

RB HUMPHREYS FLEET BUILDS on a FARMING PAST

By David Hollis

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In a previous economic life, the portion of Upstate New York between Albany and Rochester going east to west and the Tug Hill Plateau and Pennsylvania going north to south was primarily farm country. Enough commodities were grown and processed here to fill grocery store shelves in New York City and much of the rest of the Northeast: wine from the Finger Lakes, apples, maple products, vegetables from the rich muck land along the New York State Thruway, and dairy, which was king.

It was here — and because of these products — that a one-truck company was formed in 1961; its founder, Ralph B. Humphreys, coming from a farming background.



R.B. Humphreys President Marvin VanSlyke

Fifty-six years later, there may be fewer farms but agriculture and food processing remain essential to the region's economy. And, today R.B. Humphreys has more than 75 tractors and 100 trailers and focuses primarily on temperature-controlled shipping of food products east of the Mississippi River. Based in Westmoreland — all but within sight of Exit 32 of the Thruway — the company also has a modest dedicated division for flatbed, step-deck and oversized work, and offers brokerage services.

Like Ralph Humphreys before him, company President Marvin VanSlyke is a product of this part of Central New York. And, like his predecessor, VanSlyke has farming background. He also drove for his own small LTL pickup and delivery company, and ran a brokerage business in the basement of his home more than 20 years ago.

A former dairy farmer, VanSlyke joined R.B. Humphreys in 2010, merged his business and set the expanded firm on a growth trajectory that continues. Today the company's client list tops 175 companies including Byrne Dairy, HP Hood, Hillshire Farms, Crowley and Lindt Chocolate. It's a customer base that has its advantages.



Founder Ralph Humphreys

“The benefits of hauling food is that it is relatively recession proof, if you will,” said VanSlyke. “There are also drawbacks to hauling food. Every load, every shipment is time-sensitive. That in itself puts a lot of extra pressure on dispatchers and drivers and schedulers; on the whole company.”

VanSlyke said 70 percent of R.B. Humphreys' business is delivering temperature-sensitive products from central, western and northern New York to distribution centers in the rest of the Northeast, from New England to Virginia.

Getting those shipments delivered means having suitable, reliable tractors and trailers at prices that make sense for a smallish firm.

When asked what brands of trailers R. B. Humphreys prefers, VanSlyke said the company is “loyal to the best deal at the time. We have to price shop everything we buy.”

As for tractors, Humphreys these days relies primarily on Freightliner Cascadias because, as VanSlyke said, they have “good equipment and good support.” The newest trucks are sleeper cabs with Detroit DD15 engines, DT 12 automatic transmissions, and “with as many driver-friendly specs as we can get our hands on.” The list of amenities VanSlyke wants for his drivers includes refrigerators, cabinetry, bunk heaters, air conditioning and power converters.



Company's first truck

Solid creature comforts in reliable, modern equipment is not just a nice thing to do for drivers, it's necessary because they're being asked to do a tough job, according to VanSlyke.

“The Northeast regional, short-haul, refrigerated food-hauling business is some of the hardest trucking in the country,” said VanSlyke. “Many drivers seek out the jobs where they can put it in high gear and leave it there a couple of days. Our drivers are forced to make a pickup every day and a delivery every day; sometimes many pickups and many deliveries. It’s not the typical [truck driving job](#).”

VanSlyke, like so many others in the industry, said it’s not easy to find drivers who want and are capable of doing that sort of work.

“But, when we do, we have drivers that are dedicated, that are committed to the industry. But, they’re hard to find.”

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VanSlyke jokes that “the smart people downstairs that figure this stuff out” say R.B. Humphreys’ driver turnover rate is about half of what the rest of the trucking industry fights.

“It doesn’t feel that good to me,” said VanSlyke. “Some days when you get this one that is going to retire and this one that is moving out of town, and all of a sudden it feels like we’re losing half of the guys. But, apparently we’re not too bad as far as turnover goes.

“On one hand we have very difficult trucking with all the pickups and deliveries. Plus the Northeast region has all of the metropolitan areas in it that drivers do not like. On one hand it’s hard to find a lot drivers who are willing and able to do that. But, when we do they’re pretty dedicated because they’re here for a reason. They want the short haul aspects so they are home on a somewhat regular basis. And, they don’t like sitting on their butt for two days straight before they have any sort of interaction. It’s a different mentality to be proud of.”



R.B. Humphreys' COE fleet circa 1983

VanSlyke added that R.B. Humphreys relies on word of mouth referrals in its recruiting efforts, has stepped up its online recruiting and said the company benefits from its location.

“This whole Upstate New York region is full of high quality blue collar people. I know I’m biased but when it comes to [truck](#) drivers, the steely resolve that a truck driver has to have, I don’t think you’ll find any tougher guys than what we have here in the Upstate New York region.”

Still, VanSlyke said being a refrigerated company puts R.B. Humphreys at a disadvantage when competing for drivers with what he called “very good dry van and flatbed companies” in the same region.

“(It’s) not that they pay better than us,” said VanSlyke. “Or not that their benefits are any better than ours or their shirts are any better or their trucks are any better than ours. But, if a guy can make his \$50,000-plus hauling a dry van compared to \$50,000-plus hauling this reefer trailer around, most guys will opt for the dry van. It’s easier.”



Company driver Teddy Pawelek

But, no matter how good those drivers are and how well the office staff schedules them, much of what goes on is out of the control of everyone at R. B. Humphreys.

“We do the best job at scheduling our work to make it legal and as comfortable and as possible and then we hope for the best,” said VanSlyke about what his or any company can do to mitigate delays, lost time and detention. “We hope that the snowstorms stay away. We hope that the traffic jams are not as bad as they usually are. We hope the that the receiving clerk is in a good mood today. We spend a lot of time with our fingers crossed wishing and hoping.”



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