about being a truck driver, an anecdote or anything?

JC:...I can’t really think of anything.
JE: I was just wondering. Do you think that most truck drivers drive by themselves or team drive?
JC: I think most of them are by themselves.
JE: And do they choose that, is there a choice? Can you say, “I want to be a team driver?”
JC: Yeah, you could. I would choose by myself.
JE: Even though you get bored?
JC: Well, you’re talking about someone else driving down the road while you’re trying to sleep.
JE: Yeah, I guess that’s true, you’d just be sleeping. Is there anything you feel ought to be said about the trucking industry?
JC: I think they need to pay some of them boys a little bit more money. And they ought to go ahead and raise the speed limit up to the rest of the flow of traffic because that’s a hazard, where you’ve got two different speeds and everything. ... I can’t really think of anything.
JE: All right, then, thank you very much, and that’s the end of it.
Interview with Bob, January 14th, 2001

JE: Okay, could you tell me... well, could you just state your name first.
RV: Robert Allen Vincent.
JE: And how long were you involved in the trucking business?
RV: On and off, since '75.
JE: How'd you get started?
RV: My dad's cousins were all truck drivers.
JE: So did they teach you, did they take you along in the truck?
RV: Yeah, yeah, exactly, I took a few trips with, uh, David, he was one of my dad's cousins, and I made a few trips with him, and then... I fell into the easy money.
JE: I see. Did you ever have any training from one of the companies or anything?
RV: Yeah, as a matter of fact I started with a company in '86 and retrained because my experience was not current. It has to be current within two years, I think, or you have to retrain, so I went through, like a two or three week program.
JE: Okay. So explain to me a little bit, the lay person, what it's like to drive a truck. Cause I don't really know anything, I just see them go by.
RV: As far as actually driving the truck?
JE: Uhm-hm.
RV: Once you get used to the size of the thing, it's like driving a Volkswagen.
JE: Do you have a lot of gears in it, how you have to switch a lot?
RV: They're sorted. They have automatics now. Anything from 5, 7-speeds, 9-speeds, 10-speeds, 13, 18... Most of the big companies have a 9 or 10-speed transmission. I'd say the majority of the trucks do. Guys that have their own trucks usually have 13 or 16.
JE: Did you ever have your own truck?
RV: Yeah, for about five years.
JE: And then you drove also for companies and they gave you the truck?
RV: Well, when I started, you know when I first started was, these guys had their own trucks, and then after I drove for them for about a year, I bought my own and we all leased out of the same company.
JE: So how does that work when you own your own truck—do you just go to a company and pretty much offer your services?
RV: Well, there's a lot of options that way too, you can, you can, what they call trip-lease. You basically just buy the truck and you use their authority—it's changed since deregulation in '78 or
whatever — you basically just buy a truck and you use somebody else’s authority, which is
permission to operate interstate — commercial...what was the question?
JE: When you have your own truck, what are your different options?
RV: Oh, well, today, you can, most of the big companies have lease programs where you buy a truck through them. They pay you weekly and by the mile just like they would a company driver, but you make a truck payment to the company where you buy or lease the truck from. They pay all the permit fees and give you access to fuel without paying for it out of your pocket and stuff like that. You basically work for them and they take it all out of your check. It’s basically the same as being a company driver except you do, if you can last through the lease on your truck...
JE: You can end up buying it?
RV: Very few people make it. There’s a lot of, uh, favoritism I will say about the amount of miles and the types of loads you’re given. Some people haul strictly by percentage of the load. They pay anywhere from 25 to 30% of the load, of whatever you make on the truck. And then they will, if you’re not careful, give the company drivers the high-paying loads because they pay them the same cents per mile either way and then you get the lower cent-per-mile loads and you end up getting... When I sold my truck, I sold it because I could make a better living being paid by the mile with benefits than you’d make paying for the truck, the maintenance, the fuel, the...
JE: That’s something else I was going to ask you. Would you consider it a better deal to just be a company driver or to have your own truck?
RV: Since deregulation they have slowly tried to stop the owner-operator. That’s a well-known fact. The freight rates, the rate per mile has steadily gone down. For instance in 1978 I got approximately a dollar and 40 to 60 per mile, and now they get about 80 or 90 cents per mile, and everything’s a lot higher. I mean, I don’t know, they still make a good living, but they don’t make anywhere near...the average company driver makes 40 to 50 thousand dollars plus benefits. I would say the owner-operator, unless you have a good contract, would do well to clear 20 thousand after taxes and you have no benefits.
JE: And you’re responsible for your truck?
RV: Exactly.
JE: All right, we’ll shift gears a little bit, what is it like, how does it affect family life? How often were you on the road and how long did you usually stay away?
RV: Well, that varies too. It goes with the type of job. Over-the-road drivers generally give you credit. Like if you’re on the road for a week you accumulate one day off. So if you’re out two weeks, you get two days off. They problem with that is, as far as being an over-the-road driver, if
you want to go home, you interrupt the cycle, they can't send you from California to Florida to New York, they have to get you to your house on a certain date. So you interrupt the cycle, they have to get you a load that goes to your house. The same thing when you come out, they have to find a load from your house going somewhere. It doesn't work as well as if you stay on the road. They prefer you stay out and take a week at a time off. Stay out six weeks and take a week off. There are a lot of companies that run—now that's for the top wage. If you prefer regional or local work you generally get less money, or less mileage, or...for instance, if I wanted to work local or regional, I might get three to four hundred miles a day, as compared to an over-the-road driver who might get seven to nine hundred miles a day.

JE: So just making more money?
RV: Plus more per mile. It's a huge advantage if you can stand it.

JE: So do you think most people, most of the people you've run into, are pretty much separated from their families for these long periods of time? Is that something that's common?
RV: It's common with new drivers, especially, because in order to get any job driving a truck you need experience, and in order to get experience you need to go through a company that will put you through school and get you X number of miles. Most of them say a year or two years experience or 100,000 or 200,000 miles, and the fastest way to do that is with a big company coast to coast. So if you can stand it for a year or two, until you get your experience, and then you can work on a little bit closer to home job. Theoretically.

JE: What about the lifestyle associated with, especially on-the-road, the long trips...is there a certain lifestyle that you could describe that would be different? I mean, I assume there is just because you're out there, and you're away from coming home in the evening like other people, but are there things? You hear stereotypes about drug use, or prostitution at the truck stops, or things like that, do you run into those things? Are those things that you see?
RV: Certainly, certainly. When you go to the mall, do you run into drug use? When you go to your job, your school? It's no different, the people, the percentages are the same. 90%, you know, I don't have any stat sheets on me, 90% of the guys are out working their ass off and trying to get their miles and get to the house. There are the guys that do it just to go from truck stop to truck stop or from hooker to hooker. Yeah, you can't deny it's there. I always, the main difference, the thing I've always said about it is truck driving is for people who don't like to work. Physical labor. You make big money and you don't actually drive nails, or type, you know, you just drive a truck. Occasionally you unload a trailer. It's long hours and it's generally easy money. But it's a different—you don't go to work at eight and get home at five. I mean that's basically the difference in the lifestyle. A lot of people compare it to being a cowboy. You
go on a cattle drive, you leave El Paso, it takes you three months to get to Denver. You get paid so much for the trip and then you do whatever you want to until the next trip. Originally that’s the way we did it. Being single and young, I would work my butt off for two weeks and make a pocketful of money and I wouldn’t work for a month. Then I’d call my dispatcher and I’d say, “I need a load.” I mean, that’s the way it works. That’s one of the other advantages of being an owner-operator over being a company driver. The company says, “you go now, you go here, you go there,” as a company driver. As an owner-operator you can, with the right broker for the right company, you can say, “I want a load to California,” and when you get there, you say, “I want a load to Florida.” You can sit there a few days.

JE: Would you say the pay is adequate? Do you think it corresponds to the effort it takes?
RV: You know, that kind of depends on the job. I would say, if you consider you’re in the truck, you’re on the job 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, you make about three bucks an hour.
JE: That’s kind of low, isn’t it?
RV: If you consider the time you’re actually driving the vehicle, it comes out to 25 bucks an hour. It just, kind of depends on how you look at it. That’s a big problem drivers have, they don’t know going in, they think—I’ve always said also that driving the truck is the least part of the job. It’s the only thing, you know, that’s easy. But you only do that ten hours a day. Or if you drive ten, sleep eight, you drive the truck sixteen hours at the most, basically. But you’re in the truck, you’re on the job all the time. You’re waiting for a load, you’re planning your trip, you’re inspecting your vehicle, you’re loading the truck, unloading the truck. You’re always on the job.
JE: I read a couple of articles, mainly about deregulation, and they were talking about one of the big issues truck drivers had, was that they had to be sitting around, basically for hours, before they got a load to go anywhere. Is that still a problem, do you run into that?
RV: This last job I had, I worked six months, in order to get the mileage they promised me, and to get me home every weekend, I physically worked twenty to twenty-two hours a day. For the same money I made on the prior job, I worked ten hours a day. Because I loaded and unloaded every day, I was either sitting at a dock, going to get a load, waiting to get a load, you can’t rest. I get empty at seven in the morning, I wait till eleven, I might get an hour nap, I might not, if I’m tired enough to sleep. Then I’d get a load, I got to drive three hours to get it, and then I have to be to my next destination in the morning. So I’d generally spend all day getting loaded, getting reloaded, and then driving all night, maybe get two hours of sleep, for days. For five days, then I’d come home. So yeah, it’s still...
JE: Still a big issue?
RV: And no matter what the law says, no matter what the company says, you’re only allowed to
drive ten hours, blah blah blah, you get the load there or you don’t get the next load. In other
words, if they continually give me loads and I don’t make it, they’re not going to give me a load.
Or they’re going to give me a short load and I’m going to only make 200 miles a day. The bottom
line is the freight will be there, or you will not make any money. You do what you have to do to
get the job done.

JE: So in spite of all these regulations, it’s still...

RV: The only way to regulate the trucking industry is to pay every driver by the hour. That’s the
only way you can regulate it.

JE: Do you know of any companies that have done that?

RV: Sure, there are some companies that pay by the hour. But generally it’s expensive to do, and
it requires more coordination on their part. It’s a lot harder. It’s easier to hire somebody that’ll
manipulate a book or bend the rules to do the job for you, because they want to do it. 100% of the
guys out there do it because they love to do it. They want to drive, they like to go places, and
they’ll do whatever they have to do to get the job done. It’s no different than a subcontractor in
construction. You pay a guy by the hour to do it, he’s going take his time, he’s going to do a
good job, he’s only going to do what he wants to do. You pay a guy by the job, he’s going to bust
his ass, and take every shortcut he can get to get the job done. Does that make sense, this
analogy?

JE: Yes, okay.

RV: Cause I’ve done that also. I preferred subcontracting over working by the hour because I
couldn’t stand around and wait, spend three days doing a job I could do in two days. A guy
would say, “I’ll give you a hundred bucks to do this,” I’d do it as fast as I could. Especially
truckers are the same way. Most of them, anyway.

JE: Are companies starting to regulate more, because I know there’s technology now, you can put
a governor on truck so it can’t go so fast, or you can probably even track with a satellite, if you
have the technology put in.

RV: Oh, they all have that.

JE: So are they all doing that now?

RV: Yeah, everything is satellite communications and tracking. Almost all company trucks are
governed to 70 mph limits. Insurance purposes, that’s strictly insurance.

JE: So does that bother people who drive trucks?

RV: Sure, sure. I’m sitting here waiting, five o’clock, nine o’clock, I’ve got a 600 mile drive.
Roughly a ten hour drive. Legal. And so I’m waiting all day on my load, and when I get that

XXIII
load, I want to get there as fast as I can. If my truck'll run 90, I'm going to go run 90. So they, but
what that does, the only thing in the trucker's mind that does, is takes away from your sleep
time. I've been screwing around all day, haven't had rest, and the sooner I get there, the sooner I
can take a nap, or the more sleep I can get.
JE: So really arguably you could say that it doesn't help anything safetywise.
RV: It hurts. No, it hurts. A good example, you'll notice every time you go down I-69. You'll see
a big group of traffic fighting it out. The biggest cause of that is trucks that can't go but 65 mph.
They're trying to pass each other, everybody's all in a big pack. Whereas most people prefer to,
and I know I did, stay by themselves. If I'm cruising say, at 67, and I run up on a group of traffic,
I may speed up to get around them, get out by myself, and go back to whatever I was doing. If
you don't have enough speed to do that, you're constantly pushing that one mile per hour—one
mile per hour to the truck driver is like to the most stubborn, you know, if I can go 66 and I pull
up behind a guy that's running 65, I'm eventually, I'm going to go around him, because I'm tired
of looking at the back of his trailer, or whatever the reason. And they're forced into these traffic
situations.
JE: What kind of loads do you carry? Do you carry just about everything?
RV: In my career I've hauled everything from A to Z.
JE: Is there any load more difficult to carry, or more preferable?
RV: Well, each is an individual thing. Some are harder to load, take more time, some are harder
to secure. The ideal freight is when you back up to a dock, and everything's sitting there on a
skid. They put twenty skids on a truck, it takes fifteen minutes, and away you go. Same thing
with unloading. That just doesn't happen very often. Sometimes it takes...some are more work
for loading and unloading, some are more dangerous to haul, some are...it just depends, you
know, it varies load by load, it depends on where you are. For instance, when I hauled windows
and doors for this company, I always hauled the same thing, it was always the same. But
working for a freight company that hauls...you don't know what you're getting into. Without
going into detail I could say that you could haul the same load twice and it would be more
difficult one time than the other for one reason or another, it's just hard to say.
JE: How do you feel about, or how do truckers in general feel, about law enforcement? Is there a
negative or a positive feel?
RV: I feel no differently about them except for the fact that they want to get in my pocket. They
know drivers have money and they know that at any given moment they can stop a truck and
there's something wrong with it—they can get money. We pretty much give up our rights as
citizens as far as probable cause, search and seizure. You're away from home, they know you're
going to pay the thing, you’re not going to come back to court. So you give up a lot that way. As far as law enforcement, it’s a necessary evil. I feel no differently about them than you do. I’m glad they’re there, we need them. But things need to change as far as the rights go. I mean, if a guy pulls me over for speeding, that should not give him cause to search my vehicle for drugs, inspect my vehicle for faulty equipment if I have paperwork and inspection stickers, etc. It shouldn’t give him cause to get into my pocket other ways. A car can use a radar detector, a truck can’t. You know, whatever. But as a rule, they know a truck is a paycheck. The guy has money in his pocket or he has access to money, it’s a phone call away. He’s going to pay it. He isn’t going to come back to court to fight it. Although there are a few lawyer-type deals where you pay by the month to have a lawyer that’ll fight it for you. I forget what they call it. But as a rule, I mean, they have to be there. But they don’t, uh, I think tailgating is the number one cause of multiple car accidents. Not speed, not drinking, not anything other than tailgating. If you’ll notice as far as cars they, what do they suggest? Two, four second following distance?

RV: Three seconds. It should be more for a truck. If you leave here and you go down the road and there are only ten cars within sight, they’ll all be inside of that three-second following distance. They’ll all be right behind each other. And if you have a truck, and a bunch of traffic behind it, and one car length between all these people...it’s like looking at this wall running 70 miles an hour and the wall stops. That’s the number-one cause, it’s not the speed or the...And that’s one thing they don’t enforce. That’s what I think about the law. They don’t...A tailgating ticket is 50 bucks, 25 bucks.

JE: I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone getting issued a tailgating ticket.

RV: Exactly, and that’s the cause of all...Truck drivers are taught to keep your vehicle in control at all times. In other words, if that wall stops, and you can’t stop your truck, then the accident is your fault. Because you were following too close. And see, that part is enforced. Anytime a truck is involved in a vehicle, in an accident, it’s the truck’s fault, period. Because he didn’t have his vehicle under control, and being a professional driver, you’re supposed to have your vehicle under control. So no matter what the cause, or what anyone else does, if you’re in Chicago, rush hour, six solid lanes of traffic, and somebody turns into the side of your vehicle, it’s your fault, because you’re supposed to leave yourself an out. At all times you’re supposed to have a place to go, a place to stop, to be able to control your vehicle. This is all involved in law enforcement.

JE: What about other drivers, especially car drivers. Obviously you’re way up here and everybody else is way down there and you get to see...

RV: I can see your seat covers.
JE: Does that give you a privileged position in driving?
RV: Being able to see? Yeah, I hate to drive a car after driving a truck. It does. I can see. I can't stop faster, I can't maneuver faster, but I can see more. If I'm in traffic, I can see over everybody, over the traffic.
JE: So it helps your driving?
RV: I get the big picture. It's called the Smith system. Five rules to the Smith system. Get the big picture, look and see everything around. Leave yourself an out. I forget. There's five of them.
JE: How about—is there an opinion of car drivers, are they looked down upon?
RV: Truck drivers would bitch if you hung them with a new rope. They love to bitch. Yeah, they sit constantly, "this four-wheeler this, this four-wheeler did that." They do it about other truck drivers, they do it about women, gays, blacks, truck drivers...yeah, they bitch about everything. 'Cause it's all you have to do, driving down the road. You're by yourself every day and you bitch. But as a rule, cars don't see them. Like you say, you see trucks going down the road, and you don't pay any attention. You just go, you know they're there. You just drive like you drive. Something I was telling these guys not long ago is what people don't realize about truck drivers—they're people. They drive just like you do. They are just exactly like cars. They drive just like you do. They have bigger vehicles. People compare the new SUV craze to trucks, because these people have bigger vehicles and they feel superior. In traffic, because they have a bigger vehicle, the Suburban sits up a little higher, they can see a little more, they feel safer, and they're...it's becoming this joke, it's SUV's, because it's a power thing. For a lot of people. Even if I do mess up, who's going to get the worst end of this deal? There's a lot of that mentality.
JE: Is the CB radio still used a lot? Yeah?
RV: Personally I kept mine turned down, or you can squelch it down where you can only hear a little bit of it. They're good for information purposes, there's an accident, some guy needs to take, would you like to come out. For close range stuff they're good. Yeah, if you turn that thing on and listen to it...you may like it, people get hooked on those things. In the 70's they had a lot of CB clubs. People rode around playing on those things. Yeah, they're useful, and they're in full swing. Put the power to them and just chat up like crazy.
JE: Mostly chatting, then?
RV: Chatting, yeah. Just, no bad language, no...I'm teasing. They cuss and bitch over the CB constantly.
JE: Would you say, and you started, did you say in '75, that's been a while, and there's been deregulation and all that. Have you seen a change in it, and is it a change you could describe?
RV: Exactly the same answer I had about people who are just like you. Society has changed since ’75 and the industry has changed right along with it. In three weeks you can be a truck driver. I wouldn’t put a percentage on it, but I’m going to say 50% of the trucks on the road, the drivers have less than one year experience, because they can’t take the lifestyle. They want to do it, it sounds good, you can make 40 grand your first year. They go to truck driving school for three weeks, put them in a truck, and away they go. So what I’m trying to say is, in 1975, I had a beard, I’d come out of the Air Force. Hippy, drug user, beard, long hair...total outcast. Truck drivers wouldn’t even talk to me. Now all truck drivers have long hair and beards. See what I’m saying? No different than society. In ’75 if you had long hair and you didn’t wear a disco suit, you were an outcast. They’re just people. So all the things you know about truck drivers, you know, yeah. I like to do that in every situation in life. They’re not men, they’re not women, they’re not truck drivers, they’re all someone just like you that learned to drive a truck. And like I said, 50% of them have been doing it for less than a year. So they’re not...though they would like you to think they are. You never will get anybody to admit that they’ve been driving for a year or two years. Everybody’s been driving ten years. When you ask anybody, “how long you been driving a truck?” “I’ve been driving ten years.” That guy just pulled off the lot. They just got this macho cowboy attitude that goes with the big vehicle. You can’t help it when you first start. And since 50% of the people that are out there are young or new at it, you have the attitude. Anybody that’s been out there more than five years, I’d say, you completely change. You gain respect as you go. When you first start driving the thing, you don’t have a clue what it can do. Until you have swung one of those things around, had an accident, turned one over, hurt somebody...you gain respect as you go. Many times late in my career—that’s why I’ve quit three times lately—I can’t stand it. I see a bad accident. Though I’m well away from it, make sure I stay away from it, it bothers me. I see the way people drive, I see accidents waiting to happen, I can’t stand it. That’s the main reason I want out of it. Not so much the lifestyle. I’m a loner anyway. I don’t have a problem being lonely. I don’t see much difference in working twelve hours, coming home, taking a shower and going to bed to get up in the morning and go to work. You don’t have a home life anyway. Most people. So it’s not really that to me, as much as disaster waiting to happen. I have probably three million miles under my belt and I’ve never scratched a vehicle. I’m damn lucky and I’m paranoid. I know my luck is running out. And I don’t want to see that happen. I don’t want to be involved with it. But just to give you an idea what’s going on. The longer you do it, the more respect you have for it. 8,000 pounds traveling at that speed can do some damage. The most dangerous period is once you get used to the size of the vehicle, you overcome the fear of learning to drive the thing. You start getting
overconfident. You drive it like you would your car. You start taking chances, you start pulling out in front of people, you start making bad decisions. And usually this goes on until you make a bad mistake and then you quit. 'Cause most people never get over it. Killing somebody. Or you gain respect and you start to master your trade. As you would in anything. You get better at it as you go. And the problem with it is, I can never agree with somebody going to school for three weeks and being turned loose in a vehicle like that. And you open any newspaper, and all they require is some of them six months experience, some of them a year experience, and if you don’t have that, no problem, we’ll train you. What they do is sit you in a classroom for five or six days and talk to you, drive around the lot a couple times, and turn you loose on the highway. Most drivers, that’s what they dislike about the industry now is so many stupid drivers. But that’s been going on since the early eighties.

JE: So that’s becoming a more common way to learn to drive? Because I would think that traditionally you would learn as you said by hopping into the truck with someone you knew.

RV: I drove for two years before I was turned loose. I would ride with a guy or follow him around and make every move he made. Never by myself. That’s the way it used to be. After deregulation, companies can for whatever reason, train you, certify you, and turn you loose in a vehicle. I have some great stories.

JE: Tell me a story.

RV: My brother-in-law and his brother up in the mountains in Eastern Kentucky—not to use a stereotype, but they fit it. So they decided to go work for J.B. Hunt. This was back in '85 or '86. And these two guys have never seen the inside of a truck. So they go to driving school for three weeks. And they put these guys in a truck as a team. And one of them’s the lead driver and one of them’s—first seat and second seat, they call it. One of them is supposed to be experienced. They’re not supposed to allow two students in a truck. But the story is these guys told me they’d gone for three or four weeks and they quit, because they couldn’t do the job. One would start driving and the other would turn around and start heading back to the house when the other one was asleep. They got stuck under bridges. They got lost. You can’t take directions off of somebody. Oh, come in, hang a right, hang a left. You can’t go ride around the block looking for places. You have to know where you’re going. And how do you know that? Just by experience. If I’m coming to a place, and there’s any doubt in my mind at all, I need to stop, get out, call somebody, find out something to make sure I can go ahead. You don’t just keep going until you get stuck under a bridge, or a dead end street, where you have to back up three miles. There’s a million things. You can’t just turn into any parking lot. You can’t just come driving down the road, see the place you’re looking for, and turn in the parking lot. You can’t do that. The thing
won't fit. You can't back out into the street and go to the next one. You can't do that. You have to be way ahead of the game at all times, and that only comes from having done it. I remember last time I tried this—I had better stop. I did it all too, that's how you learn. Even after following someone around for two years. That's why we have the rap we have. That's why drivers—they just have to make so many mistakes. Every night, I'd say—tonight, if you guys are out past two in the morning, you'll see a truck turned over on the side of the road.

JE: And these are mostly the younger drivers?

RV: Not necessarily. Somebody made a mistake. They just show up, you can't hide it. Driving a car, you doze off and you go off the road, most of the time you can get it back under control. With a truck, you can't do that. If the thing gets off the road, it's off the road. You can't...there's no room for mistakes.

JE: Okay, I'm going to switch gears on you now. What about women in trucking—I know there's more and more, but it didn't used to be that way. I'm talking about way back, the twenties and thirties, there didn't used to be very many women drivers.

RV: No, even when I started.

JE: There still weren't very many then?

RV: Very few. The biggest thing I can say about that is that women don't have macho attitudes. As a rule, going back to the thing I say, they're not men, women, whatever, once a woman gets in a truck and gets the power, they start acting macho. They start wearing chain drive wallets and you know, Trucker Mama, they get the attitude.

JE: Are there, at the truck stops, and other truckers, do they get pushed to the side?

RV: No, no, no, the stigma is pretty much gone. A woman can drive a truck. A monkey can drive a truck. I mean, that's nothing to be proud of. I've never been proud of my ability to drive a truck. To be a safe driver, to see somebody get through their first five years in the business without an accident—that you will see from women more than men. Only because they're more respectful of the size of the thing. I say they don't have the macho attitude. You take a 16-year-old boy—you have to be 21—you take a 21-year-old boy and put him in a sports car, he's going to go out and bust ass off the bat before he learns to shift gears, hardly. Most of the time a woman will respect the speed of the thing until she learns to control it and then...as a rule. That was when women first started driving. Now there's hardly any difference. It's about the same because mostly the women that go into it now already have truck driver mentality. A lot of people determine during high school that they want to be a truck driver. So they already start. This program starts running in their head. I've seen some women that remind me of the some old truck drivers from the sixties, big Camel hanging out of their mouth, like I said, and the boots
and hats. Hardly a difference, I mean, a girl crawls out of truck now it’s just like “how ya doing, Joe?” It’s hardly noticed. In the seventies it was. Pretty rare. No, they’re part of the gang. But you see that’s just like the society thing. You didn’t see a woman running a McDonald’s in the seventies, now they’re all female. Picture of society. Do you see the point I’m trying to make?

JE: Yeah, I do. Have you come across very many married couples that drive? I’ve read a couple of articles...

RV: Great opportunity.

JE: So you think it works out well?

RV: Well, I’ve tried to talk Bev into, never actually tried to talk her into it... but if you can stand living in the truck, a team working for a good company can make 100,000 dollars a year, 120,000 dollars, 150,000 dollars. Depending on how hard you want to work. You could do that for five or ten years. You don’t have living expenses. Coast to coast team, you live in the truck. You take your time off at a friend’s or get a hotel room or something. You don’t have any expenses, you put all your money in the bank. You can, if you manage your money wisely and don’t eat three times a day in the truck stop and get a hotel room every time you stop and all that kind of stuff, you could up 100,000 dollars a year. Yeah, it’s great. You see a lot of retired couples. They both have retired from their job, they go to truck driving school and hit the road. You just want to see the country. You’ve been living in Ladoga all your life. It’s great for that. And those are the best truck drivers, they really are.

JE: What’s the comfort of the inside of a truck?

RV: Immaculate. What do you want? Whatever you want, you can get it. You want a jacuzzi? You can get a jacuzzi. You want a stove, fridge, shower...

JE: What about company trucks?

RV: Generally company trucks are, depending on what they’re set up for, very comfortable, though. All got air conditioning, power steering, cruise control. Deep condominium bunks, you can stand up and walk around in them. They got amenities, they got a rack for your TV, and refrigerator, and cabinets, and double bunk beds, single bunk bed, queen size beds, port-a-pot, you can have running water.

JE: I think that about covers everything. Are there any stories that you would like to share?

RV: Funny stories? Sad stories?

JE: Just anything that you think is worthwhile.

RV: I’d normally have a million. I would like to say that if somebody goes into this with the idea of doing it for five years, ten years, and then putting their money up, for that reason, it’s a great idea. As far as doing it for a career, I wouldn’t suggest it. Go do it to see the country, or go do it...
to live in the thing and put some money up, go buy yourself a house, or start another business, it's a great idea. It's not really a good life. As far as the stories go... the most fun I have, generally, would be after a long, hard day, backing into a spot, getting ready to go to bed, just sitting there and relaxing, and watching people trying to park their trucks. I got more humor out of that than... cause like I say most of them are beginners or learning and have enough trouble parking them anyway. Just some of the things you run into when people are trying to park their vehicle. It's something so simple. The loading dock's got a big old place to drive around and back up into them. These parking holes are jam-packed and the later it gets, the harder it gets to find a parking place... it just gets hilarious. No, I won't go into all the hooker stories, and drunkard stories...

JE: Oh, come on.
RV: Not on the record.
JE: Okay, so tell me about parking and managing your truck.

RV: The biggest part of truck driving, like I said earlier, the least part of the job is actually driving the truck. One of the biggest problems you have is finding a place to park or sleep, because there's so many trucks on the road and parking is limited. If you go by exit 4, I spoke about, where the Flying J and all the truck stops are, even during the day you'll hardly see a parking spot. And at night it's even worse because people drive their ten hours, and they have to find a place to park and go to bed. They're probably going to sit there two hours, or four hours, or whatever. So along about dark, or suppertime, usually... well some people like I chose to do, sleep in the afternoons and evenings and then drive at night. Because there's less traffic on the road and you don't have to worry about it. But if you're driving and it gets to be ten o'clock, twelve o'clock at night... That's why you see them off to the side of the road. But you get a ticket for that. You get fined there. You're not allowed to drive, yet you're not allowed to park just anywhere. You can't stop along the side of the road. So it gets hilarious. You pass a rest area, they'll be lined up for a half mile on both sides, because they've gone as far as they can go. And the law's answer to that is, "you should have planned ahead." Okay, I picked up a load at noon and drove my ten hours, it's ten o'clock at night. And I don't care where you are in this country, you're not going find a parking place. So they double park, they park in Wendy's parking lot, they park on the side of the road. You were asking about funny stories, and I was saying off the air that the most fun I have was sitting and relaxing in the evening and watching these guys come in and try to find a place to park. They cuss each other, they'll cut you off, they'll back into each other, they... it's hilarious. You're going down the road, you pull off at this exit and try to find a place to park, there's nothing. You're out of time. You're tired. You just want to go to

XXXI
sleep. Pull of and go to the next exit, there’s no place to park. Go to the next exit, there’s no place to park. Until finally you say, “piss on it.” You set the brakes, lay down, and in about five minutes there comes a cop. “You can’t park here.” Well, I’m out of hours, I can’t go anywhere.

“I don’t care, you can’t park here.” In a lot of states, they’ll just write you a ticket right on the spot. And the driver’s answer to that is you pull out your log book and say, “you sign my book, say you made me leave here or I’m not going anywhere—you’re going to take responsibility.” “No, I can’t, I will not take responsibility, but you can’t stop here.” And it gets to be a serious problem. And the more trucks there are on the road, the more serious a problem it gets. Each city should mandatorily have parking. A city of 500,000 should have parking for trucks—correlated. Should have parking for 500 trucks—or more. A city like Indianapolis is a throughfare. I-70, I-74, I-65, I-69...there’s a lot of interstates going through this one spot. And this happens to be a spot that if you leave the East Coast, it’s just ten hours away. And then the next ten hours is Kansas City. And the next ten hours is...Back to the driving the truck. When it starts this is part of your pre-trip planning. You have to...if you’re on a long trip, coast to coast, it’s not really a problem. But most freight doesn’t move that way. It only goes four, five, six hundred miles. It’s a one-day trip. You know you’re going to load, you’re going to get unloaded, you’re going to get reloaded, and then you’re going to drive, and you know you need a place to sleep. Whereas if you’re going cross-country, you can get up at four in the morning, start driving, and when you run out of hours, you can find a place to park. But if you’re picking up a load every day, it’s work. Not which way to go—you know how to get there. But you’ve got to time it so you miss rush hour in each town, you’ve got to have it so you get...you can’t sleep at the place you deliver most of the time, so you can’t go all the way to the customer. You’ve got to stop somewhere before you get there and sleep and then get up and go to work, like everybody else does. But there’s nowhere to park. So you sneak around behind Wal-mart and back up to the dock. When they come to work they wake you up and go, “you can’t park here,” you go, “Okay.” And you take off. Had a guy up in...this guy that woke me up, said, “what are you doing?” I said, “driving my racecar around, feeding the dog, what the hell do you think I was doing? I was taking a nap!” “Well you can’t park here.” Okay. Thanks for waking me up. You have to learn to find a place to sleep. I know it sounds like a simple problem, but it’s not.