

# NEIL CORDER

*Wayne's World*



# ARKANSAS REPORT TRUCKING

STATE SURPLUS | EPA ROLLBACK | WAR ON BAD ACTORS



A full-page photograph of a middle-aged man with a grey beard and balding head, smiling and looking off to the side. He is wearing a light-colored plaid button-down shirt and blue jeans, with his hands in his pockets. He is standing in a warehouse or industrial setting, with a yellow forklift visible in the background.

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ARKANSAS TRUCKING REPORT | Issue 1 2026



# WAYNE'S WORLD

*Neil Corder steers the next generation to stay true  
to ethos that built Wayne Smith Trucking*

**By Dwain Hebda**  
*Contributing Writer*

Just over the shoulders of a clutch of buildings that make up Wayne Smith Trucking, a visitor to the Morrilton-based company can see the interstate through an elevated gap in the landscape. From the lower vantage of the graveled yard and concrete parking area, the traffic appears to fly through the air, even the 18-wheelers that make up every fifth or six vehicle flashing through the sightline. The compound has only been home to Wayne Smith Trucking since 2016, but the hum of wheels and whine of engines has been the soundtrack for the homegrown hauler for 50 years.

Unlike many of the people that make up the company, Neil Corder didn't come up behind the wheel in the trucking business. In fact, he had nothing to do with the industry at all before he signed on, having married the eldest daughter of late founder Wayne Smith. Nearly everything he learned about running a trucking company he learned from his father-in-law, and it doesn't take long for Corder to refer to his mentor when discussing the growth of the 120-truck operation.

In those moments Corder and his wife Michele, who came aboard at Wayne Smith Trucking to work in the office a couple of years ago, readily call to mind how the attributes of the founder still hold sway over the company, even five decades in.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACOB SLATON







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**"AS A COMPANY WE HAVE LEARNED MORE IN THE  
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**—NEIL CORDER**

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"One of the things we've never changed that he taught us is the value of relationships," Neil said. "That started with keeping your word, you know. If we said we were going to be there at eight o'clock in the morning, we were there at eight o'clock in the morning."

"He treated his relationships with our drivers the same way. He listened to what they had to say, and the answer wasn't always 'Yes' but it was never just a flat 'No,' or a 'Get outta here.' He always treated the driver or the employee or whoever it was like a friend, and we still do."

"Dad was a very soft-hearted and godly man. He was a person who wanted to be your friend, who wanted to be your confidant," Michele said. "People respected him for being very dependable; if he said he was going to do it, he was going to do it."

A smile of memory, then she added with a laugh, "If he said us kids were gonna get a whooping, we were gonna get a whooping."

## **AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY**

Larry Wayne Smith was the kind of success story that came right out of the American lexicon. An Arkansas native, Smith's family was among the millions who migrated to California during the Great Depression in search of work. They found it out west; Wayne's father worked the pipeline across the southwest while Wayne and his brothers picked fruits and vegetables to help support the household.

Young Wayne drove his first truck at 14 years of age in a migrant labor

camp in Bakersfield, California. As he recalled to Arkansas Trucking Report magazine in 2016, he'd worked his way up to the orchards and canning operations when a supervisor asked him what he wanted to do that season.

"I said, 'I'd like to drive a truck,'" Smith recalled in the article. Next thing he knew he was behind the wheel of a 1947 International hauling produce through the camps.

"No physical, no drug test," he said. "When the peaches and the plums were all over, I hauled potatoes in from the field to the cellar."

After earning his spurs in the produce fields and orchards, Smith was back in Arkansas by the time he was 17, hauling rocks and pulpwood. Years of hard work followed, which included operating a service station, until in 1976 he decided to hang his shingle in Morrilton, consisting of two trucks and five trailers. In addition to hauling for a local cotton mill, his reputation from his days hauling raw pulpwood gained him a good customer in the local paper mill.

The cotton mill ultimately didn't last but timing proved excellent for the latter client. When Rock Island Railroad workers went on strike in 1978, it left the mill with no way to ship its products, accelerating the little trucking company's growth. In the 1980s, more labor unrest presented itself, this time among the mill's workers themselves. Smith agreed to continue hauling on the condition the situation didn't start to endanger his drivers, a show of vendor loyalty that came at the price of some damaged trucks but also solidified

a business relationship that endures to this day.

An advocate of slow, controlled growth, Smith would live to see the company serve all of the lower 48 states without sacrificing its ideals, especially safety. He regularly deflected the credit for the company's success to the people who worked for him, be it in the cab or in the office, another aspect of his genuine care and gratitude for employees.

"To his drivers," said longtime employee Vickie Berkemeyer in the 2016 piece, "well, he's King Wayne. He's good to 'em."

Though he had only an 11<sup>th</sup> grade education, Smith not only shepherded his business but also served on the boards of Petit Jean State Bank, Central Baptist College, and the Arkansas Trucking Association as a way of giving back for all he had been blessed with. Upon his death in 2017 at age 70, the entire community mourned, as did the membership of the Arkansas Trucking Association.

"Wayne has had a reputation for being honest, hard-working, and truly passionate about trucking for as long as I've known him," Arkansas Trucking Association President Shannon Newton said at the time. "The world has lost a great man, and many of us have lost a good friend."

"I just hope that we did some good," Smith said to close the ATA article. "A lot of times truckers don't have too good of a name. When I'm gone, I want to still have a good name and have an honest company. Hopefully it will keep going."

## **A NEW GENERATION TAKES OVER**

The architect of the firm's story since the passing of its founder, Neil Corder joined Wayne Smith Trucking in 1993 and quickly found himself in a master class in matters that spelled the difference between steady, long-term success in the trucking business and falling victim to sudden swings in the market.

"When I married in and started working for him in '93 we probably had



20, 30 trucks. Then in the early 2000s, we were probably up into the 60s,” he said. “It wasn’t a big climb, just slow growth as our customers grew.”

Paper products still make up the bulk, about 70 percent, of the company’s freight-hauling mailer-grade cardboard sheets and boxes for local Green Bay Packaging. The remainder of its loads are in food grade boxes used to package frozen dinners and bulk foodstuffs. The hauler serves national companies as well as Arkansas clients, such as a River Valley-based rice processor located just up the highway.

Corder, who graduated from the University of Central Arkansas in Conway “with a computer science degree I’ve never used,” was exposed to every aspect of running the company during his early days, starting out in Green Bay Packaging’s drop yard, working nights while finishing college. In the years that followed, he learned his mentor’s secrets to success in business, strategies that weren’t flashy so much as effective.

“He worked so hard. He pretty much worked 24-7,” Corder said of Smith’s signature talent as an entrepreneur. “In the early days, he would bring a truck home on a Sunday, clean it out, wash the truck, take it back. He was also the mechanic in the early five- and 10-truck days. He would book loads, he would bill loads, and then he would go to the bank with the checks. He hired some great employees, but he literally was a one-man show for a long time.”

Corder also saw a natural intellect at work in his father-in-law that was stunning. Smith was legendary for his innate mathematical skills and his ability to sum up numbers on a page with pinpoint accuracy.

“It used to make me so mad,” Corder said. “I would spend two or three days on spreadsheets on the computer and I would come down and say, ‘OK, on this group of trucks in this lane, this freight, we need to do this.’ He’d look at it, he’d hit that adding machine for about 30 seconds, and he’d say, ‘You’re about three cents low.’ I

mean, if he did that to me once, he did it a hundred times.”

Smith’s skill notwithstanding, Corder’s first big win was to successfully advance the cause of technology in operations, computerizing the office in the early 2000s.

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**—NEIL CORDER**

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“It wasn’t just the accounting software, but the trucking software,” he said. “Up to then, we did everything on big sheets of paper: 80 drivers, each driver had a name and two columns showing what they were delivering, what they were picking up. The next day, we wrote it all down again. I mean, that pad of paper was two foot, three foot square.

“In 2007, we got a server, the software, all that. That wasn’t that long ago, but I’m not going to say we were behind the times. We were probably average compared to companies our size, because it was a very large expense to do all that.”

The technology may have helped keep pace with the competition, but other, equally important elements have remained the same as when Smith ran the place, namely when it comes to employee relations. Corder said for whatever disadvantages the company may have had being located in a small town, employee loyalty isn’t one of them. However, that’s not something Wayne Smith Trucking takes for granted, nor can it ever take it for granted, he said.

“In Arkansas, trucking is one of the biggest industries in the state, and we have an advantage, probably, by providing opportunity in a smaller community,” he said. “However, we’ve never been a call in and tell us your truck number type of company. We know that it’s Joe Hill. We know that it’s Rick Duval. We recognize who they are by their voices on the radio after they’ve been here a little bit.

“That’s one thing that we’ve all agreed to, with all of our guys, is that we’re never going with a truck number. That’s when we know we’re too big.”

Corder takes this tenet so seriously that after Wayne Smith Trucking moved to the city’s industrial park in 2016, he gave up his space in the administration building because he didn’t feel it promoted the employee-first mentality Smith always preached. That might seem like a small thing, but the value of it is apparent – drivers here average 10-plus years of tenure and 20- and 30-year drivers are not unusual. There’s even a handful of drivers that go nearly all the way back to the company’s first load.

“I actually moved out of that office because I was getting disconnected. I moved back over there, right off of the main dispatch office,” he said. “We have an open dispatch office. The drivers coming through the yard, come in to get dispatched, say hi, grab a cup of coffee, sit around dispatch for five minutes, talk about this and that and then leave.



"It's aggravating sometimes when you're busy, but one of the biggest things we get from drivers coming to us after they've been here a little bit is, 'Wow. I can't believe I can just walk in and go see Neil. He's got a true open door policy.' That's where we differentiate ourselves from other companies."

### FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

The prospects ahead for Wayne Smith Trucking look bright as Corder

said a leveling out of rates has just about returned equilibrium to the local market overall. Hiring good drivers is as tricky as it has ever been, but the company has been aided by its decades of operations in the market which has created driver pipelines into local families that go back generations.

"We now have several sons, nephews, and cousins of people that worked here years ago," he said. "I think I could come up with five or six that are here

because their dad or their uncle was here. So that does help."

Another thing that positions the company well is the attitude Corder takes toward the younger generations, seeking to meet them where they are as best he can without sacrificing company goals. It is a delicate line to walk but one made easier with an understanding servant mentality.

# NEIL CORDER

## At-A-Glance

**Bucket list vacation spot:** Africa

**One word that best describes me:** Professional procrastinator

**My professional superpower:** Fix now — stress later

**Something I know to be true about all people:** They want to be heard

**My ideal Saturday must include:** Coffee, Jeep, & antiques

**The best thing about being in this line of work is:** The people we meet

**The things I am proudest of in my career are:** The people who have earned the reputation our company has earned in this business

**Advice I would give to my 16-year-old self:** Learn patience

**Quote I live my life by:** To paraphrase Lee Iacocca, "Hire people smarter than you, let them know what needs done and get out of their way."

**In the scarce leisure time that I have, I most enjoy doing:** Woodworking/hunting

**The secret to my happiness is:** My faith and family

**Weakness or guilty pleasure:** Chocolate chip cookie dough





"Actually, in a lot of ways, things are so much simpler with the youngsters, because we are very technology oriented now," he said. "We could probably operate 90% of our stuff without even talking to the driver, sending them the loads, they accept it on their screen, and they put in information that comes back to us. It's really a hands-free scenario; they don't have to even talk to the dispatcher anymore, although like I said before, a lot of them do."

"Job performance? Not a huge difference; you've got hard-working old guys and old lazy guys. You've got hard-working young guys and young lazy guys. A bigger challenge to this point is that we require drivers to take a picture of their bill of lading and send us a copy. Well, we've got three guys with flip phones. Now that's a challenge."

One change that is coming, Corder said, is the company is likely to branch into new lines of freight in the near future, diversifying its load mix to level out swings in the market.

"We do dry van and flatbed now — 70% dry van, 30% flatbed," he said. "I can see the potential for us to try getting into a 20%, 30% scenario for a reefer division. Reefer (business) drops faster during hard times but then recovers faster."

"I've got some friends that run a lot of reefers, and they're seeing the same revenue ebbs and flows, just not as deep. They can haul a lot of van freight, but we can't haul a lot of reefer freight, you know? In the hard times reefers could haul cardboard paper if they had to, but right now we can't haul cookie dough."

Corder said unlike some companies that innovated most during COVID-19, Wayne Smith Trucking has gained the most over the past couple of years when revenue was at a premium, forcing the company to look for greater efficiency.

"As a company we have learned more in the last two years of hardship. We looked inside, we found the holes, we found the leaks," he said. "We did some good things during COVID; we built a warehouse, we bought some commercial property, started a paint

and body shop. We've got all those on their feet and fully self-supporting, but I think the real learning point has been to pay attention to the pennies."

Another weapon in the company's profitability arsenal has been its long-time membership in the Arkansas Trucking Association where Corder sits on the board of directors and is also on the board of the self-insurance program. He said from programs such as the North American Transportation Management Institution audits to the insurance dividends rewarding safe

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companies to simply having the chance to network, ATA membership has been a big part of Wayne Smith Trucking's success.

"Just being at conventions and being in the room with some of the big guys in our industry has been great," he said. "I was at an ATA board meeting, and JB Hunt, Maverick, all of those guys were in there, and I'm sitting there listening. Plus it's a good give and take; I've never felt like the big companies called all the shots and the little companies just sat there and didn't say anything or that nobody would listen to me."

The benefits of membership extend to the statehouse, and Corder pointed

to some pressing issues facing the industry that are headlining the ATA board's agenda.

"Tort reform is one of the big ones, given the lawsuits that we've got as an industry," he said. "There's also a lot of industry cleanup that has to happen regarding non-domiciled drivers, non-English-speaking drivers. The board has been very concerned about that issue as well."

Meanwhile, outside his window, the sun is starting to set in the late afternoon sky. A short jaunt down an access road leads straight to the interstate where trucks glide by carrying paper, ice cream, pet food, and who-knows-what-else, headed both east and west. It is an industry in a constant state of change, yet reassuringly straightforward as carriers strive to deliver goods safely and on time, just as Wayne Smith Trucking has done for half a century and will continue for half a century to come if ownership has anything to say about it.

"You know one thing that's bad about being in a small town is that everybody talks and rumors get started," Corder said. "We've supposedly been sold seven times since Wayne passed, just because at the local coffee shop they seem to know more about our business than we do. We recently traded 30 old trailers for 30 new trailers, and we had the old ones stacked out by the highway. We must have got 10 calls from people, 'Are y'all going out of business?' It was just the rumor mill."

"The fact is, we're still a family deal, and we're not going anywhere. We have a great reputation around here from being active in the community, sponsoring baseball teams, softball teams, the high school. That's another thing Wayne believed in and did the whole time he was in business. And now our son works here; he's 29 and he started out in the shop busting tires at 14 or 15. Just like Wayne took me under his wing and taught me every aspect of the company so I knew everything about every job, that's what I'm doing with him. He's my retirement plan." **ATA**