

# Marj and Homer Hiner



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It began in 1967...Homer Hiner left North American Van Lines, after ten years, with some trucking experience and a 1962 International cabover. Having the foresight to see the need for a good diesel repair shop in the Huntington area, he decided to make a career change. When he had the opportunity to buy a small building on the South Jefferson Street, he did and opened Hiner Truck Repair. He leased out his cabover and hired one mechanic. He was in business.

As that business grew, his wife, Marj started working three mornings a week to help with the bookkeeping, payroll and fuel reports. Those few hours a week quickly turned to a full-time job for Marj, because in addition to the diesel shop, Homer was hauling grain in the evenings for customers.

“We were busy in the repair shop and using the tractor to haul grain when one day a customer told us he wanted to sell his four trucks,” says Marj. “We initially purchased those four trucks to use as a winter project. The plan was to overhaul the engines, give them a new paint job, and then sell them in the spring.”

The plan was on track until that spring in 1968, when the Hiners found they had so much invested in the trucks that they couldn't sell them and gain a proper return on the full investment.

“The logical solution was to use the trucks ourselves, so we bought three more trailers, hired drivers and started Hiner Transport,” says Homer.

The Hiners learned a great deal that first year, especially regarding Interstate Commerce Commission regulations, which were much more complex in those years. All trucking routes had to be filed in advance and customer statements of need were required, for example.

The company also bid on a hauling contract for the first time when the hauling rights for a Huntington-based ice cream were being sold.

“We had never completed a contract bid before. But we did it, even though we were afraid we didn't know what we were doing,” Marj says with a laugh. “The next thing we knew, we owned those rights and we were buying refrigerated vans and updating our equipment to meet the needs of the contract. But, that investment meant we now had a regular customer who needed our services every day of the week.”

Hiner Transport was on its way, and the Hiners say that through it all they “never looked back. We just stayed focused, telling ourselves if something bad happens, we would move on, building on what worked instead of worrying about what didn’t. We learned from our mistakes and enhanced on our successes. ”

As Hiner Transport quickly grew, the Hiners recognized the need to diversify beyond hauling grain and dairy products. Knowing they wanted to continue working with local companies, Hiner Transport secured hauling contracts with Huntington-based Our Sunday Visitor, Homier Distributing and Majestic Fireplaces, among others.

“We were specific about our customer base, though, because we wanted to avoid industries like automotive. We didn’t want to risk union strikes that would leave our drivers idle,” Marj says. “We built close relationships with the local businesses, and we worked with other businesses in the surrounding communities, as well, to have full trucks returning to our own community.”

Over the 32 years the Hiners owned Hiner Transport, the business continued to grow and prosper, transporting products across the 48 continental United States. The Hiners also maintained the diesel repair shop, which became the company’s own maintenance shop. That foresight meant maintenance and repair work could be done economically within the company. The installation of fuel islands and automated wash bays also provided for local control of the company’s assets.

For the Hiners, owning a trucking business in Huntington, Indiana, was a natural fit because of their ties to the region and Homer’s background in the industry. Homer had initially started his trucking career as a North American Van Lines owner-operator after his service in the Navy. He bought his first tractor in 1957 and had spent 10 years as an owner-operator for North American Van Lines.

“I was raised in Huntington County but knew I didn’t want to farm, so I left that career to my two brothers,” says Homer. “I always knew I wanted to be my own boss, so initially the owner-operator trucking career was right for me, and the Fort Wayne-based North American Van Lines job meant I could still live in northeast Indiana.”

Marj also had a desire to leave the farm for other opportunities. At that time, though, women didn’t often go to college, but that’s where Marj headed. At her father’s urging to become a teacher, she graduated from Ball State with a major in English and a minor in communications.

“I was like Homer, though, because I always knew I wanted to be on my own and wanted to accomplish things that helped others. Unfortunately, I learned after a year as a teacher that serving others in the classroom was not my calling,” Marj says. “I did have a love for bookkeeping, graphs and charts, and organizing.”

Throughout the years of business growth and management, the Hiners say their skills and experiences complemented each other. Marj managed the internal operations while Homer dealt with the functional side of buying and selling trucks, working with the drivers and building relationships with the customers.

“Marj worked in the office and coordinated all of those details and staff efforts, while I was specifying what trailers were needed for specific products and helping customers figure out how to best load materials for efficient transport, for example,” Homer says.

Marj also designed the four office additions to the Hiner Transport facilities and created the marketing and public relations efforts that helped the company grow. The Hiners say that while they were a couple in business together, they worked independently during the workday, each focusing on their own responsibilities in the business.

By 1999, the company employed 22 management and office staff, 14 maintenance shop staff and 125 drivers. The Hiners credit the loyalty of their employees when they speak about the business growth Hiner Transport enjoyed. Many of these employees had grown with the company, including several drivers who had been with the company since its earliest years. To encourage staff involvement and personal satisfaction, the Hiners maintained an open door policy, encouraging employees to discuss issues with them and through this technique developed a teamwork concept. “We all played on the same team,” says Marj.

In June 1999, the Hiners sold their business to Service First Corporation because, they say, the work “just wasn’t as fun any more and none of our children had the desire to take it over.”

“For years, we had tried to instill in our staff how important it was to enjoy what they did. In fact, we encouraged them to come to us if they weren’t happy, so we could help them find another place within the company where they could enjoy their work,” Marj says. “When that morning came and Homer said he wasn’t enjoying it any more, we knew it was time for us to look at other options.”

The Hiners started the process of selling the company, and they say it took them a year to find the right buyer, one who would keep the company intact and headquartered in Huntington. They say they had spent their business years appreciating the hard work so many people had done for them, and they wanted to maintain employee and community pride in Hiner Transport.

“We remembered the recession during our earlier years and at the time we told our employees we’d get through it together. We promised to share the loads equally so everyone would get some work, for example,” Marj says. “As we considered selling the business, we thought of our employees and were

determined to ensure their futures by being particular about the company's buyer."

While building Hiner Transport into the large and successful business it was, the Hiners raised their blended family of five children, some of who are employed in other trucking related businesses. Our kids grew up playing in the hallways, helping with company picnics and riding with Dad," reflected Marj. "That was in between trail rides, football practices and basketball games. We tried to do things as a family."

They also were active in their community, with Marj especially taking the more visible positions in community organizations. She was President of the Huntington Chamber of Commerce, active in the United Way's efforts and one of the three founders of the Dan Quayle Center and one of the founders of Huntington County Leadership. She still serves on the Huntington County Community Foundation, Parkview Health System Board, Parkview Huntington Hospital and Ball State University Foundation, and she remains an emeriti board member of the Indiana Motor Truck Association having been past state president. She says the "interesting part of being a woman in those early years of the business was that often I was the first woman to serve on many of these committees and boards."

Homer and Marj also encouraged Hiner Transport staff to be involved in their community because, they say, "giving back is so rewarding. It's important for people to realize they are a part owner of their community."

For every mile traveled up the Hiner highway, they filled their lives and those of others with challenges, successes and failures, met new people and fulfilled their goals and dreams. Every mile made a difference.