

Miles to Go

Ken Stabler of Ken Stabler Trucking

Roadwise

Official Magazine of the Motor Carriers
of Montana

Roadwise is owned by the Motor Carriers of Montana and is published bimonthly by Matthews Publishing Group. For additional copies, to order reprints of individual articles or to become a subscriber to *Roadwise*, contact Katie Bowlds at 406-442-6600.

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Motor Carriers of Montana (MCM) has served as the voice for Montana's trucking industry since 1939. MCM is a trade association dedicated to the furtherance of the trucking industry's goals and interests in Montana and the United States. Our membership is a very diverse group comprised of trucking companies, passenger carriers, garbage haulers, construction & excavation companies, and companies providing products and services to the industry. MCM serves these companies as a governmental affairs representative before legislative, regulatory and executive branches of government on issues that affect the trucking industry. The organization also provides public relations services, operation services and serves as a forum for industry meetings and membership relations.

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From the President

Trucking in Montana

I love trucks and the trucking business. My Dad was a truck driver and it was the only thing that he wanted to do. He was blue collar to the bone and proud of it. I knew when I was in junior high school that I would be a truck driver. I speak to our drivers education class every quarter and present the Share the Road program with them, I've spoken to every drivers ed student that went through the program in Montana for the last 10-12 years, I like to share with them the experiences that I've had and the places that I've been to, the sights that I've seen, things that only those in our industry get to experience.

Trucking here in Montana is promising, we have advantages here that most other states do not. Our state is one of the few with no state budget deficit, along with our neighbors, North Dakota and Wyoming. In looking at employment statistics, unemployment in Montana is 6.1 percent. When you compare that with our neighbors, Idaho is 7.1 percent, Washington 8.5 percent, Oregon 8.7 percent, Colorado 8.0 percent and then North Dakota at 3.0 percent, South Dakota 4.4 percent and Wyoming at 5.4 percent, we look pretty good. In breaking these figures down by county, in the east Fallon is 1.8 percent, Richland 2.6 percent, Custer 3.3 percent and Sheridan 2.7 percent, in the west Lake County is 7.6 percent, Flathead 7.4 percent and Glacier 8.7 percent. This indicates that our natural resource development is a key component to business here in Montana. Overall traffic is up about 60 percent in the Glendive, Sidney and Culbertson areas. (These stats were surprising to me because when driving up there one would swear that it is much more!) All these people working need places to live, food and groceries, automobiles, repairs, health care, etc., all of which need to get there on the back of a truck. I looked at real estate prices and the lack of housing in eastern Montana but we don't have time for all that now. My point is we have some challenges, but we also have opportunity.

Lana Batts mentioned at our convention in Missoula that when truck drivers and trucking companies start encouraging their children to drive trucks, then we will no longer need to worry about the driver shortage. I believe this to be true, and personally, I don't understand why we would not want our children to follow in our footsteps. The trucking business is an honest and honorable profession; we all know that "without trucks America stops."

I hope to see many of you in the next few months and I look forward to it. It is my privilege to serve you as President of MCM.

Thanks,

Ken Stabler
President of the Board
Motor Carriers of Montana

MILES TO GO

Miles City's Ken Stabler steps up as new Motor Carriers of Montana president

BY TODD TRAUB
Contributing Writer

Is there a better name for a trucking company's hometown than Miles City?

Is there anyone better destined to be Motor Carriers of Montana president than Miles City's own Ken Stabler?

Stabler, less than a month into his term at the time he consented to be interviewed, owns Ken Stabler Trucking, based in Miles City. With a population nearing 1,000, Miles City has produced three association presidents since the MCM's founding in 1939, which from a per capita standpoint likely makes the town the top exporter of association presidents in the state.

Stabler certainly has the lineage for the job.

"I think it's a great honor," Stabler said. "And particularly I'm kind of proud of that and honored that the last president from Miles City was in 1978 or 79, 79 I think, and was Mrs. Peggy Jerrel and they're really great

friends of ours."

As a young man Stabler actually drove for the Jerrel family, hauling livestock for Ray Jerrel, Inc.

"They've been mentors of mine all along," Stabler, 52, said. "When Raymond retired I actually bought their shop from them. I'm actually in their shop even now."

Not that the job with Ray Jerrel was Stabler's first. For a guy who has always wanted to be in trucking and who first got behind the wheel with his father as a pre-teen, it's hard to say what Stabler's first, unofficial trucking assignment was.

"I think that probably when I was 10 or 12 years old I knew that's what I wanted to do," Stabler said. "My dad was a truck driver and he loved it. That's what he was. I guess I just kind of inherited that love of driving and that love of truck from him.

I started driving, I guess, as soon as I had a driver's license. I was driving trucks. I wasn't

legal, but we did it."

Stabler got his first official job as a licensed driver hauling livestock feed locally, then he worked for a fledgling, two-truck operation before he began hauling livestock for the Jerrels.

Following the natural progression after close to 10 years of driving for others, Stabler bought his own truck in 1989.

"I think most truck drivers have a dream someday of owning their own truck," Stabler said. "I did. I was 29, 28 when I bought my first truck. I never had a desire to be a company driver again. Then, when I bought multiple trucks, then I just wanted to expand. I thought the time was right. We were in kind of a downturn in the economy in 1999 and 2000 and I thought it was going to jump back and that would be a good time to jump in."

While Montana and the Miles City area has agriculture as its backbone, Stabler's three-truck company hauled gravel for

“WE’RE SITTING IN
A GREAT SPOT.”

construction, then expanded into flatbed freight. Ken Stabler Trucking also owns a steel and recycling company and hauls its own scrap metal and new steel.

While Montana has survived the recession better than many other areas, the economic downturn of 2008-09 led Stabler to scale back operations from the lower 48 states. The company currently hauls to the Rocky Mountain States with a primary lane to Eastern Montana and the Denver area and trucks often return with oil field pipe.

"I think I had six trucks of my own is the most I ever had and then at that time I had a couple other guys that were leased on to me," Stabler said. "So really about eight trucks is all I ever had under my dispatch."

Stabler said he wouldn't mind expanding again, but not too much.

Small and manageable," he said. "I've never been a believer in a huge amount of debt. That always kind of scared me and particularly in the trucking industry. Man, it's capital intensive."

Stabler the lifelong trucker only flirted with a different line of work once, in southern California in the mid 1980s, and he soon realized he had made a mistake and began

to long for the wide open spaces of his native Montana.

"I did take and spend one winter working construction down in southern California in San Diego," Stabler said. "I guess it was the winter of '84 and '85. I truck down there a lot and I always liked it but when I got in the middle of it the only thing I liked about it was the weather. You couldn't get away from all those people."

Upon returning to trucking to stay, and after beginning to expand his business just past the turn of the century, Stabler began to be active in the MCM.

"When I was driving myself it was a little more difficult to be very active," Stabler said, explaining how his status as an owner-operator led him into the association.

Stabler is proud to be a president from the small operator ranks and said the office benefits from having presidents from different sized companies.

Stabler said as the current president, he'd prefer to keep things on the intimate level he is used to as a businessman.

"I'd really like to make personal contact with as many of the membership as possible," Stabler said. "And I don't guess I really know

the words I'm trying to say but I'd like to make sure that those that we serve feel that they're getting good representation. Because the association adds a lot and I think associations as a rule are easy to put on the back burner and you only get out of an association what you put into it.

"If you want information and want to get stuff out of them you can reap a great deal of influence. If you don't participate you won't get anything out of it."

One of the issues Stabler hopes to tackle is the driver shortage, something that is plaguing the area and keeping him from expanding again.

"We're sitting in a great spot," he said. "I'm over here in southeastern Montana. And eastern Montana and western North Dakota have just been booming for the past three years. We're extremely fortunate. We don't really know that we've had a recession, to be quite honest with you. The thing that we struggle with here because of all this activity going on is a shortage of labor. If you did go out and recruit labor, I don't care where you went, if you went to Denver or Salt Lake or Minneapolis ... we have no place to put them. ... We have no available housing.



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"I guess those are good problem to have."

To combat the shortage, Stabler said, owners like himself are going to have to rethink how they structure drivers' jobs. More and more prospective drivers are rejecting the idea of being away from home for weeks at a time on long hauls.

"I think these days of real long haul runs where a guy is out two or three weeks, I think that's over," Stabler said. "I think we're going to have to be more regional in our approach. Our drivers, a lot of them don't care how long they're gone but a lot of them want to have a family. My drivers only spend a couple nights away from home and they're off on weekends."

Stabler, a father of two college aged daughters, recalls hearing a tale from an older driver who, while on the road in the early 1960s, found himself missing the birth of his younger daughter just 80 miles away. The driver called for permission to go home for the baby's arrival and was denied.

"Times have changed," Stabler said. "I think that basically is they way I'm going to answer that question is we have to structure our business around our employees and their personal lives. We have to make them want to enjoy going to work. Trucking is a hard job. It's not physically hard, but truck drivers complain about the stress of being on the road. I hear that a lot."

Stabler also hears a lot about the general image of the truck driver, something he wants to improve. While conducting the MCM's "Share the Road" program at local high schools, Stabler said that frequently more than 50 percent of the students he talks to agree that they would describe drivers as "creepy."

Stabler blames the image on negative film and television portrayals, but he said the industry can help itself with a few tweaks to drivers' dress codes.

"That would be so easy to change," Stabler said. "We've just got to get the word out to our drivers. They're the face of trucking. They're the ones that make it all happen and it's an honorable profession."

That's one of the reasons Stabler, who counts Sunday school teaching and working with youth as one of his few hobbies, has spent the past 10-plus years visiting the high schools to teach students how to interact with trucks on the road.

"I talk to them about driving around large trucks and just kind of share my story with them," he said. "It's a great program and we all need to be proud of trucking. It's the backbone of our economy. It's why this

country is as great as it is. We need to be proud of it."

When not at work, where he spends a great deal of time, or teaching Sunday school, Stabler helps out on the 100-acre farm he and his wife Alane own at Miles City. His daughters Alissa, 22, and Rachel, 21, are respectively attending Montana State in Bozeman and Dickinson (N.D.) State.

Stabler and Alane have been married since 1986 and though he can't remember exactly how they met — which somehow does not cause him grief on Valentine's Day or any other "remember-when-we-met"

occasions — Stabler does recall one of their first dates was to a Jerrel family Christmas party.

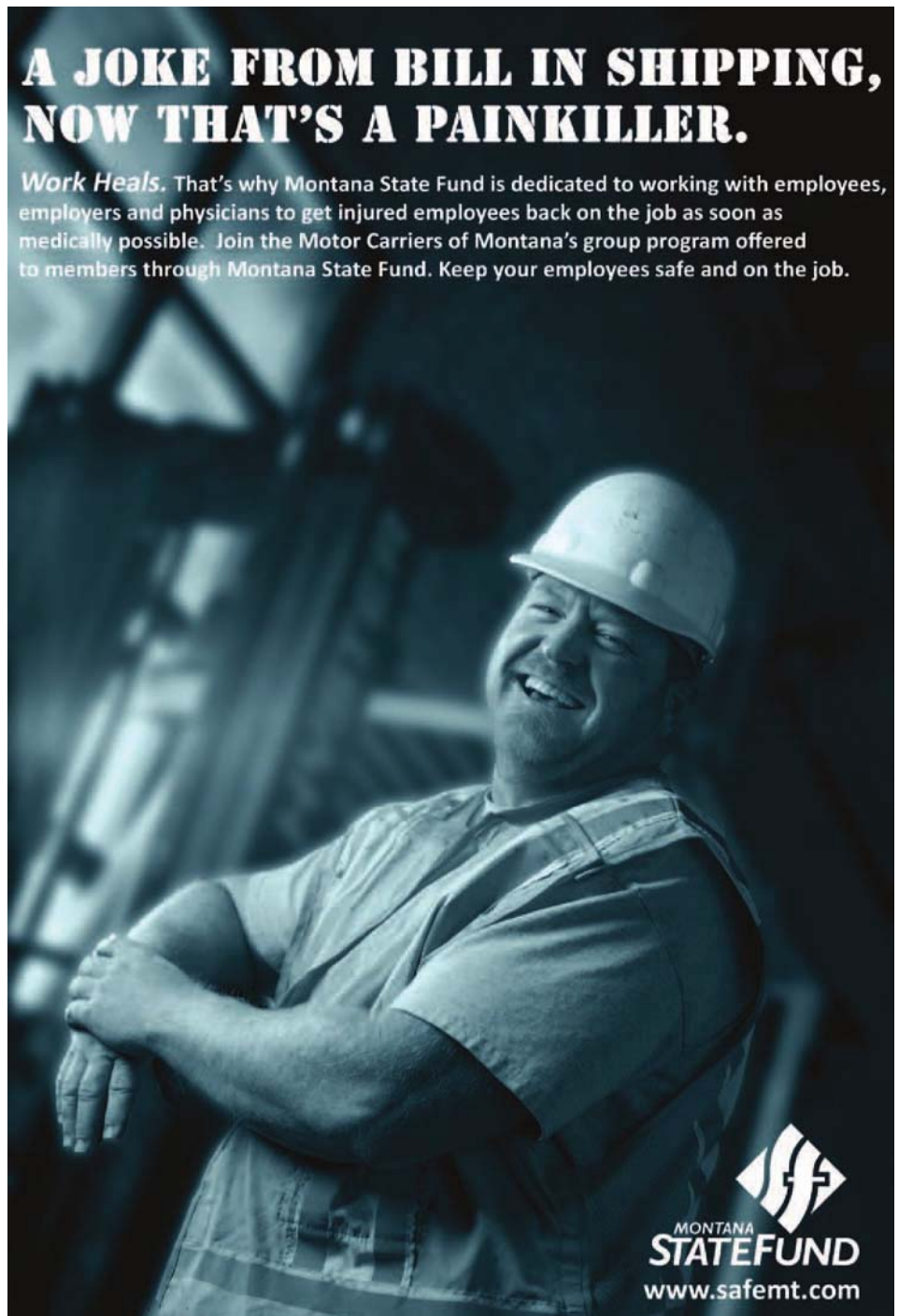
"She's been with me ever since," Stabler said.

And yes, it had to be asked, Ken Stabler is a football fan.

"I've heard it every day since 1972," Stabler said of the former Oakland Raiders quarterback with whom he shares first and last names. "I had one guy at South Carolina even take my autograph. I said 'I'll give it to you, but I haven't made a dime playing football.' That's my standard answer." **RW**

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