

Fifth Wheel Truck Stops

Meeting the trucker's needs



The Fifth Wheel Truck Stop honored 10 year employees recently. They included from left to right: Ruby Sullivan, Norm Denis, Elfie Schrader, Al Schouten, John Dunstall and Marcelle Phillips.

Claude Warren and Lew Loveridge often dreamed of opening their own truck stop way back in 1967, but they could never find a location that seemed right. That changed in 1972 however when a piece of ideally suited property became available beside the busy Highway 401 in Milton.

It has been a hard uphill struggle, but today the partners look back on 10 years of growth which have seen their modest fuel bar/restaurant develop into five full-service truck stops across Ontario, plus three 24-hour restaurants.

Originally from different parts of England, the men met in 1953 while living on neighboring farms in the Omagh area of Milton. Both were driving milk tanker trucks and in the fall of 1954 they pooled their money to form a partnership and start Loveridge and Warren Milk Transport—with two trucks. The business grew to 22 trucks and prospered.

In 1972 they sold their milk transport business and their interest in an Oakville dairy firm to finance the truck stop venture, purchasing the former Johnson Trucking garage in Milton where they began pumping diesel fuel for passing truckers.

"We weren't even sure if there was enough traffic to support a truck stop," Mr. Loveridge recalls. "So Claude and I took turns doing a 24-hour count of trucks on the 401, sitting on the roof of an old building on the property."

Their traffic count gave them the answer they wanted. "We figured if only one per cent of the total daily truck traffic would stop here for fuel, we could survive," Mr. Loveridge said.

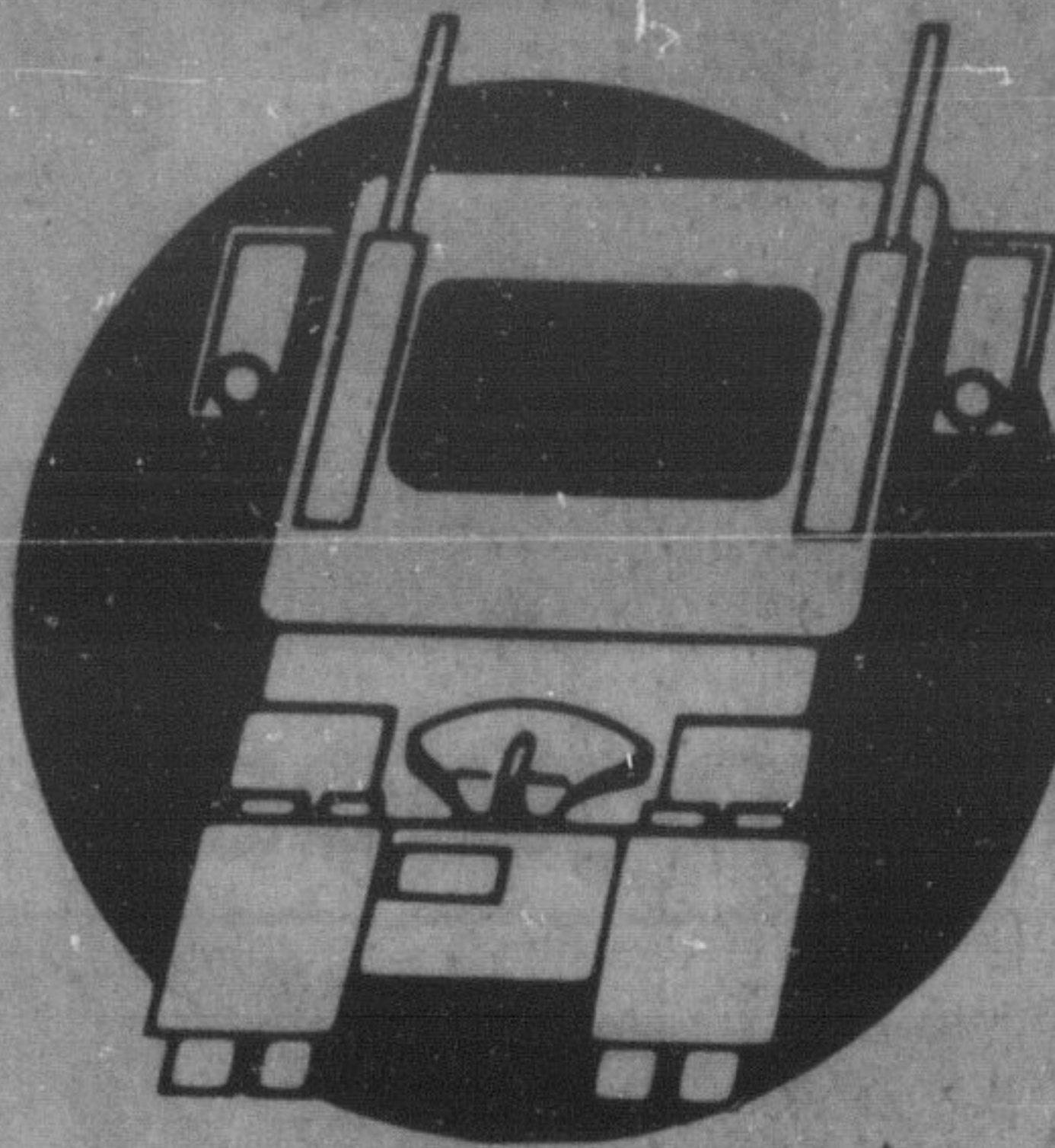
The owners had planned a restaurant in the facility, but knew nothing about the food business. One day Milton resident Jim Powers, who was then managing restaurants for a Toronto-based chain operation, dropped in and proposed a 24-hour restaurant for the truck stop. The owners agreed and Mr. Powers opened the restaurant that November. Before long he became a partner in Fifth Wheel.

(For the uninitiated, the "fifth wheel" is the part of a truck where the trailer hooks onto the cab.)

Soon a 24-hour store was added to the operation, followed by a 10-unit motel for truckers, which has since been expanded to 28 units and opened to the general public as well.

To earn the "full service" title, Fifth Wheel has added several other amenities for truckers and highway travellers—weigh scales, gasoline, propane, self-serve fuel islands, computerized fuel ticket printers, a tire shop and repair garage, truck washing facilities, games room, drivers' message centres, showers, a take-out section in the restaurant, a barber shop and shoe shine service plus a special TV lounge where the pro drivers can relax.

By 1978 the fuel bar was pumping 10,000 gallons of diesel fuel and the restaurant was serving 2,000 customers a day. Instead of getting complacent, however, Fifth Wheel's owners began looking about for expansion. They charted plans for a string of profes-



sionally operated truck stops in all the major traffic centres of the province, starting in 1976 when they acquired a small restaurant and gas bar operation beside Highway 401 in Cornwall.

While it didn't meet all of their requirements, it remained in operation until 1977 when a modern new facility was built.

Fifth Wheel expanded again in 1978, acquiring a restaurant and fuel bar at Dorchester, just east of London which they immediately expanded and renovated.

One day in 1979 the company expanded to five units when restaurants and fuel stations at North Bay and Bowmanville were acquired.

The Bowmanville building was expanded and renovated and the smaller North Bay operation remained open until 1981 when it was replaced by the company's largest and most modern truck stop, complete with 140-seat restaurant, store and 11-unit motel.

Economic conditions have forced the owners to shelve, but not forget, further expansion plans.

"We expect some day we will be able to develop sites in Grimsby, Thunder Bay and Sarnia areas," Mr. Powers explained. "We are also considering franchising Fifth Wheels in eastern and western Canada—right now we are looking at two good franchise applications from Alberta and New Brunswick businessmen."

Indeed Fifth Wheel has a good reputation in the industry. When a developer in British Columbia decided to open a truck stop near Vancouver, he visited Fifth Wheel and studied its Ontario facilities.

None of the truck stops serve alcohol and for a good reason.

"We know we would attract more highway and community business if we had booze on the premises, but it won't win us many friends in the trucking industry. Companies won't allow their drivers to stop where alcohol is served," said Mr. Powers.

In 1980 Fifth Wheel launched a new division when it opened a 24-hour "waffle house" restaurant in Cambridge, called Country House.

The concept of a 24-hour restaurant specializing in breakfast-type meals (but also serving a full menu of other dishes) came from Mr. Powers, who discovered many patrons order breakfast-type meals at all hours.

After studying waffle and pancake restaurants in the United States, he developed the Country House concept. Outside, it resembles an 1850s country home with board and batten finish, gingerbread trim and large, homey windows. Inside, it takes on the look of a 1930s type railway car diner, with its open kitchen, counter and booth seating. It is a restaurant only, with no fuel, store or motel attached.

"The Country House idea has been generally favorable," he said. "We made some mistakes in Cambridge but they are being rectified and when we opened our second Country House in Aurora last summer, we redesigned and expanded it. The Aurora operation has been an even bigger success."

Another Country House was opened in Casselman, on Highway 417 east of Ottawa, in 1981 but it differs from both the Fifth Wheel and Country House concepts.

"We are experimenting at Casselman, with a small 24-hour coffee shop plus a first class licenced dining room which will be open about 12 hours a day," he said.

The dining room will be called "La Providence" and has just received approval for a liquor permit, Mr. Powers said, adding he hopes this feature will attract more business because the Casselman restaurant has not been paying its way to date.

One thing Fifth Wheel prides itself on is its people. "We go out of our way to make our staff feel a part of the team which is so necessary in such a diverse operation," Mr. Warren said.

Annual dinner-dances to celebrate the company's anniversary, staff contests, cross-promotions between departments, a monthly eight-page staff newsletter, a staff discount card, an employee's social club and anniversary awards at the five- and ten-year levels are all designed to keep employees happy at their job.

Fifth Wheel is probably Milton's largest employer of women and students wanting part time work. Over 100 of its 500 employees work in Milton, either at head office on Market Dr. or at the Chigholm Dr. truck stop.

Although it was launched primarily to serve highway travellers, Fifth Wheel has evolved into a "family place", especially in the restaurants.

A special section is always set aside for the pro drivers, who are often on a schedule and need fast service but the remainder of the restaurant is open to the general public.

A decade of service is rewarded by local firm

Six employees who have remained with Fifth Wheel Truck Stops through its first decade received special awards Saturday during the company's 10th anniversary celebration in Milton.

Owners Claude Warren, Lew Loveridge and Jim Powers presented each with a 10-point diamond set in a gold ring or lapel pin and paid tribute to the staff members for helping the company through the "growing pains" of its first decade.

Elfie Schrader, Supervisor of the company's five stores, has held various positions, including store clerk, manager, then moved to head office supervisor of the central purchasing and warehousing division and when that division was closed she went "on the road" to supervise the five 24-hour stores.

Marcelle Phillips has worked 10 years as a waitress and more recently as night cashier in the Milton restaurant.

Ruby Sullivan, who had experience working in other local restaurants before joining Fifth Wheel has served thousands of customers in her role as waitress. Popular with her customers, she knows most of the truckers on a first-name basis and is well known as the "joker" of the restaurant crew.

Awards went to three Fifth Wheel general managers.

John Dunstall began as a chef and progressed to the restaurant manager's position. He served as restaurant manager in Cornwall for

four years, then returned to Milton and became general manager of the Milton truck stop 18 months ago.

Al Schouten was a part time busboy while attending high school when Fifth Wheel first opened in 1972. He progressed through the ranks, working as dishwasher, janitor and cook, then became assistant restaurant manager. When Fifth Wheel opened in Dorchester in 1978 he moved there as assistant, then manager of the restaurant. In 1979 he moved to North Bay as general manager where he supervised the construction of the company's newest facility.

Norm Denis began his career with Fifth Wheel as general handyman and fuel bar employee in Milton in 1972. He ran the tire shop and fuel bar for several years, helped open the fuel division of each of the new truck stops and was posted to the Dorchester unit two years ago as general manager. Recently he has also been supervising company wide fuel sales.

The evening also recognized the efforts of five-year employees Lorie Parsons and Gail Moore, who were presented with engraved silver trays.

Lorie Parsons has worked part time while attending school and full time each summer in the Milton store. Gail Moore was a waitress and cashier in the restaurant while attending high school and college and more recently worked as assistant to the restaurant supervisor.

..BULLETIN!

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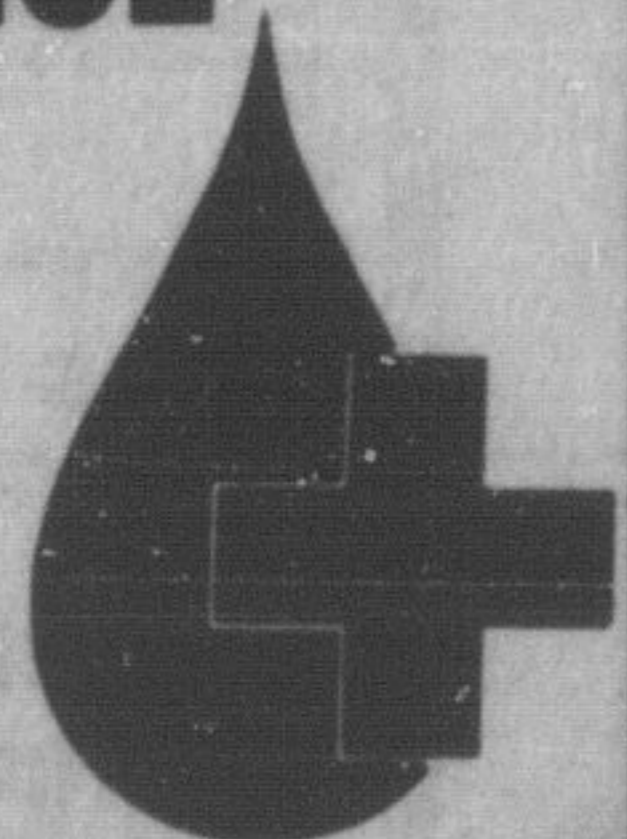


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