

Freight, Farming, And A Family Business

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OLEY (Berks Co) — A willingness to learn, change, and evolve combined with top-notch employees has proven to be the key to success and business growth for the Gotwals family.

From a hog-hauling operation to a cement hauling business, the Gotwals' transportation business now hosts the second-largest ground horse transportation company in the nation, a freight division, a fleet maintenance facility, and a 525-acre dairy farm.

Brothers William and Robert Gotwals bought their first truck in 1955 to begin their hog-hauling operation from Indiana to Philadelphia. Next the business evolved into hauling bulk cement until totals reached 30 trucks to transport hogs and 90 trucks to haul cement.

Today Brook Ledge Inc. transports horses while Xpressway hauls freight such as Snapple products, canned mushrooms, cocoa beans, glass bottles, and rolls of paper.

The Gotwals moved to the greener pastures of the racetrack when they bought the horse-hauling business from George Hutt and his two sons from Norristown in 1974.

Both companies used the same freight-liner dealer

and many employees, including drivers, dispatchers, and a sales representative, plus Hutt's son, George Jr., worked for the Gotwals for five years after the acquisition, which eased the transition into the business.

"They taught us the business. Without them we wouldn't have bought it, it's that simple. It's that specialized. You can know horses and you can know trucking but still fall flat on your face," said Brad.

The Gotwals actually conducted business out of Norristown until provisions could be made at the farm in Oley.

"I didn't know about horses previously," he said. "We still learn more every day."

Family participation has grown to include Bob's son Brent and Bill's son Brad, Bill's daughter Joan, and Brad's son William, 19.

Bill takes care of the fields and dairy besides taking his turn as a driver; Brad drives trucks and takes care of administrative responsibilities; Joan, Leola, is an office manager for the company; and William, 19, works as a shop mechanic, drives trucks, and helps out at the dairy.

Brook Ledge hauls mostly Thoroughbred horses bred for the racetrack, but they also move Standardbreds, show horses, and pleasure horses.

According to Brent, taking careful precautions minimizes risk and helps give drivers peace of mind about the responsibility of hauling \$30,000 to \$5 million horses on the trips. To ensure the safety of their high-priced charges during the long rides, drivers check the screen of the closed-circuit TV in the cab.

"The first half hour is the most critical, until they (the horses) settle down," said Brad. "They're usually nervous unless they're seasoned travelers." Although colts and fillies are separated, the horses seem to be concerned about who is in the next stall, and the "pecking order,"

said Brad.

The trucks are also kept in top shape to ensure safety, as Brook Ledge mechanics check 30-40 different items on the truck after each trip.

The horses have hay available to them at all times, along with a constantly supply of water. Chains equipped with panic-release snaps on either side of the stall help keep the horses controlled. Each stall is bedded with straw; a whole bale of straw pads the floor of the box stall for added safety and comfort.

Every five hours the water buckets are filled. Although water consumption varies for each animal, Brad has had horses drink five buckets, or 25 gallons of water, on the trip from New York to Miami.

More and more horses have been shipped in box stalls, says Brad. "The horses arrive in better condition. They're less stressed. The stall feels like the familiar surroundings of home."

An array of windows keeps the temperatures inside the trailer low. "The worst thing they

Every successful business is built on good people . . . We have the best there is.

Brad Gotwals



Two brothers, Bob and Bill Gotwals, started the company with the purchase of their first truck in 1955. The Gotwals family now runs the full-fledged freight and horse hauling business from a 525-acre dairy farm. From left is co-founder Bill Gotwals, his daughter Joan, son Brad, and Brad's son William.

can do is sweat," said Brad, who noted that a sweated horse will quickly catch a cold.

Drivers feel the ears of the horses to check for proper body temperature during transit.

The inside of the truck can be changed from three single stalls to two double stalls to one box stall to fit customer's preferences and pocketbooks. Brad estimates that it takes 10-15 minutes to load 8-10 horses. The lure of air travel has become more and more attractive to owners who take advantage of shorter travel time to ship their horses.

"There's not a day goes by that we're not picking up or making at delivery at the airport," said Brad, who has been on the road 30 days this year.

Crunch time for Brook Ledge trucking comes during spring and fall, when the horses need to be moved between Northern and Southern racetracks for the changing season.

From the beginning of November through mid-December, "Everybody wants to go to Florida to train," said Brad. Horses must be off the grounds at Saratoga while the Southern tracks are open for winter business.

Fall sales also contribute to a busy autumn season, as horses must be transported to their new quarters for the winter.

The drivers, who take five hour shifts, take extra care in braking slowly and smoothly and making gradual turns. Brook Ledge utilizes not only their full-time truck drivers to transport the horses, but also freight drivers, mechanics, part-time help, and local farmers who hold CDL licenses and have been trained by Brook Ledge.

Brook Ledge drivers are trained by accompanying an experienced driver to learn the routine and the directions to the farms for at least six months before they go out on their own. "It's critical to get things right," said Brad.

Between transporting horses to and from the racetrack or airport or to veterinarians for surgery, Brook Ledge trucks cover approximately four million miles of blacktop a year, hauling thousands of horses. Thirty 52-foot tractor trailers plus 30 straight trucks complete the horse-haul-

ing fleet.

The family also owns two 20-acre farms, one in Ocala Fla., and another in Lexington, Ky., as a mini-terminal used for transferring horses. Small trucks are sent to gather horses to the "hub" farm, where tractor trailers pick up a full load.

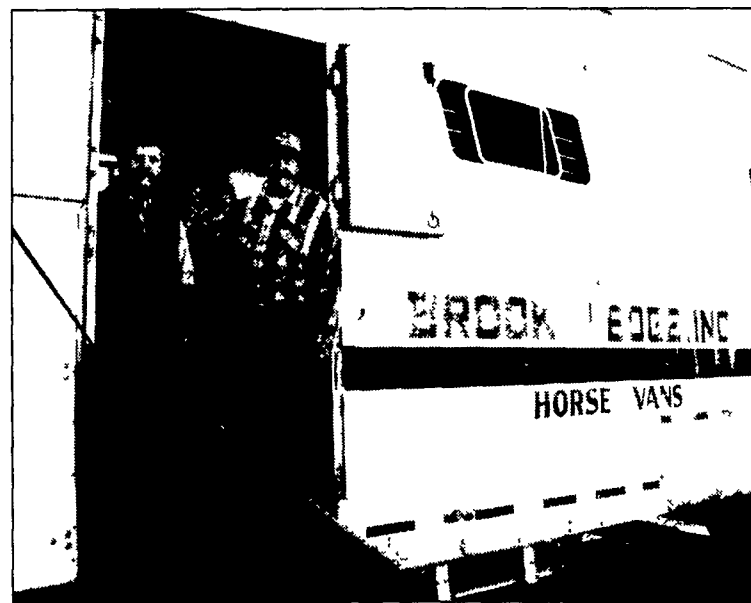
Out of 30 tractor-trailers, 15 are over the road at one time, making multi-day trips while the others are making local trips. Each driver uses the same truck on each trip.

"We're about as big as we want to get," said Brad. "Anything more than this is going to

hotbed for Standardbred sulky races, has eight major tracks. Races and shows on the weekend make for busy weekends for the hauling company.

Approximately 1,800 farms, and the directions to each farm, are on computerized records in the office, a renovated tenant house on the farm. Besides the main offices, the farm hosts the dairy farm and six bay shop facilities for the various companies run by the Gotwals.

When the orders come in, dispatchers write pertinent information on cards that are placed on bulletin boards until a load can



Besides taking care of administrative responsibilities, Bill, a co-founder of the company, and his son Brad Gotwals spend time behind the wheel of the horse-hauling tractor trailers. Although most racetracks have a loading ramp made of earth, each truck is equipped with a long loading ramp such as the ramp in the picture.

get impersonal. Getting bigger means we lose control over what happens. Now we know about each employee, who their family is, what their hobbies are. If we get bigger, we lose track of who they are."

Washington DC, Saratoga, Chicago, Detroit are just a few of the Northeastern cities to which Brook Ledge transports horses for the summer season.

"There's a racetrack in most major cities," said Brad. Kentucky hosts approximately five major racetracks, while Ohio, a

be grouped together. "We're basically a travel agency for horses," said Brad.

One load can have \$7 million of horses on board. Owners of these horses, said Brad, are mostly business owners, but celebrities such as country singer Reba McEntyre, fashion designer Calvin Klein, Boston Celtics coach Rick Pitino, Buddy Ryan and former chicken farmer and owner of the New York Yankees George Steinbrenner also get in

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Brad Gotwals, left, and dispatcher Bob Donolly are gearing up for a busy fall of transporting horses from Northern to Southern racetracks. When a call comes in, dispatchers write pertinent information on cards that are placed on bulletin boards until a load can be grouped together.