

A Look Back

The History of the Moving Industry Shows That In the Face of Innovation Some Things Stay the Same

Since the chronology of my 26 years in the industry begins in the early 1980s (see p. 39), I thought it would be of interest to precede my account of the industry with a brief look back at the origin of the industry. However, no chronology of our industry's challenges and accomplishments can really do justice to the men and women who over the past 100 years made this industry what it is today through their perseverance, hard work, innovation and risk-taking.

—Joe Harrison

The origins of the household goods moving industry are probably lost in the mists of time. Undoubtedly when Mr. and Mrs. Neanderthal moved from one cave to another they enlisted the help of their family and friends, much as most people do today—although we have no way of knowing what the equivalent prehistoric inducement was for pizza and beer.

We do know that as technology advanced, some people specialized in hauling things for others. Until the 18th Century in Europe, even affluent middle class people owned few possessions and boasted fewer pieces of furniture.

When these good burghers moved from one house to another in Antwerp or Vienna, they simply hired the local cartage specialist to bring his horse and wagon around—the same wagon that was used to haul freight and produce.

And thus it was in the New World, where until the late 19th Century most people who moved paid the nearest owner of a team of horses and wagon to help. Or, in the case of those who made the trek westward and couldn't afford the time and expense of a ship passage around the Horn, they acquired a Conestoga wagon and enough horsepower or ox power to take them over the Rocky Mountains.

Given the hardships they faced, it's not too hard to imagine that maybe one or two of these intrepid pioneers, after having watched all their worldly possessions swept away in a raging river, dreamt of a world in which highly skilled professionals employed futuristic technology to bypass all such dangers and deliver their loads across the continent without incident.

Early America's growth saw development of toll road and hard surfaced highways which continued at a feverish pace until about the middle of the 19th century when it fell victim to the principle of steam power—the railroad had arrived.

Although the railroads played a major role in reshaping the country and in settling the West, the horse and wagon still provided the only important transportation service within the settlements and between the many young towns that were continually springing up in uninhabited areas.

By the end of the 19th Century, a number of draymen in America's larger cities began specializing in moving families' household goods exclusively. Some of these companies are still in business today, proudly bearing their founders' names.

Then came the horseless carriage, and nothing would be the same. Although some movers continued to rely on horses and wagons into the early 20th Century, automotive horsepower soon replaced the clatter of hooves on city streets.

The customary procedure for handling household goods shipments to distant points in those days was to pack what goods they could at residence, cart them to a local warehouse, complete the packing, crate them, and transport them to the railroad station or water terminal.

The goods would then be forwarded in care of a friendly warehouseman at destination—who would cooperate in the handling of the goods and reciprocate in the exchange of traffic.

The Van Line Concept

This exchange of business between the two warehousemen developed a relationship that led to not only an expansion of the local warehouseman's operations, but formed what was later known as the agency concept. It also contributed to the formation of our present day van line operations.

The warehousemen eventually switched to solid-tire motor vehicles for movements within a city or local area. It was their practice to pack small and breakable items in the home, take them and the furniture to his warehouse and prepare it all for eventual shipment by rail.

Most of the packing materials came from grocery stores, where used cartons could be obtained for little or nothing. For dishes, glassware and other small breakable items, the standard unit for packing was the sugar barrel. In those days, sugar, flour, salt and other commodities were obtained by the grocer in barrels and weighed up for the customer according to the quantity desired.

Grocers had no particular use for these barrels after they had been emptied, and they saved their surplus barrels for use by warehouseman. Today, tariffs used by the moving industry continue to refer to barrels as containers when it is almost impossible to find a real barrel after the practice largely came to a halt in the mid-20th Century.

With the packing done, shipments would be taken to the warehouse where each warehouseman maintained a supply of lumber and other materials for crating the shipment to be transported by rail. Individual crates were built for each piece of furniture loaded into a boxcar for shipment.

In those days, the customer had to deal with three different service providers in order to get his shipment delivered. The origin warehouseman who handled the shipment from residence to the rail car, but the customer had to pay the railroad freight bill himself.

At destination, customer's had to find another drayman or warehouseman to handle the shipment from the rail car to the final destination and uncrate it.

Because of this, the idea arose of exchanging shipments between warehousemen. They would make friends in distant cities and forward their shipments to their industry friend in the destination city. From these beginnings, it was only natural for warehousemen to start working more closely together.

Thus was born the idea of an association for the primary purpose of exchanging regular shipments of household goods. With the formation of the National Furniture Warehouseman's Association, the industry became organized to provide better service to the public and grew rapidly.

The next logical step was the pool car. Pool car shipments were made up of several lots that were packed and crated for different shippers going from the same origin city to a destination city. The difference in freight rates between the carload rate and the less-than-carload rate became a new source of revenue for the warehouseman, who could also pass on some savings to the customer.

In the early 1920s, Henry Reimers created a new method of packing household goods into large, metal containers and forwarded them by rail—the first containerized shipments.

At this time, the traffic flow for household goods was mainly from East to West, which outnumbered shipments in the opposite direction by almost 15 to one. This doomed the early containerization effort due to the expense of repositioning so many empty containers from the West to the East.

A Trucking Power Is Born

By then, the practice of shipping household goods by rail became so extensive that that many in the industry looked to reduce dependence on rail service and control the linehaul movement. Trucks were the answer, although railroads continued to play a role in household goods shipments for years to come.

In 1919 Ward B. Hiner conceived of the idea of the first interstate van, initially called the Red Ball Transit Company (later American Red Ball Transit). In 1924 he was joined by C.M. Gentry, who shortly thereafter left Red Ball to form Mayflower Transit Company (later called Aero Mayflower) with Don Kenworthy and J.P. Haun.

These two companies originally handled all of the shipments themselves, using local warehousemen in each city to provide storage. In 1930 the carrier agency principle was born when Mayflower asked The Baltimore Storage Company to handle shipment transportation as an agent.

Within a few months, other warehousemen adopted the same idea and became agents, resulting in the gradual closing of company booking offices as more local warehousemen joined the agent network.

This development of van line agencies interrupted exchange of shipments between warehousemen operations of the organization then known as the Return Loads Bureau. The bureau also organized a non-profit corporation owned and operated by warehousemen on a cooperative basis, which later evolved into Allied Van Lines.

One of the odder early entries in the van lines business was the Greyhound bus line, which removed older bus chassis taken out of service and replaced them with van bodies to use in hauling household goods.

Movers were part of the nascent trucking industry, which burgeoned following World War I, when the strain of the war economy showed up weaknesses in the nation's rail system and trucks showed they could provide much needed service flexibility, particularly when it came to picking up and delivering rail shipments from terminals and serving areas rails did not reach.

But by 1935, during the height of the Depression, the trucking industry was in a chaotic state. That year Congress passed the first Motor Carrier Act, bringing under federal regulation all interstate truck and bus services.

The Act also required all motor carriers to obtain licenses and file tariffs, and name rates, conditions for handling shipments and assumed liability.

Even before the Act, truckers in many states had formed state trucking associations. After the Motor Carrier Act, representatives of the various state associations met in Washington, D.C., and formed a national organization known as American Trucking Associations.

The Origins of AMSA

One of the association's first acts was to call in representatives of the various trucking groups to cooperate in meeting the many requirements imposed by the new federal regulation. Household goods haulers were part of this group along with freight haulers.

In September 1935, representatives of seven of the country's leading movers met in Washington to organize ATA's Household Movers Group. These were Allied Van Lines, Aero Mayflower Transit Company,

Greyvan Lines; United Van Lines; American Red Ball Transit Company; United Van Service and National Delivery Association.

One of their first tasks was development of a nationwide tariff. At the time the moving industry priced household goods on a cubic foot basis. The new organization created a Bill of Lading, released rates, an official definition of household goods and established a weight-based tariff, which became known as the Old Brownback Tariff because the publication had a brown cover.

To complete the establishment of the Household Goods Carriers' Bureau, the movers met in Cleveland in March 1936 and elected officers and directors.

In 1938 the ICC issued its first rules exclusively aimed at regulating interstate household goods moving. This first stab at regulating movers left a number of controversies still brewing, and led to a series of more than 50 additional rulemakings that were issued up to the demise of the ICC in 1996.

One of these was the definition of household goods, which some movers tried to use to include new furniture shipments in their authority. Others addressed dock charges (extra charges warehousemen applied to movers that were not members of its agency network), reweighing, interline rates, accessorial charges and estimating rules.

In 1948 Congress passed a law allowing antitrust immunity for collective ratemaking in the trucking industry over the veto of President Truman and soon after the HHGCB became the first rate bureau to file an application under the new law.

Following passage of the Motor Carrier Act, the various U.S. military departments had need for movers, and with the growth of the industry and the experience of the military, definite procedures were established for handling of military household goods shipments.

In 1952, the Department of Defense created a department known as the Military Traffic Service. At the department's request, a committee was formed composed of representatives from the Army, Navy, Coast Guard and Air Force, with a consultant representing the moving industry.

This led to uniform terms and conditions of service and regular procedures for movers to submit bids.

Transportation officers at military installations were required to use only those movers approved following submission of service tenders. In 1957 DOD agreed to accept rates filed by HHGCB and other rate bureaus.

The passage of the Motor Carrier Act and the Household Goods Act of 1980 ushered in a new era for our industry. The post-1980 regulatory environment saw the beginnings of price/service options and vastly increased levels of carrier competition.