Trucker Stories: Best/Worst and Other Thoughts

Michael and I both left our corporate careers and went into truck driving, to enjoy life on the road while earning a paycheck. Our freight hauling career led us to MRA, who had World Vision as a client. Once we were selected for the World Vision tour, we were excited at the chance to take our life on the road and give it a higher purpose."

Sherri was previously a branch manager at Wells Fargo, and then decided to make a career change to attend truck driving school at Stevens Transport of Dallas, TX. Michael was working in technology, but had always been interested in driving. Once their kids graduated high school, they saw the lifestyle change as a perfect opportunity to share life on the road together.

Michael and Sherri Washington
Tour Operators
World Vision Experience: Kisongo Trek

Many years ago I was a deputy sheriff on the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (1973-84 with a year "off" as an over-the-road trucker). I had been working the streets of South Central Los Angeles and had grown tired of what I thought was a broken justice system—one leaning heavily to protect criminals at the expense of victims and society at large.

So I explored some other career options and decided on trucking. I had never driven anything larger than a Chevrolet but had a good friend from my time in the Air Force who had his own tractor and trailer and was having a great time hauling loads all over the country.

At the time (1979) I decided to enter the owner-operator world driving for North American Van Lines. NAVL had a driver training program and a truck purchasing which—as a novice-seemed right for me. So off to Ft. Wayne, IN I went for two weeks of training and a new gig as a driver in their "New Products" division. I had a brand new International Transtar tractor and was looking forward to getting out on the road.

What I enjoyed the most about driving was the freedom of the open road and the opportunity to see places that I'd never seen before. To this day I can recall episodes of noteworthy runs. As a solo driver I had to be careful about on-duty time and all the rest of it and I imagine that the regulations these days are quite a bit more restrictive than they were 30 years ago. Fortunately, the merchandise I hauled was mostly manufactured goods and I was never under time pressure to get a load to its destination. Of course, the faster you delivered, the faster you got another load so there was that kind of pressure, but I chose a more "relaxed" work schedule.

I would start my driving days before sunup and would shut down by dusk or earlier-on duty hours permitting. I never liked driving at night because part of the attraction of driving to me was seeing the country. You see more of it in daylight than at night. But at night you typically had less traffic and when going through major cities, the night drive was best.

Probably the best feeling I had was after getting loaded in some city someplace and snaking my way through traffic on old, narrow streets finally seeing the sign for the interstate I needed. Seeing those red, white and blue shields was like finding the exit door in a packed theater. Then heading down the on-ramp and going through the gears, all of a sudden you felt "at home" on a road that was built for you and at speeds that your truck was meant to drive. Even though, at that time, we were under that ridiculous 55 MPH speed limit.

Usually the first day's drive after getting a load was the shortest as time was spent loading and all the rest of it. The second and later days were best-get up early, start the truck, hit the café for a cup and then on the road again into the daylight. There is no better feeling than hitting the open road. That really is a great feeling that I enjoy to this day-in my four-wheeler.
The downsides….there can be many and like most things in life, depend on your personal situation.

I was married at the time I started driving with NAVL and I lived in the Los Angeles area. One thing we were told during training was that most of the freight that we would be hauling would be around the eastern half of the country. That meant that I’d get home every five to six weeks-if possible or I could chose to dead head home and just take myself out of service for a period of time. But not rolling means you’re not earning and that wasn’t a great option. So being married is certainly a challenge to driving over-the-road.

But there are many options today for drivers that can keep them relatively close to home base. Lots of companies offer routes or regions that took years to get in the past so that's a good thing. Driving all 48 was attractive, but it has a price, too.

Another negative is certainly the volume of traffic these days and the overall lack of driving skill and courtesy in most of the driving public-at least that I see on a regular basis. Another, for me, was driving in winter. Having grown up in Southern California, driving in snow was a whole new experience for me. Driving a truck in it was not something I enjoyed. But I did get tips from other drivers and when things were really bad, I’d just lay down at a truck stop someplace and wait for it to clear. But not all drivers are able to do that.

All in all, I enjoyed my time as a trucker and would recommend it to folks today-as long as they understand what is lurking behind all those appealing commercials and ads for drivers. I would encourage a prospective driver to visit a truck stop and talk to drivers and ask them what they find most attractive-and unattractive about driving. They should seek out drivers who are working for companies that they are considering-that’s the best way to gauge what life will be like. But they should ask several drivers for that company and not just one or two.

And I’ll end with this story. The last time I drove an 18-wheeler was in Oklahoma City in 1987 or so. I left the LASD and became an FBI agent in 1984. My first assignment was on a drug squad at the FBI office in Ok City. I had picked up information that a trucker for a company based in El Paso, Texas was delivering large loads of marijuana between Texas and Missouri along with his “legitimate” freight. His route took him right along I-40 to Ok City then up I-44 to Missouri. I watched him over several weeks as he made pot deliveries to individuals at truck stops in Oklahoma.

I figured out who the driver was, got a search warrant for his rig and when he next came through town and met with his connection in Ok City, we busted both of them. Several pounds of pot in the cab, as expected.

But we had to do something with the rig. I called the company (by then I’d had a contact there who was aware of the problem and was very helpful) and asked where they wanted the truck to be parked while they dispatched another driver. There was a service center not far from the bust location where the company had an account and I drove the rig there and parked it. I offered to drive it the rest of the way to its destination, but my FBI boss said, "not a chance."

And that was the last time I ever had the pleasure of driving an 18-wheeler.

Frank G. Scafidi
Director, Public Affairs
National Insurance Crime Bureau

I was an over the road (OTR) driver for three years, driving all forty-eight states pulling refrigerated loads.

The best part of being a trucker is that it’s independent and not usually repetitive. The driver can set the days as he or she wishes, working a schedule they’d like to drive based on the loads and times available for pickup and delivery. If you wish, you can stop and see sights and things along the way and are mostly left alone if you’re getting the job done.

The worst part is all that alone time. Even for team drivers, with two in the truck, one of them is likely sleeping.
most of the time that the other is driving, and contact with friends and family is difficult when all you have is a
phone. For me, that was by far the hardest thing to deal with and was the reason I finally left the business and
became an automotive writer.

I enjoy driving, but with a family, trucking was not for me.

Aaron Turpen

In my mind there are a lot of "pros" in the trucking industry. You get a feeling of pride knowing you're a vital part
of the US and world economy for one. Being that you travel a lot, you see all parts of the country both big cities and
small towns. It definitely gives the sense of independence. It is also a profession that is not fading away any time
soon so employment opportunities are almost always there. And since trucking is more of a lifestyle then just a job
there is a lot of camaraderie among drivers.

There are some "cons" to the profession as well. If you're just starting out it can be difficult to find a local job
without experience and companies will want you to spend a few years running over the road. The industry has
become very heavily regulated by the government. Unfortunately truck driving is not as respected or appreciated in
the public eye as it once was. You'll generally end up working long days and off hours as well as spending a lot of
time away from your family and alone.

Todd Swenor
15 year professional

Truckers get a lot of "beaver shots" from women passing them on the left. They can see right down her dress or
skirt which has ridden up in the car. By the time that they pass the trucker knows what kind and what color panties
she is wearing.

John Wilder

The best part about driving a big rig is you get to think. The worst part about driving a big rig is you think 4
wheelers are idiots. The good part creates wonderful philosophers that can be found in every truck stop along the
highways and byways around the world. The bad part is the gray hair and forehead wrinkles caused by people who
have to hurry up, get in front then slow down with a complete disregard for safety. There is a "big" reason for that
space in front! Another good point is we don't have to listen to Country music. The bad part is the vibration will
definitely wear down your teeth.

Of course Truck drivers have the best jokes and in plenty that will come out with very little prompting. They need
them. Comparatively speaking, most of the other drivers don't compare to the skills and knowledge base of the
Professional Truck Driver. Another good part is the view. Truck drivers get to see everything. The scenery, animal
life, bazoombas hanging out of passenger windows, all the colors of the world. The bad part? Well...Ladies, we can
see what you are doing when you pass by. It's distracting to say the least.

From the early days of Teamsters, hauling freight over land by horse and cart to today's big machines it hasn't
changed by reason, only by method. From in town small delivery to long haul, we get to work unsupervised and at
the mercy of the Hordes.

Neven Gibbs
Writer, Entertainer
Retired 4 Million Miler.