

Small Town Big Wheel

WOODFIELD INC.-THURSDAY, MARCH 22, 2018

Just before the Civil War, Camden, Ark. was the second largest city in the state and a hub of transportation in south Arkansas. A busy port brought steamboats up and down the Ouachita River and attracted businesses like John T. Chidester's stagecoach and mail wagon services that carried mail from Memphis to Fort Smith. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, railroads allowed access to forests and the logging industry. Arkansas's first oil well was discovered there in the '20s, and business boomed. The population almost quadrupled to over 11,000 by 1950. In the '60s, Highland Industrial Park opened as manufacturing and defense brought good jobs to the area. The economy has ebbed and flowed in the years since Camden was incorporated, and when one of the region's oldest and biggest employers, International Paper Mill closed in 2000, more than 1000 people lost their jobs. Defense contractors like Lockheed Martin and Raytheon have moved in to take advantage of Camden's industrial spirit, but knowing the history of a place like Camden makes you appreciate a transportation company like Woodfield, Inc. and its owner and president Mr. Jimmy Starr. Any small business owner is proud to be a "job creator," but in a city where the population peaked over 50 years ago and has dropped 23% since then, someone who can provide good jobs is valuable. Sitting in his Woodfield office on the southern edge of Camden, Jimmy Starr understands how being responsible for employing others is a privilege. "We're thankful to be able to provide a job, a good job that people want to do. That's exciting for us." His wife Kathy agrees, "It's a privilege and an honor to be able to have jobs available for people. That's probably one of our main goals, to employ people, get them a good living and to have respect for each individual, no matter how old they are. We strive every day to build respect." Starr nods back to Kathy, his wife of 44 years and partner in business for 30. She jokes that she raised him, which he doesn't protest. "But," he interjects, "I taught her to drive."

Trucking Roots

Starr was born in Oden, Ark. just north of Mount Ida, the youngest of eight children. His parents had both died when he was five or six years old, and he was raised by older sisters and moved around a lot. Eventually, he ended up in Camden at Harmony Grove

School where he met Kathy. “ When our parents passed away, there was still four at home, and they divided us up. I and my younger sister moved to Camden. Then, my two twin brothers, they moved to Hot Springs. ” He started dating Kathy when they were sophomores at Harmony Grove High School. They graduated in May 1973 and were married in June at Calvary Baptist Church, the same church they still attend, where Kathy has played the organ since she was a teenager. His father and eventually his brothers all drove a truck, and for as long as he could remember, Starr wanted to drive a truck, too. As a newlywed at 18, he hauled wood around the state for the International Paper Mill. “ When I was 21, I was just waiting to find somebody to hire me, ” Starr said. So when he turned 21, he met Steve Williams and Larry Lahey, who would later co-found Maverick Transportation in North Little Rock. Lahey ’ s father owned Steel Haulers, out of Kansas City, and gave Starr his first over-the-road driving job. He drove a truck for 10 years, first for Steel Haulers and then for Arkansas Best Freight (ABF) ’ s flatbed division, called the “ scat division. ” On the road for a week at a time, driving up and down the Midwest, Starr said he kept his mind occupied by planning for the future and his family. “ When you ’ re gone, you think about home a lot, your wife, family, children. . . I think you just think about what you want your life to be. ” In 1983 when his youngest son Gregory was born and older son Scotty was four years old, he sold his truck to be closer to home. He had met a man who offered to buy his truck while he was driving to Pennsylvania for ABF. At first, Starr refused, but when Greg arrived, he changed his mind. He hauled his last load to Pittsburgh, drove to the man ’ s shop, received his payment and a ride to the airport and flew back to Arkansas, away from his career as a full-time driver. The Starrs bought a convenience store in town. “ To be honest with you, I ’ ve thought about this often, if I had not have had the responsibility of running the store, [leaving trucking] would have been very difficult. . . The convenience store was very time-consuming. I didn ’ t have a lot of time at first to even think about anything except operating the business that we had, ” Starr said. But a few years later, another man wanted to buy his convenience store business, paving the way for Starr to get back into trucking. He bought a truck that his brother drove. Then he bought another and another and another. Woodfield incorporated in 1988 and began over-the-road hauls in 1993. Now Woodfield,

Inc. has 117 trucks. “ It ’ s not big in comparison, but it ’ s a full-time job for us, ” he said. Raising the family Kathy was the receptionist at the Ouachita Valley Family Clinic, but as the trucking business grew, she decided to come help, and the two have been working together ever since. They used to share an office, literally working side- by - side, but now Jimmy runs operations on one side of the building while Kathy works billing and accounting on the other side. They joke that Jimmy’s side makes the bills, and Kathy’s side pays them. Their children work somewhere in between. Scotty supervises the chip/flatbed division. Gregory is the van operations manager, and Stephanie, their youngest works accounting and payroll in the office with Kathy a few days a week and out of her own office in Magnolia the rest of the time to be closer to her own small children. “ We’re together all the time. . . any time we can be together, we’re good with it. We don’t fight at all as far as I know, ” Kathy said. For some people, it might be hard to imagine working this close to family every day and liking it, but Jimmy Starr instantly smiles when talking about his wife. “ My best day is when I see Kathy here in the morning. ” It’s obvious that they not only enjoy working here but that they really enjoy working here with each other and have raised their children at Woodfield to value hard work. “ I know Stephanie started out when she was about 14, working with me. I'd venture to say Scotty might have been 11 and Greg, maybe about the same age. When they got started, they may not have liked it, but they did it. They did it . . . and all in all, it’s worked out for the best for our family, ” he said. Raising the business We all start life in diapers, but Starr started his business in them. In 1994, Woodfield was able to get some business from a company in East Camden called Arquest that manufactured baby diapers. It wasn't always steady work because they had a carrier outside the region that was hauling most of their freight. “ As years passed, we would just do everything they would allow us to do. We had other customers that we hauled for, too, but they were just right in our back door and had product that went out, and also, some came in. Whatever they would allow us to do, we would do it. “ The carrier that they had at that time was not based here. Often, they were not able to provide a truck for whatever reason in the area . . . After a few years, we became their primary carrier and except for customer pickup, we did all their transportation, inbound and outbound. We did that for 17 years. ” Woodfield

really grew up in diapers, or hauling them, at least. “ We didn't ever really say we wanted anything. We grew according to the customer base we had and the freight that we were able to get and the drivers and the equipment and so forth. We didn't really ever say we wanted 50 trucks or a hundred. We just woke up one day, and we had a hundred. “ What we did learn was hauling diapers was a very good business. ” With any business come concerns. In trucking, finding and retaining good drivers is always a struggle. Starr acknowledges that it comes with the territory. When the economy grows, so does the demand for trucks and drivers. A few years ago, Woodfield added more local, short hauls to their business to get a driver home every day because he remembers the pull of wanting to be with his own family while he was out on the road. He said he never got tired of trucking when he left ABF. He loved it, and he was “ fortunate you could make a good living driving a truck; ” he just knew he needed to be home more. “ To be honest with you, it ’ s been an issue for 24 years. Whether you have 10 trucks or a hundred or a thousand, it ’ s always going to be a concern. It is, ” he continued. At the top of his mind though is safety. With the privilege of providing jobs for people is the weight of being responsible for those people ’ s lives and livelihoods. “ Kathy and I are responsible for everything, any part of it. It all ends with us, ” he said. Woodfield shifted to electronic logging devices for drivers to record their working hours about three years ago, and Starr believes that once everyone is logging electronically, the environment for all drivers will be safer. “ From our side, after a guy has made his day, then it is time for a rest. We just feel better, because we're responsible for it. When it ’ s your responsibility then the liability is something you are always concerned about. But we have not really had a lot of resistance. ” In addition to getting drivers home, Starr says his other priority is to keep them moving when they are on the road. When a driver gets to his destination, Starr ’ s goal is to have another load ready to pick up. He wants for Woodfield drivers what he wanted for himself. “ We try to avoid laying over and to keep the guys moving. Because I know when I was driving a truck, if I wasn't at home, I wanted to be moving. ” Lost and found Even though it's been decades since he's driven full-time, Starr still relates to his drivers and their time behind the wheel. He's maybe even a little nostalgic for driving. Though Woodfield ’ s trucks are shiny and new, just outside his office sits a maroon and

white Peterbilt cabover from the 70s just like the one he used to drive. His name is in script just under the driver side window and “ Woodfield, ” across the door. It’s not the exact same truck, he drove all those years ago, of course. That one was actually stolen. He was near Dallas, where ABF had a terminal in Mesquite, Tex. in 1979, and it was his first brand new truck. He remembers that it cost \$53,000, which was a fortune at the time. He reported the truck missing, but after 30 days, there was still no sign of the missing truck. “ It was a cold winter night and I ’ d gotten a motel room . . . just got up the next morning, and it was gone. ” He bought another truck and went back to work when he got a call from the Fort Worth Police Department that they had found the stolen truck in a suburb of Fort Worth. He bid on it, and a few days later, he got it back. A lot of things have come back around for Starr: his lost truck, his career in trucking, and year after year in the industry. Until the cows come home In a few weeks, Starr will gather drivers and employees for a party at The River Woods, a local venue with a dock right on the river and an outdoor stage. They’ll have a band and host a Christmas party catered by Wood ’ s Place with fried fish and all the trimmings. And they ’ ll recognize some of the contributions employees have made to the company over the past year. “ It takes the seriousness out of business just for a little while, ” Kathy said. And they do take their work seriously, but they know how to have fun, too. They recently took a cruise from New York to Nova Scotia, Halifax. They flew into New York City and spent some time in Times Square. Starr said, “ We'd never been there, so it was like two country bumpkins in the city. But we just had the best time. ” He recounted some of the stops up the Eastern coast, but stops, and smiles, “ I would just say that wherever she ’ s at, that's where I'm going. I'm just as happy as I coul d be. ” Jimmy Starr is modest about his accomplishments, but on a little table in his office sits a golf ball — the one from his hole- in -one at a local tournament, the one that earned him a brand new pickup truck a few years ago. He was on a team with a couple of friends and was the last one to hit. “ I said, ‘ Tom, now what am I going to do with this pickup? ’ He said, ‘ I don't know. Just hit the ball. ’ And lo and behold, I place it right in the hole and we about all . . . , ” he trails off. “ We just couldn't believe it. ” The golf pro couldn’t believe it either. He heard them cheering from the clubhouse and called the Ford dealer, saying “ I'm telling you,

somebody has won that pickup, because t hey're making too much noise out there. ” Starr gave the Ford pickup to his grandson last year for Christmas. He shakes his head, “ I'm sure it will never happen again, but it happened on that Saturday morning. ” Now, Starr and Kathy spend the weekends at the farm north of town that they bought three years ago with cows and their Great Pyrenes puppy, Callie. Around the lunch table with Kathy and Stephanie , he laughs about how close they ’ ve gotten to the animals. Stephanie shows off home videos on her phone of Kathy greeting their first trailer of cattle in a sing-song voice, “ Welcome to your new home. ” They pretend-tease her for sometimes singing to the cow s, and in the videos, it really does look like the bovine congregation, crowded around her, is ready to join i n the hymns with a chorus of “ moos. ” But it turns out that Jimmy has bonded with the cows, too. In the mornings before work, Kathy says, she ’ s heard Jimmy talking to Loretta, one of the cows, complimenting her hair and the spray of bangs that hang over her eyes. He sighs, “ I don’ t know if I’ ll ever retire. I'm sure one of these days, our kids will wish we would. But we're just not people who like to do nothing. We've got to be doing something at all times. But years will pass and there will come a time that we'll want to settle d own, might buy a few more cows. But we'll be around for a long time. ” After almost 30 years, it’ s not hard to believe Jimmy Starr will be providing jobs in Camden until the cows come home.

Story by Bethany May Managing Editor

First printed in Arkansas Trucking Report Vol. 22 Issue 6.