

# How repairing antique clocks led to the cab of a Cascadia

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It's a bit before 6 on a Sunday morning and Sean Richards slides his Freightliner Cascadia onto the New York State Thruway near the state fairgrounds in Syracuse, reefer trailer in tow. Traffic is sparse as he slips through the toll booths and heads west, deadheading to Dunkirk about 200 miles west on the shores of Lake Erie southwest of Buffalo.



Sean Richards drives for R.B. Humphreys

The 53-year-old Richards drives for R.B. Humphreys, a small company with reefer, flatbed and specialized divisions headquartered tight to the Thruway in Westmoreland, New York to the east. He started his run at home in Phoenix, a small bedroom community north of Syracuse, and will finish it the next day at a large refrigerated distribution center near Hartford, Connecticut; 600 miles in all.

This morning, Richards is pushing the Cascadia with a 12-speed automatic and 337,000 miles along under low-hanging dark clouds. He drives in and out of light showers on his way to pick up 2,939 cases of ice cream from the large Fieldbrook Foods plant.



As Richards drives, he recounts how he went from being a kid hunting and fishing along the Oswego River to making his living behind the wheel. It's been an unconventional career path, that's for sure, but one the affable guy who married his high school sweetheart says has been good for and to him.

Unlike many truck drivers, Richards did not grow up with a family in the business. His father, who ran specialty publishing business, died when Richards was a senior in high school. After that, he enrolled in the natural resources program at a small two-year state college in Morrisville, New York. He jokes he thought he could find a job that would pay him to hunt and fish.

Confessing he was, at best, a disinterested college student, Richards dropped out, got married and embarked on a series of jobs, none of which were destined to set him on a clear career path. He started at an auto repair garage, was a short order cook then orderly at a large Syracuse hospital. To Richards' resume would be added a stint in the tool rental department of a Home Depot and cold call selling life insurance.

Along the way, Richards said he and his wife became interested in refinishing antiques and he learned how to repair old clocks.

Hard as it is to believe, it was that skill — bringing antique clocks back to life — that got him into driving trucks.

Richards says he had an interview at L. & J.G. Stickley, a high-end furniture maker located in suburban Syracuse. The company was adding mantel clocks to its line of Mission style furniture, and Richards explained to company President Alfred Audi (no relation to the carmaker) his love of and skills with clocks. He got the job.

Eventually, Richards would earn his Class B CDL and began driving a box truck and delivering furniture for Stickley. Driving was OK, but it was carrying the heavy, solid cherry furniture into houses under the watchful eyes of well-heeled and particular homeowners that was the hard part.



As Stickley expanded, so did the opportunities for Richards. They paid him to get his Class A license, which he did in 10-hours-a-day bursts every Saturday and Sunday for 13 weeks. That put him in Stickley's first tractor-trailer, which Richards drove into Manhattan and to furniture showrooms in North Carolina and elsewhere. That, says Richards, led to being named Stickley's transportation manager.

Corporate changes within the furniture company forced Richards to find another job, but one that put him back in the driver's seat. He signed on with Santaro Trucking Company based in suburban Syracuse. Richards was hauling trash from Canada to massive landfills in Upstate New York; he passes the Thruway exits for them on the drive to Dunkirk.

When Shannon Brown, Richards' dispatcher at Santaro, took a similar post with R.B. Humphreys, Richards was one of several drivers who followed.

About the time Richards finishes recounting his work history, Exit 59 for NY-60 North looms on the right. Richards eases the Cascadia through the EZPass lane and over the few blocks to One Ice Cream Drive and the Fieldbrook plant; he's at the gate at 8:30 a.m.

"We're on time because that's what I do," says Richards, in a matter of fact way. He says he has been to this location five or six times before and knows the drill. "Trying to be on time is my way of showing respect."

Paperwork checked inside, the yardman moves a tractor out of the way and assigns Richards door number two. After a temperature check — Richard's reefer trailer is at -13 degrees — he slides his tandems all the way back and then snugs the open trailer up to the loading dock and settles in for the loading process that will eventually take as long as the trip here from Syracuse.

Standing outside near his truck, Richards talks about what he just did.



"When I was a rookie," he says between drags on a cigarette, "I looked like an idiot (backing up) just like everybody else. But, like anything else, the more you do it the better you get. Today, if I see someone else struggling, I'll get out and help. And, there is a lot of struggling going on."

Standing in the yard, Richards is philosophical about the work and life on the road, always warming when he talks about being home. He casually offers a universal truth about the driving life:

"No matter where I am, no matter what I'm doing," he says, watching carefully as another tractor-trailer pulls into the yard. "I'm supposed to be someplace else."

One hand in his pants pocket and the other brandishing another cigarette, Richards shrugs and continues matter-of-factly on the general topic of waiting to load and unload.

"I have planned a life beyond this stop," he says to no one in specific. "And you are \*\*\*\*ing on it. Why? You have just consumed "X" hours of my life I can't get back to no real purpose."

He talks about having to sign paperwork in five different places because there are “so many inefficiencies that paperwork has grown into a behemoth. (We) sign everything just in case. Just in case.”

The driver of the other truck that arrived wanders over. Bill Bartos is an owner/operator who also drives for R.B. Humphreys, and he and Richards compare notes on their respective runs. The conversation grows to three with the arrival of Lou Akins, another owner/operator driving for Humphreys. Like Richards, Akins drove for Santaro and followed Shannon Brown to the reefer fleet. The conversation ranges from cigarettes vs. vaping to the height of bridges on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway.

Akins offers some insight into the company for which the men drive. When he was in the market for a new truck, Akins says Humphreys President Marvin VanSlyke told him to find the truck he wanted and not just one he could afford and VanSlyke helped him buy it.

Two and a half hours after driving through the front gates at One Ice Cream Drive, Richards is loaded. Doors locked and sealed, Richards stops outside the gate, resets his tandems and heads to the Thruway and Connecticut.



Richards and Bill Bartos

Back on I-90 East, Richards says his chat with Bartos and Akins is a rarity.

“This job is not for everybody,” he says “You have to be comfortable with your own company. You can go for a week at a time without a real conversation other than a business transaction like, ‘Thanks for the cup of coffee.’”

Aside from the annoyances that come with detention, traffic and bad drivers, Richards enjoys the work.

"I like the peace," he says. "I like the silence."

He also likes the opportunity to learn.

While he has a CB in his truck, Richards only switches it on when he needs it; bad weather, traffic congestion. He follows numerous news outlets in his Facebook newsfeed, and he reads Wikipedia entries. There are a number of books in his sleeper; mostly history and religion titles as well as the Bible. ("I've always read," says Richards. "As a kid I read the Encyclopedia Britannica.")

Eastbound on the Thruway, traffic has picked up and a gray Dodge becomes what Richards calls one of his "favorite annoyances."

"He passes me at a good clip," he says, "And then gets in front of me and slows down."

For the next 20 minutes, the scene — or one similar — plays out several more times. On four-wheeler speeds up and Richards tries to pass and then slows down when he backs off the Cascadia.

Eventually, traffic sorts itself out just in time for lunch. Richards takes the exit for the TA/Petro Pembroke at Exit 48A in Corfu.

Over a sandwich and fries, Richards revisits the thread of an earlier comment when he said, "I don't live to drive. I drive to live."

He says, "I'm committed to being out for 11 days, but when it's time to come home, it's time to come home. I have a wife of 32 years who actually wants me around. Every other Saturday belongs to us."

His wife Amy is a trainer for a major grocery store chain. Their two daughters live with them. Sean and Amy also have a son.

"I live at home, I don't live on the road. I work on the road so I can live at home," he says.

And, Richards figures he will be on the road for some time to come. While he lives frugally ("I've never had a car loan."), he says without a hint of regret, "I expect to work until I am physically unable."

Dishes cleared, the tab paid, Richards is back on the Thruway headed to Syracuse.

By the middle of the afternoon he meets his daughter at a parking area, picks up some clean laundry and heads east to overnight near Albany. He'll finish the run early Monday morning.

- See more at: <http://www.truckersnews.com/how-repairing-antique-clocks-led-to-the-cab-of-a-cascadia/#sthash.hEHZx1pQ.dpuf>