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The Long Haul

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Reflections on the rise and fall of an iconic trucking company

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BY: KATIE MORITZ

We saw the good years and didn't even realize it.

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Not long ago, trucks from St. Johnsberry Trucking Co. were spotted on roadways all over the northeast. The hard work of two brothers and thousands of employees built the company from the ground up — driving the regional economy for decades. But in 1993, everything came crashing down.

Now, workers are scattered, retired, or employed elsewhere. Buildings have been sold or repurposed. There isn't much, aside from private collectables, a painting in the St. Johnsberry Welcome Center, a trucking logo at the entrance of the White Market, and a few decaying trailers scattered in fields or forests, to acknowledge such an important company in St. Johnsberry's history.

Additional photos available [here](#).

To Serve You Better

In 1966, St. Johnsberry Trucking co-founder Harry Zabarsky reflected, "...sometimes I think I was just too dumb to quit. We've been through everything—floods, hard times, mud, snow, strikes, hurricanes-everything. We've hauled everything too—you name it, we've moved it." He went on, "you know, when I was a young fellow, I actually thought it was romantic to drive around in a truck."

Harry's father, Daniel Zabarsky, became a U.S. citizen in the early 1900s. Originally from Tsartorea, Russia, he married Ida Shusterman and arrived in Chelsea, Mass., for a new life. They settled in Orleans County and raised three sons and two daughters. According to Beth Kanell, who writes a blog on the genealogy and history of Vermont's Jewish communities, many Jews settled in northern Vermont in the late 1800s and early 1900s and began their lives as peddlers. Some moved into trucking, as the Zabarskys did, while others worked at junkyards and auto dealerships. Their children, like the Zabarskys, went on to become business owners as well as lawyers and doctors.

By 1918, Harry Zabarsky, at the age of 17 or 18, was old enough to help his father remake a Ford roadster into a truck. According to the Bangor Daily News (June 4-5, 1988), in the spring of 1920, Harry hauled milk from local farms in Barton and delivered it to the creamery in town. He began to learn the back roads well, and took on more and more hauling. One summer, according to Kanell, he brought furniture for a vacationer from their home in Boston. The rest of their belongings, which were to arrive by train, arrived three weeks later.

It was, according to the Bangor Daily, the moment "Zabarsky realized the possibility of long-haul trucking." He and his brother, Mickey, would start St. Johnsberry Trucking in 1921 and by July 11, 1925, it was a well-established business.

On Nov. 4, 1927, New England experienced a devastating flood, the worst in the region's history. According to the University of Vermont's digital archives, it destroyed "1,285 bridges, miles of roads and railroads, and countless homes and buildings." According to an article in Vermont Life, "The crest had passed down the Passumpsic River in the afternoon. Most of the bridges had been washed away and the town nearly isolated. Railroad tracks were washed out for hundreds of feet. The Portland Street Bridge had moved off its foundations."

This chaotic event presented Harry and Mickey with an opportunity. With many railroad tracks flooded, and because the Zabarsky brothers knew the back roads, they were able to use their trucks to carry freight and mail to local towns. Days after the flood, as many towns and villages sat engulfed in the aftermath of water and mud, a postmaster asked the brothers to bring mail to Newport. The brothers were given guns for protection and off they went, Harry at the wheel, Mickey on the hood, a long stick prodding the water in front of them, searching for firm ground, as they navigated the logging trails and back roads of the Northeast Kingdom. Despite their knowledge, it still took 26 hours to travel 46 miles, but after such a natural disaster, people began to understand that working with the Zabarskys meant commitment.



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Just met a very nice guy from New York who drove many miles to the North Star office for a copy of this article on St. Johnsberry Trucking from last May.

<http://northstarmonthly.com/articles/long-haul>



An early photograph shows Albert Dussault and a St. Johnsbury Truck, in Batavia, N.Y. in 1933. Although Albert has now passed away, his son, Andrew, proudly showed photos of his father and told his stories. In the photograph, Albert is standing beside a truck with a soft top, grasses rising up before him, nearly to the height of his shoulders. It is hard to tell the expression on his face, but the fact that he poses in front of a truck he drives for work says something.

Huddled around his computer screen, Andy explained that his father was a man of strength and determination. When Andy was 15, he started working at the soda fountain at Concord Kennedy Kitchen on Railroad Street. One day a man walked in, a little gruff, and quietly took a seat. He ordered coffee, then, over the top of his mug, asked Andy, "your father Albert Dussault?" Andy nodded. "Well, I'm Frank Fischer," the man said. "Your father is the only man I ever knew who could take two full cans of milk and double deck them in a trailer." A typical milk can, when full, weighed close to 100 pounds and Albert could lift two at a time; one in each hand and put them on a truck.

Physical strength was not the only characteristic of those who worked for St. Johnsbury Trucking. There was also a sense of resourcefulness. The building that houses the White Market today used to be a trucking terminal. On each corner of the terminal ran a ramp that lead to the basement where mechanics did repairs. Tractors, the "truck" part of the vehicle, would back up their trailers to be loaded and unloaded. Right next to this terminal was the Harris House, where Andy's parents and grandparents lived. When the trucking company began building the terminal in the 1940s, they had a problem: there was a house in the way. Unlike today, when real estate would be bought and demolished to make "better" use of the land, the home was lifted and moved to Cottage Street. Rather than destroy the home that stood in their way, St. Johnsbury trucks did what they did best. They moved it elsewhere.

It took more than resourcefulness for the business and town to flourish. It also took confidence. Like the flood that tested the Zabarskys' work ethic, so did their drive to expand. The Zabarsky brothers were determined to get a truck that could collect and deliver butter to Boston. They believed they could supply butter faster than their competitors, but they had to prove it. They collected signatures from sellers validating the time the brothers had made it to their creamery, and then they set out for Boston with empty trucks. They parked outside Faneuil Hall and Mickey climbed out of the truck and said, "If St. Johnsbury was hauling your butter, it would be here by now."

Talk about gumption.

The strategy not only worked, it really worked. Not only did Mr. Learned of W.H. Learned's store finally agree to sign on with the St. Johnsbury Trucking, but he asked other vendors to do so. And they did. When all was said and done, the Zabarsky brothers had set up business with S.S. Pierce and Rhodes Brothers as well and they planned for a butter delivery three nights a week. To accomplish this haul, they purchased a closed, insulated truck, and realized that, like their other trucks, she too needed a name. They ran a contest in town and decided on Miss St. Johnsbury.

However, all did not go according to plan. On the Miss St. Johnsbury's first run, full of fresh butter and excitement, she hit a large maple tree in Hill, N.H., and burst into flames. Although insured, the butter was gone and the truck was a near wreck. Yet, what could easily been seen as a failure, was not treated that way. Although Miss St. Johnsbury was unable to make the trip, it didn't mean they could not follow through with their commitment. They sent another truck, one with questionable breaks and difficult gears, to fulfill the mission. At 12 miles per hour, it took 16 hours to get there and another 16 to get home.

Although the Zabarskys encountered failures and disasters, they used the difficulties as an opportunity to display their character. For example, during the Great Depression, St. Johnsbury Trucking almost went under. Almost. In the early 1930s, trucking was very competitive. Many people rushed into the business without experience. Prices were often far below a break-even point. By 1935, conditions had become so chaotic that legislation put the trucking industry under the Interstate Commerce Commission. Due to a dishonest employee, who fiddled with the books to cover shortages, checks began to bounce and sheriff's orders were sent out. According to a thorough audit, St. Johnsbury Trucking was \$90,000 in debt.

The Zabarskys' attitude was to move forward, looking for more business.

The Depression and \$90,000 debt was a bigger problem than a flood or a burning butter truck.

Their challenges now could put them out of business for good. Serious action was needed in order to succeed, and so Harry and Mickey decided to divide and conquer. Mickey and his family went to Boston in search of new business, and Harry stayed in St. Johnsbury. The administrative functions stayed in St. Johnsbury, but the company and its operations, sales, and headquarters were eventually established in Holliston, Mass.

To the surprise of many, business bounced back. Both brothers worked to build up the image at home and in Boston. The company was able to pay off creditors within three years and continued to expand. Since the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) held authority over who could run trucking lines to where, most of the company's growth was by acquisition. Trucks increased in size from 12 feet to 23 feet, their trailers grew from 14 feet to 40 feet, and their weight went from 40 thousand pounds to 73 thousand pounds. By 1966, the company moved about a million pieces of freight a week and each piece was handled about 6 times. This required coordination and hard work. The trucking company depended on having the best workers in the area, in order to set high standards that would, similar to their freight, spread throughout the Northeast.

On a sunny afternoon recently, David Brown sat down to talk about the administrative side of St. Johnsbury Trucking. Brown was the vice president of the company's information systems. He joined the company in 1966, focusing his attention on computers at a time when they were a rare sight in the business world. By 1975, the trucking company had a real-time system set up to keep track of every shipment, every trailer, and every driver. He replaced old, outdated accounting machines with a computer driven accounts receivable system based on (then current) 1960s technology. For Brown, this was not just exciting; it was fun. He was, in a sense, a driver for technology. His freight? Information.

Once he finished explaining the technical aspects of his work, he started telling stories. He leaned back in his chair, let out a sigh, and smiled, as if now the fun part could begin.

Once Harry Zabarsky became more of a titular figure in the company, he used to ride with Brown to Boston and discuss the early years of the company. Once, he explained why the trucks didn't go to the New York City docks: corruption. Bribery was required to do business and Harry refused to involve his company in such activity. Instead, his trucks transferred freight to other companies that could deal with the docks if they chose. Harry, as well as the workers, strongly believed in a sense of integrity, that people should have a moral compass and a strong work ethic.

According to an article in Double Clutch, a publication on antique trucks, a Rutland Herald account talks of company lore, saying that during the Depression, when the trucking company was going through difficult financial times, it was rumored some drivers pawned their watches to buy gas in order to get home to Vermont. Workers were tough. Workers were committed.

Brown explained that even when the company cut back its employees' hours from 40 to 35 a week, people signed out but continued working, without pay, to get the job done.

At his home in Danville, Tim (Red) Somers' pride for St. Johnsbury Trucking is clear. Placed with great care atop his dining room table were several St. Johnsbury Trucking items: pins, plaques, models, articles, photographs, patches, clippings, even a belt buckle. A small box was filled to the brim with pins, each commemorating years of safe, accident-free driving.

Before he sat down to talk, he explained each of the items. His blue work shirt hung on a cupboard next to the table. With his strong hands, he delicately held out a model of a truck for a photograph. He showed off a baseball cap with the company slogan sewn across the top, and he then pointed to the different colored stones that glittered in the pins and rings. On each, St. Johnsbury was engraved.

Somers drove for St. Johnsbury Trucking for 37 years. Originally from Peacham, he had loved trucks since childhood. During the war, he drove for the town of Peacham at the age of 13.

When he first started driving for St. Johnsbury Trucking in 1953, Somers was what they called "on the road." He drove at night and stayed over during his trips. He did this on and off for seven years, returning home to rest, see his family and community once or twice a week. Often, to stay awake, he'd smoke cigars and hang his head out the window. In 1960, Somers happily became a local driver and remained one for the rest of his tenure with the company.

Being a local driver wasn't an easy job. When he started, Somers made \$1.27 an hour. Even

though he was hired for an eight-hour shift, he often ended up working 12-14 hours and would come home to a late supper.

A typical day involved starting at 6 a.m. on a platform unloading trucks that had come in from Boston overnight. He would load the trucks back up and deliver goods locally.

At first, drivers wouldn't be able to make the trip to Boston and get back in time to sleep in their own beds. This is what they called "turning Boston." However, once the interstate was built, drivers would be able to turn Boston as well as larger cities.

For two and a half years, Somers did the Bellows Falls turn. He would leave the house at 6:30 a.m., grab coffee on the way, and arrive there by 9:30 a.m. He would work the docks until 3 p.m. and then bring freight back to St. Johnsbury.

Somers carried just about anything, thanks to booming local industry. The St. Johnsbury Trucking Company was a common carrier, dealing in much smaller shipments that required several terminals. They shipped just about anything to anybody, to any destination. During its boom in the 50s, 60s and 70s, it was considered a basic resource to run the economy. At the time, Somers carried freight for Lyndonville's Tap & Die, Vermont Flexible Tubing, Hills' Manufacturing, which focused on wood products, Tender Corporation, Burndy, Maple Grove, Carrie's Maple Sugar, the Peck Co., a big supplier for Sherman-Williams, Reeds Supply, Fairbanks Morse, along with many others. Although some remain, many are gone.

What was St. Johnsbury like when the trucking company was flourishing? Somers' face lit up with a big grin and he said the area was full of life. Friday and Saturday nights were very busy. People often worked 6 days a week, 70 hours, and when they were off, they knew how to have fun. There were local dances, roller skating rinks, two movie theaters, nice hotels, bars, an active railway station, and numerous places to shop. The town, like those who worked in and around it, was vibrant, energetic, and thriving.

After Somers described the liveliness of the town, he folded his hands on his lap. "We saw the good years and didn't even realize it."

Halfway through an interview with Kenny Robinson, of North Danville, he pulled out a white binder filled with clippings, magazine articles, and photographs. He then showed a napkin with a hand drawn map on it. "This was our GPS system," he explained. "Sometimes it would take two to three napkins to draw it out. Sometimes you ran out of napkins."

When Kenny Robinson first started driving in 1972, he was nervous about finding his way. He would arrive at his destination, and while other workers would use his truck for local deliveries, he would eat, sleep, and prepare for the next night of driving. Robinson liked night driving. He also liked the calm of less-populated roads, new places to visit, and the people he worked with.

In order for Robinson to make it home for the weekend, it was important he keep track of how far he had driven during the week. The company would not let their drivers do more than 500 miles a night.

He drove big trucks, 45 footers, and there were breakdowns, blown tires, and bad weather. When he first started, there were no radios. If he needed help, he, like his fellow drivers, depended on the kindness of strangers. Sometimes, when he pulled off to the side of the road to wait out bad weather or fatigue, people would venture outside their homes, cross the interstate, and check on him to make sure he was okay.

But weather and fatigue weren't the only concerns. Often, terminals were located in a city's rougher neighborhoods. Once, while hauling a trailer of cigarettes to Wilmington, Robinson was warned to stop and eat prior to unloading. When he arrived, he was told to contact dispatch, lock his doors, and back into the terminal carefully. Although one might think liquor would be at risk, thieves were actually more interested in cigarettes.

Drivers themselves were rarely, if ever robbed, but the back of their trailers, if stopped long enough at a red light, were vulnerable. Once David Brown's computer system was up and running, drivers felt more of a sense of safety, as now the computers could keep track of trucks.

But even with computers, drivers still valued the help of face-to-face kindness. One night, when driving a flammable load, Robinson was told not to use the tunnel going to the George Washington Bridge in favor of side streets. He was in a bad area and watching traffic lights carefully, trying to avoid stopping in front of a particularly bad bar. When he reached where the

road met the river, he realized the underpasses there were too low. A cab driver saw that he needed help and stopped traffic. He then guided Robinson up over a curb so he could turn around, and directed him back to the highway.

On the road, and within the St. Johnsbury Trucking Company itself, there was a sense of camaraderie. Whether between strangers or other truck drivers, those whose job was to transport something to somewhere, watched out for each other. Before the trucks had radios, Robinson told me drivers would use their dome lights to see who was with them on the road. Often they knew each other and would give a wave. Every fall, after the company no longer existed, laid off or retired drivers would get together and have what Robinson called “a good visit.” Tim Somers would make a stew and people as far as Bangor and Boston would come together to catch up and share stories.

In 1975, the Zabarskys sold St. Johnsbury Trucking Co. to Sun Oil, now Sunoco. At the time, Sun Oil was an energy company trying to diversify. Under the name Sun Carriers, Sun Oil purchased three other companies: Mellon Trucking (which served the Northwest), Jones Trucking (which served the South), and Standard. The idea was that the trucking companies would be connected by scheduled truckways. And, according to Brown, this did work. Brown, who had a relationship with information systems out in Texas and at one point, ran applications of data in Dallas, believed that Sun Oil was a good owner.

Unfortunately, in the mid-1986, Sun Oil decided to go back to energy so Sun Carriers was sold to a group of investment lawyers in Los Angeles. The transaction was a leveraged buyout, the acquisition of a company using borrowed money and using the assets of the company being acquired as collateral for the loans. Leveraged buyouts were common in the 80s, allowing companies to make large acquisitions without having to commit a lot of capital.

Debt increased and although St. Johnsbury continued to survive, the other trucking companies began to go under. Mellon went bankrupt first. Then Jones. Then Standard. St. Johnsbury held on.

St. Johnsbury Trucking officially closed its doors on June 14, 1993. Headquarters notified terminal managers and it fell to the managers to tell drivers and office workers. According to the New York Times article, “A Victim of the Deregulated Road,” earlier in the month of June, the Teamsters union, which represent around 3,000 workers, agreed to a 9 percent wage cut with a promise of a share in the company’s profits. Teamsters officials met with St. Johnsbury executives on the Thursday before the company closed, and St. J Trucking proposed a broad range of concessions. They offered to cut the work force in half, to replace current health and pension plans with local, less expensive options. However, an audit showed that, despite its best efforts, the company would not be able to survive. In 1992, it had lost \$13.4 million of its \$88.1 million revenue.

Ron Care, the general president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters said in the article that, “It’s another case where workers cannot save a company from management’s mistakes and 12 years of deregulation.”

Some believe St. Johnsbury Trucking ultimately went bankrupt because of its debt. Others believe it was deregulation. Still others blame the unions. David Brown believes it was the method of ownership. The drivers I spoke to, still loyal to the company they invested so much of their time and energy in, believe it was changing times and markets, and a shift in industry, both local and abroad. Many wonder why the company wasn’t sold as a going operation. Some believe it is because it was worth more dead than alive — the value of its assets would return more to debt holders than selling the company to another owner. And, to a certain extent, it was true. As the company grew, the cities surrounding the terminals also grew. The real estate on which those terminals sat increased in value. When the company shut down, some of the properties sold for millions of dollars.

It also put 4,400 hardworking people out of work.

Although the closing of St. Johnsbury Trucking was a sad moment in history, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” And for the drivers, the dock workers, the mechanics, the office staff, the managers, the higher-ups, the local community: this holds true. When the doors closed, many of the workers were the best in the area and in need of new jobs. Other companies, in turn, likely benefited.

When the Zabarsky brothers made their way through the flooded streets of Barton to deliver mail, when they pushed a clunky old truck all the way to Boston to finish a job, the best part of the story wasn't that they got the mail to their destination or that they actually delivered the butter. It was the test of their character, and the journey itself.

Sources: A Brief History of St. Johnsbury by Peggy Pearl; a three part series on St. J Trucking in Covered Bridge Weekly; a 1966 Vermont Life article "Trucks, Tractors & Trailers;" Beth Kanell's blog jewsinvmont.blogspot.com; the University of Vermont's Landscape Change digital archives; Double Clutch Magazine; the New York Times article, "A Victim of a Deregulated Road;" as well as the company's newsletters "En Route" and "The Spirit of St. J."

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