

WAYNE SMITH

Giving Trucking a Good Name

ARKANSAS REPORT TRUCKING

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AND COVER BY JOHN DAVID PITTMAN.

Giving Trucking a Good

Wayne Smith knows what it takes to keep trucking for 40 years

“SOMEONE USED TO ASK ME IF I GO TO TUNICA AND GAMBLE. I SAID ‘NO, THE BUSINESS I’M IN, THAT’S ENOUGH GAMBLING FOR ME.’”

By Bethany May
Managing Editor

Fifteen years ago, the *Arkansas Trucking Report* visited Wayne Smith as he celebrated the 25th anniversary of his small trucking business, Wayne Smith Trucking, in Morrilton, Ark. We introduced readers to a soft-spoken, modest man, who despite heading a long-running, successful business in his community still wanted to tinker in the shop, talk with the drivers and get away from the executive desk as often as possible.

In 2016, on the 40th anniversary of Wayne Smith Trucking, some things have changed, but the spirit of Wayne Smith hasn't. He will tell you, “It's been a good trip.”

The most obvious change is the address.

Today, if you were to drive by the Wayne Smith Trucking sign and campus of old buildings—truck shops and offices—down Hwy 64, you'd find a ghost town, empty of cars and people and most certainly trucks.

The company just moved headquarters to Morrilton's growing industrial park right off of Interstate 40, and the city renamed the street WST Circle six months ago when Smith bought the building. A stark contrast to the old headquarters, the new front doors are flanked with flowers, visitors are greeted with a giant TV screen showing a map where dispatchers can locate their drivers anywhere in the U.S., and a shiny racecar sits in the parking lot with “Wayne Smith Trucking” across the side.

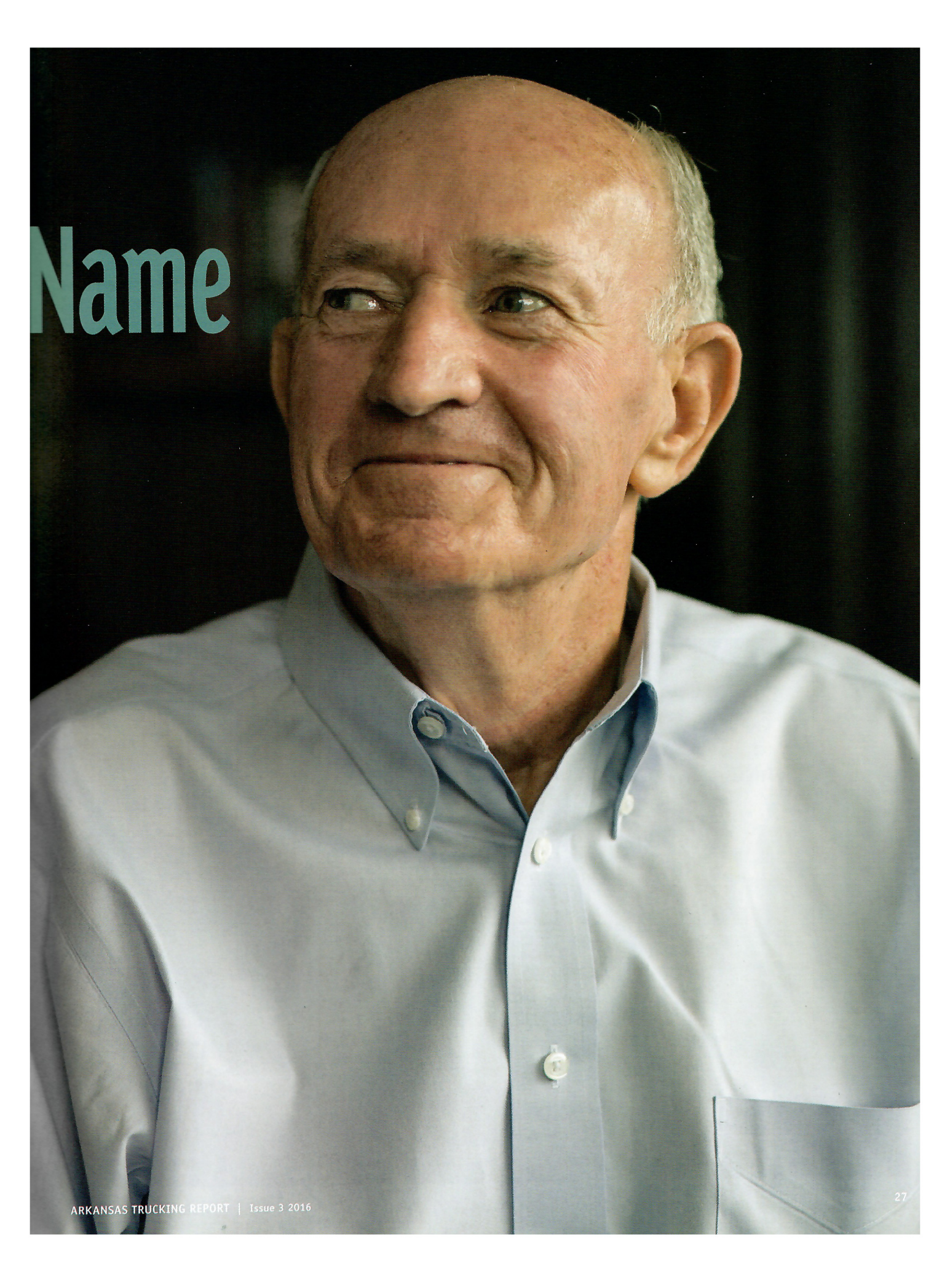
The new building is two stories with stacked stone inside and out, but the move was more practical than aesthetic. The trucks can now just get off the interstate rather than driving all the way across town.

“I figured one time the miles that we ran through Morrilton, coming to the shop and going back. It'd surprise you how many miles we were going out of way—out of route,” Smith says.

“Seems like it was about 3,000 a month.”

One thing that hasn't changed much is the way Wayne

Photography by John David Pittman

A close-up portrait of an older man with thinning grey hair, looking slightly to his left. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

Name

speaks about his drivers. In 2001, he bragged about his drivers' safety records, saying, "It's the employees who have kept it all together, and that's the bottom line."

Today, when Wayne talks about drivers, his voice cracks and his tone is hushed, almost reverent. Vickie Berkemeyer, whom he has called his "right hand" in the office for 34 years, explains, "To his drivers," she pauses, "well, he's King Wayne. He's good to 'em. If you don't have drivers, you don't have a business." The drivers will come in, she says, to check on Wayne or talk about their day, their work, their family. He respects the ones who climb in cabs and carry loads day after day.

After all, he started out as a truck driver in a labor camp near Bakersfield, Calif.—the kind of camp you might see as Steinbeck's Joads family rolled over the hill in *The Grapes of Wrath* during the Dust Bowl or the kind that were torn down in the old Merle Haggard song.

While his dad worked the pipeline and his family followed its progress across the Southwest, Wayne and his four brothers began picking fruit and vegetables. In 1960, he got his first chance to drive the truck to haul the produce through the camps.

"The first time I drove a truck I was 14 to make the harvest. I finally got to be on the orchards and canning. Each season, the supervisor always asked, What do you want to do this year?

"I said, 'I'd like to drive a truck.'"

After a quick spin around the parking lot to prove he could do it, he was handed the keys of a '47 International, and his career more or less began there.

"No physical. No drug test. When the peaches and prunes were all over. I hauled potatoes in from the field to the cellar. Then I started driving a dump truck."

When he was 17, Wayne was hired in Arkansas to haul rocks and later pulpwood.

After moving rocks in a dump

truck, he went to Pencil Bluff, by Mt. Ida, in 1966. "Pulpwood was five feet wide and top heavy. I remember there was a hill that you had to shift as fast as you could, and it was raining the night I had my first load."

WHATEVER IT TAKES

One reason, Wayne and the drivers have so much mutual respect is that he considers no job beneath him.

Until recently, Wayne would still drive when he needed to. He would work all day in the office, and then he and Peggy, his wife of almost 50 years now, would take roll-stock paper to Tulsa before coming back the next day and going back to work.

But he won't just get behind the wheel. He's also willing to get his hands dirty in the maintenance shop. He used to work on all the trucks. When his only mechanic was off on Mondays, the company president would also become the company mechanic.

"We've just always kind of done

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what needed to be done. It don't make any difference if you are washing one, greasing one, or driving one . . . if it needed to be done," he trails off. "I would never ask anybody to do anything that I wouldn't do."

"I only have the last two years because I can't," he says.

Declining health has kept him from driving the trucks or pitching in to fix them over the past few years, but his friends, family and coworkers whom he calls friends and family have learned from the example Wayne has been setting the past 40 years: they just do what needs to be done.

Vickie, of course, is a veteran of the philosophy, working alongside Wayne for over three decades. But lately help has come from family and long-time employees.

Neil Corder, the operations manager, has been working for Wayne for 23 years, Kent Eddy in human resources was also overseeing safety for the last 5 years, until Joey Berkemeyer, Vicki's

husband, came on board to take over safety last year.

"I've got some really good people... starting right here," Wayne says nodding toward Vicki, "and Neil, Ken, Joey. All I've got to do is just think it, and it will be done."

And it's true. If you attended the 2016 Arkansas Trucking Association's Business Conference in May, you may have run into Wayne.

"Joey pushed me around the ATA meeting in a wheelchair. He's the one who suggested that. And if we go to Albuquerque next, he said we are going

to take a wheel chair."

Wayne's actual family can be found in the office as well. On the day of our visit, we met his daughter Tonya Simer, working in billing. She's been with the company for 22 years, and the apples' apples don't fall far from the tree either. Three of Wayne's five grandchildren have dabbled in the trucking business already.

Tonya's daughter Lauren, a sophomore at Arkansas Tech, is spending her summer helping out. Derek, his only grandson, who attends the University

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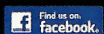
—WAYNE SMITH, PRESIDENT OF WAYNE SMITH TRUCKING

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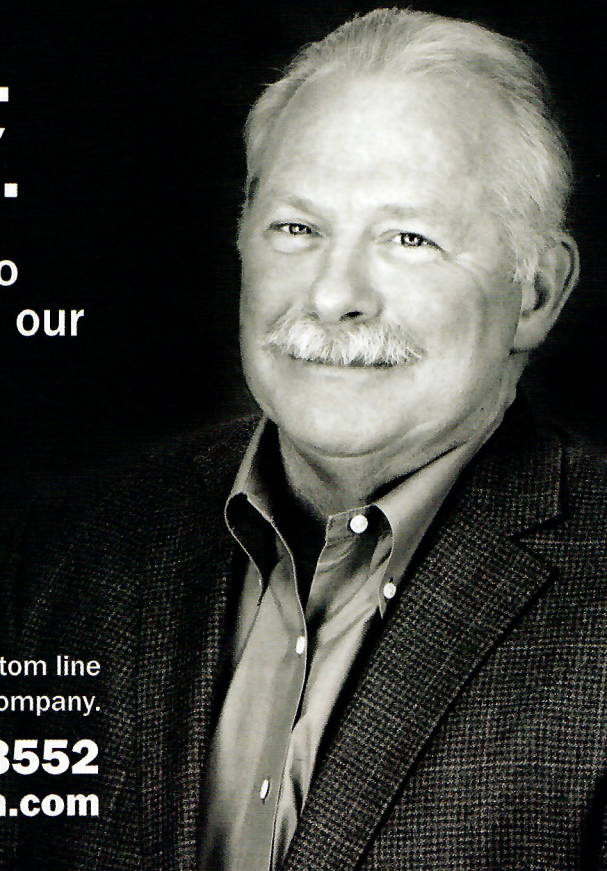
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“AND THEN, ONE NIGHT, OVER THERE AT THE OLD PLACE, WE HAD FIVE TRUCKS LINED UP IN A ROW. AND YOU COULD TELL WHEN THEY GOT OUT OF THE CAR... THEY UNLOADED THE SHOTGUN.”

of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton, has been working in the shop as a mechanic for the last four years, and Wayne hopes he might one day run the shop.

Not yet graduated from Morrilton High, Mallory—another of his four granddaughters—recently stopped by the office to practice her dispatching skills.

“She loved it,” he says.

Wayne is quick to attribute his company’s longevity to blessing and his band of loyal employees.

“To me, it’s just like a dream. I look back at the way things have all worked out, and it’s not what I’ve done, but what the Lord’s done. I don’t like to take credit for nothing. I just try to do my part.

“If I was successful in anything it would be in finding the right people. Whatever success I got, it was caused by all these other folks. I might have picked them, but they are the ones who actually carried it out.”

But Vicki assures that WST success is not just luck; it’s Wayne.

“The Lord has blessed Wayne just like he said, and he won’t ever take the credit. I see though,” she says.

When it comes to luck and risk, he’s not much of a gambler. Instead, he likes to play it safe. You might be fooled by the racecar out front or the picture Vicki pulls up on her phone of Wayne sitting on a motorcycle, squinting into the sun. But he swears the kickstand was down and he never actually rode it, “I’m not much of a daredevil. Someone used to ask me if I go to Tunica and gamble. I said no, the business I’m in, that’s enough gambling for me.”

SCOTCH BLOCK FINANCES

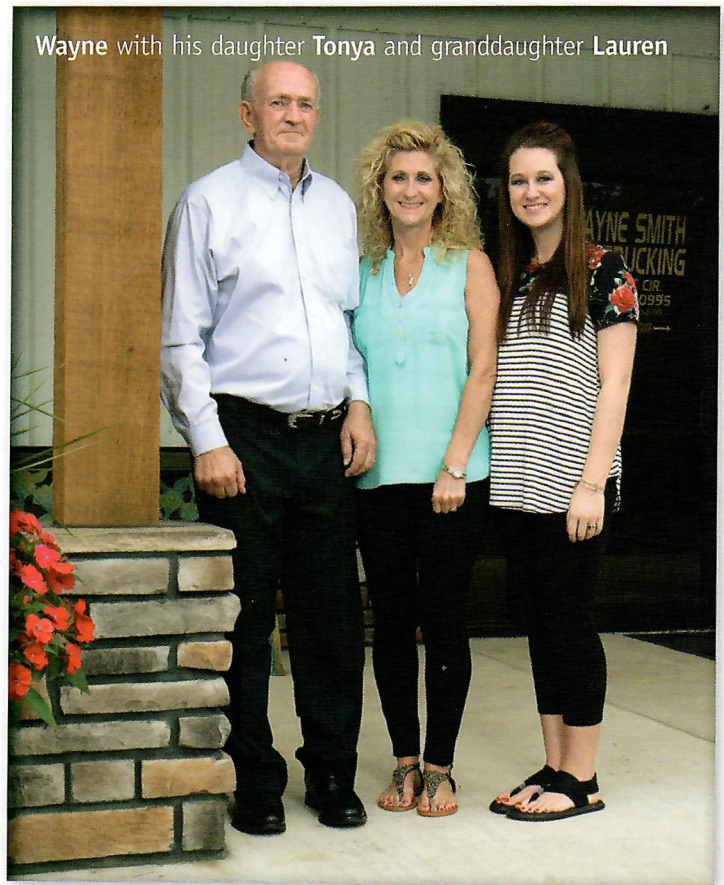
He learned his conservative streak from the two men who sold him the business in ’76. He asks, “Do you know what a scotch block is? Years ago before trucks had park brakes, they just put them in gear and parked. Sometimes they would roll, so they had blocks that they’d stick under the tires—scotch blocks.

“Mr. Butler told me, as far as finances, you need to keep you a scotch block. If you have an engine go out, or a transmission, or something that is going to cost a lot of money to fix, make sure you got enough money. So we’ve always tried to keep a scotch block.”

The philosophy has served him well. The past 40 years have brought economic ups and downs, deregulation that drove rates down, the cost of fuel and equipment that keep going up. Wayne says keeping a financial scotch block under the business kept everything from rolling backwards when times got tough.

Perhaps the biggest risk Wayne took was not just buying the business, which consisted of two trucks, five trailers and a contract, for \$95,000, but growing it so quickly when the Rock Island Railroad went on strike two years later. The ’78 strike put the paper mill they serviced in a dilemma, because they still had paper but no train to put it on.

Wayne with his daughter Tonya and granddaughter Lauren



—Because Wayne had hauled raw pulpwood for them when he moved back to Arkansas years earlier, they asked if he could haul the paper while the Rock Island workers were on strike. The plant manager helped Wayne get an emergency temporary contract to keep all of his trucks full. And then some.

When the plant manager called Smith, he asked how many trucks he could get. So Smith called the bank and was told he could get a million dollar credit. “In ’78, that was a lot of trucks.”

Eventually, Rock Island began rolling again and strikers went back to work, but they let WST keep all the scrap paper out of Safeway.

Smith doubled his fleet to keep up with demand, but hauling for the paper mill meant crossing the union’s picket lines when mill workers went on strike in the ’80s.

The supervisors were sleeping and eating at the mill to prove they could run without the whole crew, so they still needed WST to pick up and deliver loads.

“I told them as long as we don’t get anybody hurt or anybody threat-

“BECAUSE YOU’RE SMART, AND THEY KNOW THAT. YOU ARE A GOOD BUSINESS MAN, AND THAT’S WHY THEY WANT YOU.”

—VICKI BERKEMEYER, ON PETIT JEAN STATE BANK AND CENTRAL
BAPTIST COLLEGE PUTTING WAYNE ON THE
BOARD OF DIRECTORS

ened. And people I knew that worked over there that I grew up with, they all promised me that they wouldn’t do anything to mine. And then, one night, over there at the old place, we had five trucks lined up in a row. And you could tell when they got out of the car... They unloaded the shotgun.

“They shot the radiators and the side of the cab. They just stood there and emptied the gun.”

Wayne knew the fight was with the mill and not him as a vendor, but he had been caught in the middle. Luckily, the man who ran the radiator shop in town heard about the gunfire while listening to the news on his way to Clinton to go deer hunting. He turned around to help.

“We had folks pulling radiators out and helping us. We got them all back together. And the paper mill manager came over to say, ‘whatever you need, we’ll help you.’”

A GOOD TRIP

People in his community have had his back when he needed them, like a friend who gave him business when the corduroy plant, where Wayne had a lot of business, closed in ’85. But Wayne has been giving back on a regular basis as well. He serves on the board of the Petit Jean State Bank and Central Baptist College. That he would even be asked still bewilders him.

“I just went to the 10th grade because we were travelling so much. So I don’t have the education. But when the president of the bank wants you to be on their board, that’s a pretty big deal... I still don’t understand how all that happened,” he muses.

“If I’m all they got...” he trails off, but Vicki responds, “Because you’re smart, and they know that. You are a good business man, and that’s why they want you.”

He also serves on the Board of Directors for the Arkansas Trucking Association and the Board of Trustees for the Self Insurers Fund, since 1993.

Wayne is the only original trustee still serving for the ATA-SIF, which provides workers compensation to its members, mostly made up of smaller carriers.

“The Arkansas Trucking Association and the SIF basically kept us in business because we were paying so much for workman’s comp. That was a good thing and helped lots of people and helped the association... I thought it was good of Steve [Williams] because he was big enough that he was self-insured, but he wanted to get something for the little guys.”

He says it is hard to believe he’s been a part of the association and the fund for so long because he used to look up to the older members. Now he

calls himself “one of the old rats in the barn,” someone that hopefully younger members can look up to.

There is a lot to admire about how far WST has come in 40 years. From one truck of his own, to the two when he bought the business, to over 100 today, not to mention over 500 trailers.

“You look back over the years and see how things have worked. It’s kind of awesome to me, amazing how that’s your life,” he shakes his head in disbelief. “I’ve seen companies, big companies that used to be on the board with the association, and you’d think they were doing everything just right, and they’d be gone.

“And here we keep plugging by, even during the hard times in ’08 and ’09. We still keep our head above water, and it’s just amazing to me how all that works,” he continues.

When we return to WST after another 15 years, what would we find? What legacy is he leaving for Arkansas trucking?

For someone who started behind the wheel, it should come as no surprise that Wayne is working on leaving a legacy for the driver.

“I just hope that we did some good. 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.”

Since 1976, he continues to give drivers a good name.

“Like I said, it’s been a good trip.” **ATR**

