

GARY SALISBURY BREEDS SUCCESS BY EXAMPLE AT FIKES TRUCK LINE.

GO THE EXTRA MILE

By Lane Kidd

Executive Editor

Photography by Jon D. Kennedy

Gary Salisbury has an easy way of talking to people. His tone and soft cadence has you feeling so comfortable that he could fire you and you would never know it happened. He has a quick smile, and sprinkles self-deprecating humor and satire into the mix, showing that nobody should ever take himself too seriously.

Like when we were talking about achieving in school. "We had about 350

acres and about 50 or 60 head of cows, you know, getting up about 4:30 every morning. We had machines and you had to get in the stalls two at a time and you would get on each side of the cow and milk two and then walk those out and milk two more. We also had a lot of feed to grow and hay to bale. For these reasons I always looked forward to the end of summer so I could go back to school and do nothing and get a little rest." He smiled on that last line, glancing to make sure I was paying attention.

When I asked him if he ever regretted not going to college, he quickly

retorted, "I graduated from Blevins High School man, why would I need to go to college."

Or when he described why he chose trucking over dairy farming. "My brother and two sisters did not want anything to do with the dairy business and I was the youngest so Dad wanted me to carry on. Dad started talking about adding more cows when I was in high school and I finally worked up the courage to say that I did not want to be in the dairy business. I simply decided that I did not want a job where I had to work seven

Continues



days a week, twenty four hours a day” pausing briefly for effect, “and so being the smart guy that I am, I got into the trucking industry.”

This is the way you spend time with Gary Salisbury – always enjoyable, always a few laughs interspersed with some thoughtful insight. A couple of things shined through on one sunny summer afternoon though – he is enjoying being right where he is, professionally and personally.

Salisbury is Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Fikes Truck Line in Hope, Ark., a business that relies on 400 owner-operators to deliver freight throughout the U.S., virtually all of it on flatbed trailers. Fikes does not employ company drivers, preferring men and women that own their trucks and equipment.

Jim Smith, a long time trucking executive and former Chairman of the Arkansas Trucking Association, owns Fikes Truck Line, a company he bought more than 25 years ago. Smith is around the office most days. However, a few years ago he handed off the reins to Salisbury, entrusting him to the company’s decision-making, something Salisbury does not take lightly.

Salisbury has strong feelings for Jim Smith. He speaks plainly, “Jim Smith has been as much a dad to me as he has been a mentor and a boss. He took me under his wing and I have no idea why. There is a relationship there, whether I have worked for him or whether I was off doing something else. He taught me how to sell, how to be an executive, how to make good decisions, and best of all, how to be patient.”

We arrived to start the interview a little late in the morning so we decided to grab lunch at a locally owned eatery that featured some of the best roast beef and fried okra on the planet, a spot where Salisbury either nodded or waved to several around the restaurant.

On returning, I complimented him on how neatly everything in his office was organized. “Well, if you open that door over there” leaning back and pointing to a side credenza, “everything that was on my desk will slide off into

the floor. Somebody peeked in this morning, looked around, and asked me ‘who’s coming to the office today?’”

Walls and shelves are adorned with paraphernalia and more than one photograph of President George W. Bush hangs on the wall, a couple of which are autographed, somewhat ironic since we are in Hope, hometown of former President Bill Clinton.

“I have this book on Hillary”, he says a little defensively, handing me a copy of a biography entitled *Her Way*, “but I haven’t gotten around to reading it yet,” as he smiles and puts it back.

“I HAVE SEEN GUYS COMPLETELY TURNED AROUND BY OUR PROGRAMS.”

I rolled off a few questions to get things started. Has he ever stopped to consider how he wound up here – this nice office, the responsibility for managing one of the state’s larger trucking companies, elected by his peers to the boards of the Arkansas Trucking Association and the national Truckload Carriers Association, as well as a state vice president to the American Trucking Associations and other achievements?

After all, I observe that he did not attend college. He was Jim Smith’s first truck driver back in the 1980s, but moved around and drove for other companies. When did he know that he was destined to return to Fikes and work on the other side of the desk? More importantly, what did he do to draw Smith’s attention?

Salisbury ponders these questions for a moment. “In 1987 I was no longer driving and had come back to Fikes to work as a dispatcher and it was in the summer and freight was good and we were busy. That winter, however, things changed. Freight lightened up and as winter settled in, freight orders simply went south on us. We found ourselves

coming to work and sitting around looking at each other.”

“You see, we were waiting on the phone to ring,” he explains. “At Southern Refrigerated (where he was previously employed), we were always on the phone calling or meeting customers and asking for the business. The reefer business is that way, very competitive, and if you are not the first one on the phone, someone else will get the order. Anyway, we sat around with the phones silent until finally I said ‘man we’ve got to do something, get on the phone, and call people and start hauling some freight.’”

“We started calling companies,” he continues, “and customers that we had not talked to in a year and we had left some of those customers on not the best of terms. Sometimes you have to swallow your pride and put your hat in your hand and ask for the business. We did and we turned it around.”

“One morning not long after Jim Smith walked in and said ‘you set the tone in this office and this company and

you turned a negative into a positive’. That may have been the moment that he thought I might have some potential,” he says, emphasizing the word ‘potential.’ Salisbury has obviously capitalized on his potential ever since, managing Fikes and growing the company each year.

A company of one

Seven years earlier though, around 1980, it looked like Salisbury’s destiny might be to drive a truck. Congress had deregulated the trucking industry and to everyone it looked ripe for the taking. No longer was trucking open only to those companies that held the authority to haul commodities. Anyone with a dream and a few thousand dollars could get in the game, with one truck or a thousand.

Salisbury decided to join the fray. “I had driven trucks and tractors all my life,” he says, “so I applied for authority and Leon Prickett at Trux, Inc. helped me file the proper paperwork. I put ‘Gary Salisbury’ on the side of my truck and I was in business.”

The following year he heard about a new company that needed drivers. “I

knew one of Jim’s high school friends and he told me that his buddy was starting a trucking company and was just getting started. “He was really great,” Salisbury says with a smile remembering his first conversation with Smith on the phone. “I introduced myself and he said ‘well, I just bought this company and I put my savings into it so it’s not a matter of if it’s going to work, it has to work; so I am committed and I will be just as committed to you’ and that phrase has stayed with me ever since,” Salisbury says.

“It was fun back then,” says Salisbury of those years. “It [deregulation] did bring an excitement for those who wanted to be in the business, even those of us with only one truck. For those that were already in the business, it brought a little stress and anxiety to say the least.”

Salisbury is proud of his years as a truck driver even though he realized early on that he wanted to eventually do something else in the industry. He even admits to missing the job now and then. His experiences as a driver are indispensable he says in relating to the challenges that his owner-operators face each day. “I’ve gone down Cabbage Pass on I-84 in Oregon, trying to slow down

for that last curve and, I have been out early in the morning when you are trying to get into Bakersfield and the fog is so deep you can’t see,” he says. “I have fought traffic and dealt with scale houses and inspections so I can get right with them,” he says, smiling proudly.

However, Salisbury admits that he was not a good businessman back then due to a combination of factors – youth, lack of experience and not much understanding of business principles. “I usually took off on Fridays and left late on Mondays, but worked really hard Tuesdays through Thursdays,” he says, smiling a little sheepishly. “I look back now and can see the mistakes I made. I could have made a lot more money.”

However, he believes those personal experiences helped him. He wants his drivers to be more successful. “I am obsessive compulsive and so I decided to start reading books about five years ago,” pausing to see if I am listening, to which I quickly respond that reading books can be a good thing.

“Anyway, if a leader isn’t learning,” he continues, “he is simply not being a very good leader and I like passing those things on that I pick up in my

personal reading that can give people an opportunity to succeed. One of the basic lessons is simply to go beyond what people expect of you.”

He cites an example from a book he recommends to anyone interested in business management – “The Fred Factor” by business writer Mark Sandborn. “Sandborn features a mailman named Fred in Denver, Colorado, to show how commitment and enthusiasm can do so much in your job. This person was a thousand percent beyond a mail carrier, taking care of loose pets, watching the homes of people who were away on travel, picking up trash and generally taking care of his neighborhood. We want people at Fikes to be like Fred.”

Cultural differences

The historical designations given trucking companies, such as less-than-truckload, truckload, regional versus long haul, specialized, private versus for-hire, are blurring more each year. Some industry folks still maintain that companies like Fikes, a business that relies on owner operators rather

Continues

GET SOMEONE ON YOUR SIDE

A National Law Firm Dedicated to Trucking.

A Legal Defense Plan Designed By and For Truckers.

Vital Protection for America’s Best Drivers and Trucking Companies.

Jim C. Klepper, Esq.
800-417-3552
www.driverslegalplan.com

DRIVERS
Legal Plan



“THEY FIND IT HARD TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO GET FREIGHT DELIVERED WITHOUT FORCED DISPATCH.”

than buying their own equipment and employing drivers, are not really trucking companies.

Salisbury simply disagrees with that premise. He does admit that the two operations are completely different. “The number one difference is culture,” he explains. “I believe the difference may be more in the way in which we associate and relate to the people in the trucks. Companies that own and operate their equipment cannot understand how we manage owner-operators. They find it hard to understand how to get freight delivered without forced dispatch.”

“People are people,” Salisbury explains, “and anytime you make

somebody do something they don’t want to do, they may not like it. Companies that force their drivers to take loads when they want to come home often wind up with their trucks parked at a rest stop with that load gone. It works the same way here. Are we a little more open-minded? Yes. Do we negotiate with our drivers? Absolutely. But it all works and

everybody has an understanding because it’s a partnership.”

“From my perspective,” he counters, “it is hard to understand how those companies get it all done, all those things like personnel, equipment, maintenance, driver turnover, stuff that takes away from your core business, which is to move freight. We don’t have to worry with maintenance and huge driver recruiting and HR departments. Our safety department does all of our leasing and driver requirements, because all of that is similar, it all falls under the same rules.”

In fact, Salisbury believes that more trucking companies are now emulating businesses like Fikes. “Those companies are tired of struggling with driver turnover and they know we do not have that problem,” he observes. “We can grow our fleet without as much capital so it is not too surprising that many of the conventional trucking companies are now coming over to our side, trying to recruit owner-operators.”

And Salisbury admits that the asset based trucking companies are stiff competition. “Those companies are doing a good job recruiting owner operators,” he admits, “so we have to be just as innovative to be attractive” citing fuel discount programs and the business training courses they offer. He also mentioned “Higher Roads”, a program of services developed by Jack Milligan, a former executive at the Kansas Motor

Carriers Association and later at the American Trucking Associations. Milligan recently affiliated with Fikes Truck Line.

“For several years we looked for a program like Jack’s,” Salisbury says of the program. “We wanted a service to let the trucker

know what they can deduct, what they can’t and what it takes to make money. The program also helps with personal finances, tax returns, how to pay off debt, credit scores, how to up credit scores, how to trade and get better equipment.”

“I have seen guys completely turned around by our programs,” he says. “They were broke and really depressed and

didn’t have a good outlook on life but those that have just a little ‘want to’ about them have their lives turned around here. It’s great to hear the feedback from their wives when they say ‘he would not be the man he is today without Fikes.’”

Breaking out

Everybody can point to people who had a hand in their development, people who believed in them enough to give them a break. Salisbury is no exception. While Jim Smith will always hold a special place on his list, Salisbury says that Tony Smith and the late Homer Jones, co-founders of Southern Refrigerated Transport in Texarkana and Ashdown, Arkansas, are also on his list.

He says that Jones and Smith believed in him enough to give him his first real opportunity to pursue a career other than driving a truck. “I was a good talker,” Salisbury relates with a grin, “but to be a good freight salesman, or any salesperson, you not only have to sell yourself but you have to get someone to trust that you can represent their company well.”

In 1985, Salisbury was driving a truck, leased to Jones and Smith’s fledgling trucking company. He heard through the grapevine that they wanted to expand into the highly competitive refrigerated truckload business. Something moved him to ask for a meeting with the owners.

They gave him the appointment and he wasted no time pitching his idea. “I said ‘you are going to need a salesman’ and I proposed that they hire me to recruit and manage drivers for them but more importantly, to go out and find the business for them.”

Salisbury reflects on what led him to ask for that meeting. “I loved driving, but I also didn’t want to drive a truck for the rest of my life and I saw the opportunity with Homer and Tony to do that.”

“They liked the idea,” Salisbury murmurs, and “they even gave me a company credit card.” The job fit him

“YOU SEE, WE WERE WAITING ON THE PHONE TO RING.”



Salisbury and Jim Smith

like a glove. “I loved traveling and meeting new people and the harder the people were to see, the more I liked the challenge. I liked to work my way up the ladder to get to the man who makes the decisions.”

His first real opportunity to book freight was the 7 - 11 convenience store chain.

A series of

lower level meetings finally led him to the corporate headquarters in Dallas. “The transportation department was like on the 15th floor of this high rise building in downtown Dallas and I had never been in a situation like this in my life,” he recalls.

“This fellow brought in a rate analyst and I did not even know what a rate analyst was,” he laughs. “I didn’t

even have a price sheet,” he recalls, “just winging it but he said that we needed a company to haul self-serve sandwiches from Los Angeles to Utah and asked me to get him a price. That was my first real sales call and we wound up getting the business and hauling freight for them for several years.”

Salisbury worked for SRT until 1987, when he remembers Jim Smith calling him with the opportunity to work for Fikes. Salisbury says as excited as he was when Smith called, leaving SRT was “one of the hardest things I have ever done” because “they were simply great great people.” He never forgot Jones telling him to pursue his dream. Homer said ‘this is your future, and you have to do it.’

There is no one way to lead people or manage a company Salisbury observes. In fact, contrary to popular opinion, he relies on his intuition in making many decisions. “A lot of people say you should not go with your gut but I am the

“WE HAVE ONE TRUCK THAT HAS SHOWN A 13% INCREASE!”

Ralph Bradbury
President – Continental Express

Our patented technology (U.S. & Canada) extracts hydrogen from water and injects it into your combustion chamber, resulting in a more efficient, more powerful and cleaner fuel burn.

- 100% safe. No hydrogen is stored on the vehicle, it is produced on demand only when the vehicle is running.
- Does not void your vehicle warranty.
- Installs without any engine modification or significant downtime.
- Reduces emissions while increasing horsepower and torque.
- Tested over 60 million miles and more than 150 fleets.
- Unit is transferable to your next truck.
- Leases available.

Try our revolutionary new hydrogen fuel injection system and if you don't see at least a 10% increase in fuel economy, we will refund your money.

It's as simple as that.



10% Fuel Savings Guaranteed



Hydrogen Fuel Injection

Canadian Hydrogen Energy Company Ltd.

www.chechfi.ca

CONTACT INFO FOR HYDROGEN FUEL INJECTION OF ARKANSAS

In Little Rock call:

Jeff England @ 501-376-0222

england@arkansas.net

One Innwood Circle, Suite 204

In Fayetteville call:

Kim Brawner @ 479-283-1612

kbrawner@ipa.net

1667 Broadview Drive

Member



Member



Member



opposite. You know, if it does not feel right, then most likely it isn't."

Salisbury is actively engaged in the industry's associations nationally and at the state level. Fikes Truck Line is a member of its home state trucking association and also the Texas association and both the American Trucking Associations and the Truckload Carriers Association.

"It takes a lot of time," he admits, to attend meetings and engage his peers on the issues. "I want to make a difference and associations are the only way we can do that. Whether we need to pass or defeat a law that is the way to get it done. We are very effective in Arkansas and I think we have set a standard here of being able to lead the industry in ways

that have been good and positive changes for the industry."

He also enjoys the camaraderie and friendships he has with his fellow board members of the Arkansas association. "Sometimes I look around and it is easy to feel a little intimidated when you are with people like Robert Young and Bob Powell and the executives for FedEx and Wal-Mart and J. B. Hunt sitting beside you. After all, I'm just a farm boy from Hope, Ark., who didn't go to college and started out driving a truck," he says grinning. "It really brings you home to the fact that in this industry, anybody can do anything if you simply put your mind to it and work hard."

I ask him where he sees himself in ten years. "Well, I hope to be right here.

Our tagline is 'connecting people with purpose' and I would like to see more people connected and doing well," adding "and hopefully Jim won't be coming in everyday and I can go back to working Tuesdays through Thursdays."

Of course, not anybody who believes in 'The Fred Factor' would ever work three days a week, although he might really enjoy that schedule. Gary Salisbury has built his career on doing what nobody expected, making the extra effort to sell himself, to make the sale or to book the freight, or to help his drivers and their families or to push for the best operating environment for his industry. Salisbury is doing the extra things. Fikes Truck Line, its drivers and the trucking industry are the beneficiaries.

AT A GLANCE

BORN: January 24, 1960 in Hope, Arkansas

MARRIED: Married to the former Suzy Barnett for 11 years

EDUCATION: Blevins High School in Blevins, Arkansas

HIGH SCHOOL ACTIVITIES: "I was president of the Future Farmers of America for two years."

FAMILY: "My parents are my dad, Homer, and my mother, Junita, who has passed away, and I have an older brother, Leslie, and two older sisters, Sandra and Barbara. Now, I was the baby of the family and from their [siblings] perspective I was spoiled and got everything I wanted. From my perspective, I was just really smart and manipulated my way through life based on their mistakes."

CAREER CHOICES: "I was born and raised in the dairy business so I always felt that I was either going to be a dairyman or a truck driver."

MUSIC OR TALK RADIO: Talk Radio

FAVORITE MUSICIANS: Eagles and Willie Nelson

FAVORITE DINNER: Freshly caught salmon from the Pacific Northwest

FIRST CAR: "I bought a used 1963 Ford Fairlane when I was 16. It had a 3-speed, 289 cubic inch engine but it was a four door, pretty geeky but it ran."

NOTABLE QUOTE: "I didn't have anything else going for me as a kid so I had to have a sense of humor."

FAVORITE CITY: "Seattle is our favorite city and the Pacific Northwest is our favorite place. We love it up there. That's where Suzy and I went on our honeymoon."

WHAT ADVICE DOES SUZY GIVE YOU? "Relax, go hiking. Suzy likes the outdoors, and she usually drags me along and I am usually a half a mile or so behind her. One time we were hiking in Colorado. My breathing was labored and we had not seen any wildlife and Suzy said, "Well, Gary, did you really expect to see anything when you sound like a freight train coming up the road?"

FAVORITE SPORTS TEAM: "The Razorbacks but I am not really a very sport-oriented individual."

FAVORITE PASTIME: "Piddling around."

