

## **ABSTRACT**

VALENSKI, LAUREN ELIZABETH. Is a Job Really Just a Job?: The Ins and Out of Over-the-Road Truck Driving. (Under the direction of Dr. Risa Ellovich.)

Over-the-road truck driving is a demanding occupation which requires drivers to spend long periods of time on the road enduring the hazards of the United States interstate system and the occupational pressures for efficiency and reliability. While prior research efforts in the social sciences have mapped the changes in the structure of the occupation since federal deregulation, they have largely neglected the truckers and their interests in the occupation. Overall, scholarly research has not sufficiently addressed the factors which motivate people to seek jobs as over-the-road truck drivers in the United States.

This study seeks to remedy the matter through the analysis of ethnographic data collected via semi-structured interviews and participant observation from May 2012 to August 2012. Over-the-road truck drivers were interviewed at truckers' lounges and diners in truck stops and at the loading docks of distribution centers across the United States. Eleven current and one former trucker participated by sharing their career histories, on-the-job experiences, and plans for the future.

Analysis of the data indicates that for those truckers who do not leave the trucking industry within their first year on the job, over-the-road trucking offers better pay than alternative occupations available to them. Furthermore, with accumulating over-the-road experience, additional career opportunities become available to truck drivers, something not often offered them by other occupations they might hold.

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Is a Job Really Just a Job?: The Ins and Outs of Over-the-Road Truck Driving

by  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my grandfather, who always encouraged me to follow my heart, wherever it may take me.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Lauren Valenski is originally from Memphis, Tennessee. She graduated from Bryn Mawr College in the suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology. She will graduate from North Carolina State University in 2013 with a Master of Arts in Anthropology.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Tom first and foremost for allowing me to accompany him in the cab of his truck for three long summer months. By extending such an offer to me, he gave me the chance to travel the United States and to experience an occupation that is largely unnoticed and under-appreciated. Without Tom, this research would not have been possible. I would also like to thank all of the truckers who willingly gave a portion of their time, participating in group or individual interviews at truck stops and shipping yards or chatting over a meal at Iron Skillet or Denny's. Regardless of whether their experiences were true stories or “truckers' stories” told to a naive outsider, their career histories and occupational experiences gave life to this research. I would further like to thank Dr. Nora Haenn and Dr. William Wormsley to whom I am grateful for their flexibility and words of encouragement throughout the research and writing process. Finally, I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Risa Ellovich, for her unending patience, wisdom, and unwavering support.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CB radio – Citizens' Band radio

CDL – Commercial Driver's License

CSA – Compliance, Safety, and Accountability

DM – driver manager

DMV – Department of Motor Vehicles

FMCSA – Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration

HOS – Hours of Service

MVR – Motor Vehicle Record

OTR – over-the-road

TA – TravelCenters of America

USDOT – United States Department of Transportation

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

From the middle of May through the first week of August 2012, I experienced the life of an over-the-road (OTR) truck driver in the United States. I had not intended on spending my summer in the cab of a semi-truck, but when Tom\*, my cousin and a trucker for eight years, suggested I hit the road with him for a few months, it was hard to say no. Admittedly, I could not pass up the opportunity of a thirteen-week-long road trip, driving through parts of the country I had never and probably would never get to see otherwise, all the while viewing the United States from a perspective few people have experienced.

After a long day on the road hauling frozen baked goods from a bakery in Spokane, Washington to a grocery distribution center north of Salt Lake City, Utah, Tom and I pulled into a packed TravelCenters of America (TA) truck stop to shut down for a 34-hour reset. At this point, I had been traveling with Tom as his ride-along for approximately eight weeks. He was exhausted from driving across the country in eleven hour shifts almost every day of the week. In addition to neither of us getting much sleep over the last few days, Tom's body was beginning to give out on him, despite the fact that he is a healthy, 30-year-old male. He knew the constant pressure he was placing on his body to perform was doing quite a number on him regardless of how much sleep he received. Tom always pushed himself hard every single day behind the wheel while I was on the road with him, regardless of the circumstances. He had been with his motor carrier company, Athens Transporters, for two years, doing his absolute best in order to insure that he kept receiving enough loads and enough miles during

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\* All of the names used for my informants and the companies they work for are pseudonyms.

the week to continue making at least \$700 per week after taxable deductions (as most truckers are paid on a weekly basis).

After walking across the street to a local restaurant to finally be able to sit down to eat a meal in what seemed like the first time in ages, Tom and I wandered back over to the TA, ready to unwind and watch a bit a television in the upstairs truckers' lounge. The truckers' lounge was a small room with a large flat-screen television and enough seating for eighteen people. At that moment in time, it would not have mattered had the lounge been almost filled to capacity with truckers, Tom and I wanted desperately to be anywhere else than the cab of the truck and out of the sweltering summer heat. Exhausted, but itching to converse with people aside from ourselves, Tom announced to the other truckers in the room that I was an anthropology student doing research on truck drivers for my Master's thesis. The handful of drivers who were present all volunteered to answer questions regarding their work history, occupational goals in the trucking industry, and notable experiences they had as truck drivers. It was not until Ray, an African-American long-haul company driver in his mid-thirties, began to talk that I clearly understood the difficulties the majority of over-the-road drivers face and their perspective on their job.

After answering several questions and detailing his own personal narrative, Ray took a moment to reflect and then said, "But why the interest in us [truck drivers]? Nobody writes about us. We're at the bottom of the totem pole, you know?" Ray paused for a minute to collect his thoughts then continued, stating, "In fact, the industry's going down because nobody cares about the drivers anymore." I looked around the lounge and saw the other drivers nodding their heads in agreement.

Over-the-road drivers are not the only truckers feeling the burn of deregulation. Drivers interviewed for a video produced by the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports division of the non-profit Puget Sound Sage echoed this sentiment saying, “Why do we have to be at the bottom? Why is nobody listening to us? That's my biggest question, why do we have to be on our own” (PugetSoundSage 2011)? Despite the Coalition's focus on port truck drivers, nearly all of the truck drivers I have had the chance to speak with stated that in one way or another they were treated by someone either within the trucking industry or from the outside as second-class citizens or dogs.

Although my interest in long-haul trucking is deeply personal, having family members who were or currently are truck drivers, this research never was about me. While I will briefly examine truck driving from the perspective of those family members truck drivers leave behind in order to earn a living, my main focus will remain on the truckers. This research is about Tom, Wayne, Vernon, Abram, Marcus, Paul, Mark, Gene, Carl, Ray, Denny, James, Sameer, and every other trucker on the United States highways and road systems, risking their lives, foregoing holidays and birthdays with family, to drive products in various stages of completion hundreds to thousands of miles across the country to eventually bring them to American consumers. This is their perspective on the occupation as OTR truck drivers, including the good, the bad, and everything in between. Using their perspective, I intend to bring to light a part of the transportation and service industries that is rarely discussed.

In an occupation as demanding on the employee as OTR truck driving, what keeps drivers like Tom behind the wheel and not seeking employment in another industry? I

hypothesize that while many of these drivers have sought employment and been employed in other occupations before becoming truck drivers, they remain employed as truck drivers because the job offers them better pay than their employment alternatives. They also find that career advancement is possible as a consequence of their accumulating experience, something not often offered them by other occupations they might hold. Given their current education levels, skill sets, health conditions, and/or family responsibilities, they find OTR trucking as an adequate occupation. For the purposes of this research hypothesis, career advancement means higher pay, a local trucking job, or a dedicated (predictable) route.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

Prior to conducting my field research, I attempted to find and read as much as I could pertaining to the world of over-the-road truck driving in the United States. I found the literature in the social sciences as well as in popular journals, newspapers, and other media to be rather sparse save for a few studies on owner-operators and local trucking. There are several special-topics magazines directed toward truck drivers specifically. Magazines, such as *Truckers News* and *Driver's View*, and newspapers, such as *The Trucker*, can be found in truck stops across the country, often free of charge. They cover a variety of topics relevant to the trucking industry: new Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration rules and regulations, new technology and equipment, staying fit and healthy on the road, and the dangers truckers face on the job. Overall, the topics covered in these publications are similar to those found in federally-funded studies and popular media outlets with the only difference being that they are aimed at informing a specific portion the United States population – the truck driver.

While some scholarly research exists concerning truck driving, the majority of the literature available is of little direct help in answering my research questions. Much of it provided a frame of reference for the issues present in the trucking industry before and after federal deregulation. The majority of the findings from federally-funded research that have been published to date focus on trucking industry practices and policies surrounding the occupation: correlations between the physical and mental health of truckers and the nature of the occupation; the safety of truck drivers and other motorists; causes of fatal and non-fatal

accidents involving semi-trucks; trucks and infrastructure; advances in truck technology; and the economy.

In browsing other media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, and *USA Today*, one might see a different picture of the industry. Economics journalists often look to the trucking industry and railroad industry to gauge the condition of the nation's economy. Reporters pour over quarterly data of shipping tonnage volumes and carrier company hiring and turnover rates to determine the strength of the trucking industry and the economy.

One scholar in particular has focused on the economic aspects of the trucking industry. Michael Belzer examines the impact of neoliberal philosophy and federal market deregulation on the trucking industry, asking, “What if the rest of the market looked like the trucking industry” (2000:159)? The trucking industry is where the ideals of a free market economy, including open competition as a result of increased productivity, increased efficiency and lowered prices, came to roost. Competition drives shippers' rates and truckers' wages increasingly downward while the consumer reaps the savings benefits. In fact, Belzer estimates that roughly 80% of such consumer savings came at the direct cost of reduced employee wages (2000:45). However, Belzer notes that the trucking industry has not been totally deregulated; rather, restrictions on market activities and wage rates have decreased while restrictions on non-economic activities, including hiring practices, worker qualifications, and truckers' hours of service (HOS), have increased (2000:46). Despite this, the changes that occurred as a result of administrative actions taken during Jimmy Carter's presidency continue to be described as deregulation (2000:64). While Belzer examines prior

scholarly literature on federal deregulation, federal reports, and his own previous data from surveys concerning motor carrier companies and the Teamsters Union to make his point, the trucker's voice is missing in his research.

Although not a main focus in his argument, Belzer makes two key points that are central to my own research. First, Belzer notes that, as wages are driven downward and drivers invest less in their own human capital, labor devaluation results in the industry no longer attracting drivers who are the most skilled, but rather those workers with the fewest employment alternatives (2000:46). Second, Belzer states that truck driving has become an alternative occupation, sought after by workers in other industries as a fall-back opportunity, particularly for those who have been displaced by economic recession (2000:47). While I believe some of the truckers I interview inevitably fall into one or both of these categories, I suspect others will not, having decided on a career in trucking from a young age.

Other scholars have also focused on rather specific aspects of the trucking occupation while neglecting the question of why people choose to become truck drivers in the first place. Like Belzer, Andrew Gardner also examines the effects of deregulation on the trucking industry (2002). His focus, however, is at the state level, rather than the national level, concerning specifically the Louisiana oil transportation industry. Prior to intrastate deregulation in 1995, the Gulf Coast oil industry heavily favored owner-operators who relied on family and buyer connections to acquire loads and turn a profit. Robert R. Alvarez and George A. Collier, in an article concerning long-haul trucking in Mexico, point out that Mexican truckers in the country's north also rely heavily on their own personal networks to secure loads for transport across the United States-Mexico border to market vendors in

southern California (1994).

Gardner's research offers a glimpse of the consequences of deregulation on the local or regional level. Prior to deregulation, truck driving was not only an art in terms of driving skills, but also in terms of negotiation. The importance of social capital has changed thanks to deregulation. Truckers are no longer directly responsible for securing their own loads. Instead, the trucker's driver manager, or DM, serves as the middle man between the trucker and the shipper and receiver by assigning loads to truckers who work for the motor carrier company as either company drivers or owner-operators working under a lease agreement. In Chapter 4, I shall argue that Gardner's research is flawed in this respect, as I have found that socialization and negotiation are still key components of a trucker's occupational success.

Melanie Mills (2007) and Joseph A. Blake (1974) in their separate works examine various characterizations of the truck driver in movies, books, magazines, songs, and motor carrier advertisements. Some characterizations have been positive, painting the ideal trucker as reliable, professional, well-trained, competent, independent, and experienced, while others villainize the trucker as a reckless monster terrorizing American highways. Mills points out that negating such negative images requires the creation of an occupational culture in which, once again, trucker socialization is front and center (2007:79). Socialization, in this case, allows for a sense of community and belonging through the opportunity to communicate experiences and establish shared perspectives.

Lawrence J. Ouellet's (1994) experiences as a local trucker driving for three local California-based trucking companies, Muriel Faltz Lembright and Jeffrey W. Riemer's (1982) study of women truckers, and Michael H. Agar's (1986) research on independent trucking are

the most closely related to my own research. While Agar focuses on the underlying complications associated with being an independent trucker in his ethnography *Independents Declared*, he also briefly details how or why many of the owner-operators he interviewed became truck drivers. Agar includes data from ten interviews with nine owner-operators. For Agar, the variability in the trucker's backgrounds and how they each became owner-operators served to de-romanticize the occupation. Agar notes that there are a number of independent truckers “who do not particularly idealize trucking, who describe their entry in terms of fortuitous circumstances, and who did not begin as independents” (1986:36).

While Agar states how each of these truckers got into the business (either through family, childhood interest, chance, or lack of options), the truckers' attraction to the occupation and their future career plans are not his focus. Rather, Agar chronicles the experiences of the independent trucker, which can differ greatly from those of company drivers. Because the trucking industry has changed in many ways since Agar conducted his research in 1981 and 1982, his research now provides historical insight into the trucking industry and independent trucking in the beginning stages of market deregulation.

Although Lembright and Riemer were concerned with why people choose truck driving as their occupation, their focus is on a minority group in the industry – female truckers. Lembright and Riemer found that women often choose to become truck drivers to be with their significant others. In many cases, Lembright and Riemer discover that these women were giving up other job opportunities that would pay better than truck driving and not require such long, hard work on their part. Therefore, the authors make the opposite claim for female truckers than Agar makes for male truckers, in that women are voluntarily

leaving their jobs or job prospects in order to be with their significant others on the road. On the other hand, male truckers, or at least the owner-operators Agar interviewed, in some cases sought out trucking because it was an occupation that excited them from a young age, but for others trucking was either an occupation they lucked into or chose as the result of few or no other employment opportunities.

Lawrence Ouellet also examines the occupational experiences of the truck driver, focusing on local truck driving in California. He examines how workers' needs and motives at three local, rather than long-haul, trucking companies shaped their on-the-job activities. Rather than expending so much effort at work in order to earn more money, receive better pay rates, or to rid themselves of monotony or fatigue, Ouellet suggests that truckers' high effort levels at work are attempts to create and maintain a positive image of self (1994:11).

Although Ouellet conducted his research prior to the intrastate deregulation of 1995, the consequences of federal deregulation at this time were becoming more and more apparent even for truckers transporting goods within the boundaries of the state. Relying on his own experiences as a truck driver while putting himself through school to become a sociologist, Ouellet's auto-ethnography of his time spent at the three local companies presents trucking as an occupation workers choose not for extrinsic, monetary rewards, but rather for intrinsic rewards, such as the pleasure of autonomy, variety, and operating high-quality equipment. Ouellet states such intrinsic rewards enhance the trucker's self-esteem, reaffirm his masculinity, and give meaning to his life (1994:219).

Ouellet categorizes truckers on a spectrum with “super truckers” at one end, who place high value in the intrinsic rewards the occupation offers, and “workers” at the other

end, who instead value the occupation's monetary rewards and give precedence to spending time with their families. Ouellet points out that approximately 60 to 70 percent of the truckers at the three companies fell somewhere in between the worker and the super trucker, using monetary rewards as their excuse for high levels of effort at work while the real reasons lay in the pleasure of mastering their skills and other non-monetary rewards (1994:204-7). Melanie Mills likewise cites freedom, independence, and control, not monetary rewards or company benefits, as the reasons why truckers are on the road (2007:86).

While neither Ouellet's nor my own research are generalizable to the rest of the trucking industry, I in fact make the opposite claim from Ouellet and Mills in that truckers are first and foremost in the occupation because it provides them a way to earn a living and provide for their families. Money, therefore, serves as a key motivator with other factors as ancillary benefits (e.g., traveling, freedom, solitude or socialization, the satisfaction of driving a powerful semi-truck, etc.).

Finding little in the way of social science literature specific to the trucking industry, I expanded my search to include literature covering the anthropology of work. There is a considerable amount of literature available concerning blue-collar workers in social science literature; however, the majority focuses on factory workers, caregivers, fishermen, or miners, jobs which in many ways differ greatly from that of the long-haul truck driver.

In a 1979 Association of Social Anthropologists monograph, Sandra Wallman makes several points in regards to anthropological perspectives on work which are relevant to research on the trucking occupation. Wallman first states that “few would seriously argue that the maximization of money or other material gain is the sole form of rational economic

behavior or the only incentive to effort” (1979:4). In a later article aimed at examining the amount of time Americans spend in paid labor, David J. Maume and Marcia L. Bellas point to Juliet Schor's work in which she notes that while money is not the only reason Americans increase the amount of time they spend at work, success is often measured through the acquisition of material possessions, which have become necessities rather than luxuries (2001:1139). Workers are thus caught in a work-and-spend cycle in which the income workers earn from their jobs is funneled toward purchases and paying off incurred debts. Later, Wallman echoes Ouellet's views in that effort on the job is related to non-monetary, rather than monetary rewards, stating, “People are inspired to make the extra effort necessary for a better performance by the promise of extra reward. It need not of course be material reward: in industrial society personal satisfaction is said to be better than money in the bank” (1979:6).

Overall, the topics explored in scholarly research concerning the trucking industry do not sufficiently address the factors which motivate people to seek jobs as OTR truck drivers in the United States. In most cases, the information is far from current as federal deregulation in the early 1980s, the 1995 intrastate deregulation, and the collapse of the nation's economy in 2008 have altered not only the structure of the trucking industry, but more importantly the reasons why people choose to become truck drivers in the first place. Overall, the literature referred to above lacks discussion of why people of varying age, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic standing are attracted to the occupation. Even when addressed to some degree, this literature does not reflect the current reasons for choosing long-haul truck driving as an occupation as these reasons have changed since this literature was

written. Many of my literature sources are between ten and forty years of age, making their information dated at best. This paper addresses such gaps in trucking industry literature, focusing on the current motivators for entry into the trucking industry.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methods

My perspective on this research is ultimately that of an outsider. Although I am family, I am not a truck driver. The experiences I had over-the-road in the summer of 2012 are relegated to the truck cab's second seat. I rode with Tom, my cousin and key informant for this project, from the middle of May through the beginning of August for a total of thirteen weeks. Tom is a solo company driver meaning he drives without a partner in a company-owned truck. He currently has eight total years of truck driving experience. At the beginning of the research period, Tom had been driving for Athens Transporters for two years.

Athens provides its company and lease drivers with new Freightliner Cascadia raised-roof sleeper trucks. For someone who has never been in the cab of a semi-truck, I was a bit intimidated the first time I climbed into the truck. It came equipped with a Detroit diesel engine with high-torque for load-towing power that produces a loud roar when in motion, a 13-speed manual transmission, and all sorts of knobs, buttons, and displays on the driver's-side dashboard. A thick, opaque gray curtain, which could be kept open or closed, divided the front half of the cab from the back. The back half of the cab, or “sleeper” as most truckers call it, came equipped with ample storage space, bunked twin-size beds, and A/C controls separate from the cab of the truck. While not a top-of-the-line truck, it nevertheless got us and our load from pickup to delivery time after time, almost without fail. Almost.

While on the road, I actively observed and participated as much as I could. Tom's

preference for driving at night and sleeping during the day meant that I had to adjust my sleeping schedule to his. I accomplished this task rather quickly as I found it impossible to sleep in the bunk while the truck was in motion. From the minute I initially climbed into the truck, I accompanied Tom almost everywhere, listening to exchanges between him and the warehouse employees and observing while he filled out and scanned TripPaks at truck stops detailing his mileage and costs for each load dispatch. While Tom was not used to sharing his truck with another person, having an extra pair of hands lifted some of the pressure off his shoulders. His schedule was often very tight, so much so in some instances that his arrival time was merely minutes shy of being late to pick up or deliver. Tom taught me how to do everything just short of driving the truck, although he did offer to do so about a month into the research.

I earned my keep by sweeping out the truck, grabbing to-go meals and other necessities at truck stops while Tom refueled the truck, went back and forth between the shipping-and-receiving offices at distribution centers to fill out paperwork, and checked on the loading or unloading process of our trailer. I also wrote out the trip plan for our upcoming load. Trip planning involves writing down key information concerning the load a trucker is scheduled to haul. Trip information, which includes the load's number, addresses and phone numbers of the shipping and receiving locations, the load's pay-per-mile, and company suggested route information, is sent directly to the trucker from his driver manager via the QUALCOMM, an on-board computer which functions as a two-way satellite communicator, geolocation software, and electronic hours-of-service logbook. In addition, truckers must take into consideration several factors in their trip planning: rest, weather, traffic, distance

from the shipping customer to the receiving customer, the time it takes to travel this distance, and the speed at which the truck travels. While trip planning is crucial to the trucker's efficiency, trip planning can take up a considerable amount of time. By doing something as time consuming as trip planning, I was able to take one more responsibility off Tom's shoulders so that we could get moving to our next destination sooner.

Helping Tom with his duties also allowed me to participate as much as possible. While I turned down his truck driving lesson offer, I questioned him about everything related to his job, from his day-to-day responsibilities to his thoughts on the industry as a whole. I also made sure to respect Tom's need for occasional silence. There were times when we were thundering down the highway, sitting in complete silence for what seemed like hours, watching fields of corn and livestock and towering wind turbines pass by while listening to nothing but the powerful roar of the Freightliner's Detroit diesel engine.

In addition to participant-observation, I conducted a total of twelve interviews with current and former long-haul truck drivers: five company drivers (including Tom), two lease-operators, two owner-operators, and one former trucker who is now a hotel manager. Two of the drivers never specified during their interviews whether they owned their truck or not. The majority of the drivers were able to respond to questions on leasing and truck ownership as four of the six company drivers had previously leased or owned their vehicles.

These interviews occurred in two contexts, with groups of drivers and with individuals. The truck drivers who participated were of varying ages and ethnicities, coming from a variety of educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Some drivers were immigrant workers, some had dropped out of high school, some had earned their bachelor's

degree, and many held various jobs before finally settling on truck driving. Some drivers had just started out with less than a few months of experience under their belts, while others had been behind the wheel for half a century. When I refer to a single truck driver in general, I will use the pronoun “he,” as the majority of my informants and the majority of truck drivers are still male according to a study conducted by Global Insight, Inc for the American Trucking Association (2005:11).

Neither Tom, myself, nor the eleven other drivers and one former driver I interviewed claim to speak for all truckers, as personal histories and road experiences differ widely. Over the course of my research, I began to understand that every trucker's decision in terms of his or her trucking career is bound by a unique set of circumstances and life choices. My findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to all truckers within the industry and likely not even to all truckers driving for a single motor carrier company. As a result, the research findings presented here will be based largely on the case study of my key informant, Tom, with supporting material from our interactions with other truckers who were willing to discuss the ins and outs of the occupation and other life experiences. These are the truckers whose stories I will tell while also providing an all-too-rare glimpse into an occupation that often goes unnoticed or remains under appreciated in both scholarly research and in the popular media.

I conducted several of the interviews in a group setting in a truckers' lounge. While sitting at a TA truck stop for a weekend, Tom and I would frequent the truckers' lounge to get out of the truck and the unbearable July heat. With July 2012 being the hottest on record across the nation, other truckers sought refuge inside of the truck stop as well (National

Climatic Data Center 2012). Although the small room was not set up for group conversation, with all of the chairs facing a flat-screen television on the wall opposite the door, the truckers who entered were eager to relax in an air-conditioned room and converse with other drivers. I interviewed the first group of truckers, Wayne, James, and Mark that Saturday evening and the second group, Ray, Gene, Carl, and Vernon, the following afternoon. Other truckers would often peek into the room or stop in to listen to these discussions, occasionally chiming in with their own experiences.

In the group settings which lasted from three to four hours, often with breaks in the conversation in which the truckers or Tom and I attended to other tasks, I began our conversations by asking the truckers how and why they began truck driving. The rest of the discussion was less structured. I often allowed the truckers to take the conversation into directions and topics that were important to them then pose any questions that had not been discussed during lulls in the conversation.

I conducted a third set of group interviews while eating with Tom in the truckers' section of an Iron Skillet restaurant in a Petro truck stop in San Antonio. This particular session, like the two conducted in the TA truckers' lounge, was unplanned, but also did not focus as much on the truckers' career choices and personal histories. Tom and the six other truckers present in the truckers' section of the restaurant chatted casually, sharing their stories of life on the road with each other while offering advice and warnings to heed, imparting the lessons they had learned while truck driving to the younger or less experienced members of the group.

All other interviews were conducted individually either in the truckers' lounges or fast

food restaurants of truck stops or while waiting at the loading docks of distribution centers. Individual interviews were often much shorter than group interviews, lasting an average of 15-20 minutes. Individual interviews were shorter because, in most cases, these interviews took place while Tom and the trucker interviewed were on-duty. As a result, individual interviews were more structured than group interviews. Questions were less open-ended with fewer opportunities for the trucker to expand on his answers or introduce topics he believed were important.

Tom was present for all interviews. He often acted as a liaison, approaching other drivers while he waited in line at a distribution center's shipping-and-receiving office and I planned our next trip back in the truck. While none of the interviews were recorded, I took notes during every session except for the casual conversation amongst truckers at the Iron Skillet. I chose to take notes rather than record the interviews in order to better protect the identities of my informants. Not recording allowed the truckers to be more open in their interviews as many discussed dissatisfaction with their driver managers and employers they may not have expressed if they had been recorded. Some informants were wary of being interviewed despite not being recorded. Abram, a Somalian lease driver, was initially hesitant to answer questions after having assumed Tom was a police officer. Marcus, a Haitian lease trucker also driving for the same company as Tom, was visibly nervous during his interview.

I began my research with the intention of determining whether the men and women who choose over-the-road truck driving do so with the intention of turning it into a long-term career or if they plan on using the over-the-road experience as leverage for gaining a position as a local truck driver. However, once I began, I found that local trucking positions were not

a topic of conversation among the long-haul truckers I interviewed. Instead, the truckers would openly discuss their own work history and upbringing, how long they had been in the business, the often unbelievable and humbling experiences they had while driving, their own perspectives on changes in the industry since deregulation, long-term career goals, and what motivated them to become truck drivers in the first place. While various factors influenced each trucker in his choice of occupation, it appears income and benefits often served as the key factor motivating them to seek and maintain jobs as over-the-road truck drivers.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Over-the-Road Trucking Industry

Although the trucking industry is a part of the United States economy, over-the-road truck driving has its own occupational culture. Truckers spend their first year adjusting to life on the road. For many, OTR trucking is not the right career choice. New truckers who choose to stick with it find OTR truck driving is a hard, exhausting career that can bring both frustration and satisfaction. In this chapter, I will discuss the challenges prospective truckers face in becoming truck drivers and the trials associated with the first year behind the wheel. Much of the narrative included in this chapter entails the experiences of the solo company truck driver, as the majority of the information gathered came from observations of and interviews with my key informant, Tom.

#### Trucking Demographics and Barriers to Employment

A 2005 study conducted for the American Trucking Associations by Global Insight, Inc., a subsidiary of publicly held publishing company IHS, Inc., projected that between 2004 and 2014, the white male trucker population between the ages of 35 and 44, which made up over half of the trucking industry at the time, would decrease by 17.7 percent (2005:24). As the trucking industry's majority demographic continues to age, there is an increasingly urgent need for motor carriers to train and hire new truckers. The industry struggles to fill an ever increasing number of vacant seats for a variety of reasons: the federal legal driving age for interstate truck drivers; criminal background checks; high turnover often as a result of decreased wages; increased safety regulations; infrequent home-time; adequate knowledge of

the English language; and costly training required to obtain a Commercial Driver's License (CDL).

One of the first barriers younger, hopeful drivers encounter is the federal legal driving age limit. Prior to implementation of the Commercial Motor Vehicles Safety Act of 1986, commercial licensing requirements varied from one state to the next. Many states allowed anyone licensed to drive an automobile to drive a commercial motor vehicle (FMCSA 2012). Following the implementation of the 1986 act, USDOT FMCSA required truckers to be at least 21 years of age in order to possess a CDL to legally operate a commercial vehicle outside of their state of residence (FMCSA 2013). Under the 1986 Safety Act, young prospective truck drivers may obtain a Commercial Learner's Permit (CLP) at 18-years-old in order to receive training and behind-the-wheel experience prior to taking the required knowledge and skills tests in order to obtain a CDL. CDL testing requirements vary by state. In the majority of states, persons may obtain a CDL at 18-years-old, but by law, they may only operate commercial motor vehicles within their state of residence. In Tennessee, drivers must be at least 19-years-old before obtaining a Class A CDL to operate vehicles in excess of 26,000 pounds.

In order to even qualify for the truck driving schools and training programs offered by most motor carriers, such as Con-way Transportation, PRIME inc. and Werner Enterprises, a prospective trucker must be at least 21 years of age (Con-way Inc. 2013; PRIME inc. 2013; Werner Enterprises, Inc. 2013). Furthermore, many companies, such as Tom's employer Athens Transporters, requires that anyone less than 23-years-old must have a clean driving record, which typically means no reckless driving charges, DUIs, or more than

two moving violations in the past two years. In addition to this limitation, many trucking companies list 23 as the age minimum as part of their employment qualifications. This limits the number of trucking companies that would accept any prospective drivers under the age of 23. As a result, the trends Russ Bynum and Paul Davidson cite concerning truckers getting into the occupation later in life are in part directly related to the minimum age requirements enforced by the USDOT and preferred by many motor carriers (Bynum 2012; Davidson 2012).

For those who do meet the legal minimum age of 21 to be employed as an over-the-road trucker, there are several other obstacles that may bar their entry into the trucking industry. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) has established the following as general qualifications for commercial motor vehicle drivers, stating:

“A person is qualified to drive a motor vehicle if he/she – 1) Is at least 21 years old; 2) Can read and speak the English language sufficiently...; 3) Can, by reason of experience, training, or both, safely operate the type of commercial motor vehicle he/she drives; 4) Is physically qualified to drive a commercial motor vehicle;<sup>1</sup> 5) Has a currently valid commercial motor vehicle license issued only by one State or jurisdiction; 6) Has prepared and furnished the motor carrier company that employs him/her with [a list of his/her traffic law and ordinance violations, other than parking]; 7) Is not disqualified to drive a commercial motor vehicle under the rules in §391.15;<sup>2</sup> 8) Has successfully completed a driver's road test and has been issued a certificate of driver's road test”<sup>3</sup>

FMCSA's qualifications reduce the pool of potential truckers by excluding several

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- 1 A full list of physical qualifications for driving a commercial motor vehicle may be found on the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's website at:  
<http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/rules-regulations/administration/fmcsr/fmcsrruletext.aspx?reg=391.41>
  - 2 For §391.15 of the FMCSA driver regulations, see:  
<http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/rules-regulations/administration/fmcsr/fmcsrruletext.aspx?reg=391.15>
  - 3 FMCSA qualifications may be viewed in full at:  
<http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/rules-regulations/administration/fmcsr/fmcsrruletext.aspx?reg=391.11>

populations, such as immigrants who may not yet be able to adequately comprehend and communicate using the English language and those persons whose physical or medical conditions or histories may place themselves and/or other motorists at risk. Those persons who are able to meet these requirements are then qualified to become truck drivers.

### Truck Driving School

The first stage of a new trucker's career involves choosing a truck driving school in order to obtain his or her CDL. For potential drivers, this means either attending a trucking school sponsored by a motor carrier company or a private truck driving school. However, inexperienced drivers are not the only ones who must attend a truck driving school. Many carrier companies also have newly hired truckers with OTR experience complete an abbreviated version of their truck driving school program or attend a short orientation to the company in order to learn company policies and gain familiarity with the company's driving and communications equipment.

Tom indicated that the way many companies attempt to train their drivers can be discouraging to people interested in becoming truckers. Having attended an abbreviated version of Athens Transporters' truck driving school, Tom explained to me the training phases new drivers must complete before they are able to become solo or team company drivers.

“Inexperienced drivers who pass Athens's company screening and are hired go through Phase One of training. In this phase, the driver pays about \$6,000 in truck driving school tuition and is expected to cover his own personal expenses, such as food and sometimes housing. This phase can last anywhere from a few weeks to a few months. Students spend a month in the classroom and then, once they clear your background, medical

examination, and you pass your tests, they send you on the road to begin hands-on training.

Once the student has passed this phase and has received approval from his trainer that he understands and can perform the general fundamentals and duties of a trucker, the student goes through what's called an upgrade class and moves onto Phase Two. This is also the phase where experienced drivers who have just signed on with the company begin. During this phase, drivers spend about one to three months over-the-road with a trainer and are paid \$65 per weekday during this part of their training. After the O.K. from their Phase Two trainer, the drivers take another set of upgrade classes that last about a week; then, they must complete and pass an upgrade test on driving skills and general knowledge acquired during training in order to receive their CDL and become OTR truckers.”

As Tom illustrated, just making it to the point where a driver has his CDL, is driving without the supervision of a trainer as either a company solo or company team driver, and is earning a regular weekly paycheck can be a long, drawn-out process sometimes lasting six months to one year, depending on the student's progress. “For some people,” Tom continued, “Going without a paycheck for that long is a deal-breaker. A lot of the students have bills to pay and families to take care of and they can't go that long receiving no pay for the first few weeks or months and only \$65 a day for the next few months.”

Many of my informants pointed out that truckers who do make it through the company's driving school and become company drivers tend to only stay with these companies long enough to accrue the minimum amount of experience necessary to begin working for another, "better" carrier. Better, in this case, refers to companies with better working conditions, which include but are not limited to: increased wages, health benefits, more opportunities for home-time, potential to earn more paid vacation days, and the opportunity to work a regional or dedicated route closer to home. As a result, many of the

major motor carriers serve mainly as training grounds and a way to gain experience for new truckers.

Such companies often have a poor reputation among more experienced truckers. James, a long-haul trucker in his late 30s with twenty years of over-the-road experience, pointed out that many motor carrier companies have bad reputations because they constantly churn out new drivers that are often-times barely qualified to be behind the wheel of a semi-truck and do not adequately prepare new truckers for life on the road. James said:

“The most dangerous drivers on the road really aren't automobile drivers, it's the new truckers. Their companies push them hard so they're out there on the highway burned out and not thinking. Company driving schools don't spend much time training their drivers before putting them behind the wheel and expecting them to work at the same rate as more experienced drivers.”

Carl, a 60-year-old OTR trucker, placed the blame on the training process as well, stating:

“The problem's the trainers. They show [the new truckers] short cuts instead of how to do the job right. I see it everyday on the roads and at truck stops. The other day I pulled up behind another driver at a fuel bay. He wasn't filling his tanks. He was just letting his truck sit there with the four-ways [hazard warning lights] on while he sat in McDonald's eating his breakfast. When he came back, I confronted him, and he said that his trainer had taught him that.”

In addition to trainers teaching new drivers bad habits that may inconvenience other drivers or put their safety or that of others at risk, poor training may lead to new drivers not knowing how to properly perform the duties associated with their job, which may hinder the drivers' efficiency and productivity, barring them from being assigned better loads. Improper training could also place new drivers at an increased risk of committing various federal

Compliance, Safety, and Accountability (CSA) violations, such as breaching maximum allotted hours of service (HOS) or driving in an unsafe manner.

### OTR Truckers' Wages and Incentives

While driving is the trucker's profession, the truck is the tool each trucker uses to earn money. According to May 2012 wage and employment statistics for truck drivers, U.S. Truckers earned on averaged between \$25,000 and \$59,000, which translates to between \$12 and \$28.50 per hour of driving (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). A new OTR trucker will earn an annual salary near the lower end of the spectrum in his first year behind the wheel. Tom, for instance, noted that he made less than \$20,000 in his first year with Athens. However, in his second year with Athens, Tom earned close to \$40,000.

“I hadn't yet gotten the hang of things in my first year. I wanted to get the good runs, the ones that would keep me running. It took a while for my DM to have confidence in me. It's not just about my skills behind the wheel, but also how I trip plan.”

Tom admitted that trip planning was where he struggled initially.

“The only times I've ever been late to a delivery was for reasons that were out of my hands. The shippers take too long loading the trailer, you run into stand-still traffic on the highway because of some wreck or rush hour, or the truck breaks down, or you get blizzards or wind gusts that force you to pull over, all of these are out of my control, but I had to learn to give myself enough time to get the load where it's going. I stopped aiming for getting it there on-time and instead get it there a few hours ahead of time or sometimes even a day ahead if I just need to drop the trailer in the [receiving] yard.”

As a result, Tom has been able to double his earnings in his second year with the company. However, despite his overall increased earnings, his weekly paychecks vary greatly

in total dollars earned after income taxes, Social Security, and Medicare are withheld. In one week, Tom can make more than \$1,000 as a company solo OTR trucker. However, there is no guarantee Tom will make even close to that amount the following week. “I’ve made as much as \$1,200 in one week then turned around and that next week only made \$600,” Tom said. If Tom had children to care for or a significant amount of debt, it is likely that the uncertainty of his weekly earnings would place a considerable amount of emotional stress on him in addition to the other on-the-job pressures he experiences on a daily basis.

Company drivers' wages vary so much from one week to the next because they are not salaried nor are they paid based on the number of hours they drive; instead, they are paid based on a per-mile rate. For each load a trucker delivers, he is paid per mile driven for that specific load. However, company drivers are paid based on a predetermined, fixed mileage and not the number of miles actually driven for each load. For instance, Tom receives a load originating in Amarillo, Texas for delivery to Portland, Oregon. Tom's company will pay him 34 cents-per-mile at a fixed mileage of 1,600 miles. The number of miles Tom actually drives using the most direct route is 1,645 miles, 45 miles more than he is being paid to drive. Upon realizing this, Tom said, “I felt cheated out of money I rightfully earned. It may not look like much, but when they don't pay you for driving 15 miles here and another 5 miles there, all that adds up.”

For the carrier company, though, paying drivers based on a predetermined, fixed mileage for a load ensures that the driver will not only take the most direct and economical route, as Lafontaine and Masten state in their work, but that the driver will also be under increased pressure to get the load to its destination on or ahead of time in order to move on to

the next load as soon as possible (2002:23). Fixed mileage for a trip places efficiency and timeliness as driver incentives toward earning more money rather than relying entirely on the total number of miles actually driven. Being an effective driver in turn means getting to the customer on or ahead of schedule, following the route one's driver manager (DM) assigns with the load or finding a shorter route if possible, and avoiding unnecessary delays, all in order to get as many loads as possible on one week's paycheck.

Rates of pay-per-mile-per-load often vary widely as well. In trip planning for Tom, I found that his pay-per-mile would often vary from one load to the next with a range between 27.5 cents-per-mile and 35.5 cents-per-mile. Coupled with the fact that the number of miles he drives varies from week to week, Tom rarely knows exactly how much he will make from one paycheck to the next. For truck drivers who are on the road trying to provide for their families financially, the insecurity caused by such fluctuations in pay may not be worth the unpredictable home-time and absence from their families for weeks or months on end. Thus many new drivers elect to leave the industry after less than a year of being on the road.

Furthermore, the majority of major motor carrier companies, such as Athens, determine truckers' pay-per-mile rate based on experience, not performance. For every year Tom is with the company, he will earn a penny or two more per mile than he would have the previous year. Recently, he contacted his DM to ask when he would receive a pay raise. His DM stated that because this company does not give raises or bonuses based on performance, Tom's next pay raise would occur on the anniversary of his hiring date. For Tom, and no doubt many drivers in Tom's situation, the lack of incentives for performing one's job as a trucker well is quite discouraging.

Drivers with a motor carrier thus have few incentives to remain with the company long-term. Meager annual pay increases and often no more than two weeks of paid vacation time for each of the driver's first eight years of employment with the company tend to drive those who stay to seek employment with other trucking companies. One compensation Tom's company offers after three years of service is a partial refund of the trucker's tuition paid for the company driving school. However, once Tom gains two years of experience with his company and maintains a clean motor vehicle record (MVR), he is in a position to be hired away by another trucking company. Many companies hiring experienced drivers offer sign-on bonuses often totaling more than the tuition reimbursement Tom would get for driving for an additional year with his current company. Many of these companies also offer performance-based raises, often paying the driver an additional 1-3 cents per mile, which as mentioned above, Tom's company does not offer. In Tom's case, the incentives his company offers are not worth staying beyond the three year experience mark.

#### Trucker Expectations, Driver Manager Relationships, and Trucker Reliability

Two elements of the truck driving occupation can increase a trucker's likelihood of driving a more consistent number of miles and earning a more stable paycheck: the trucker's reliability and his relationship with his DM. Part of the problem for new drivers though, is that many enter the occupation with unrealistic expectations for their first year behind the wheel. Unless prospective truckers seriously research the occupation before they begin driving, they may hold unrealistic expectations which their employers are often not willing or able to meet. This is the case because the driver has yet to demonstrate that he can deliver

better paying, longer runs on-time. Lack of understanding of the occupation prior to getting behind the wheel of a truck can have unexpected consequences for the driver and the companies. By not knowing the average pay, expectation of miles to be driven, job pressures, and time spent out on the road versus at home, drivers can easily become disillusioned, leaving new truckers with little choice besides putting up with the job or finding one other than truck driving. Therefore, low retention in the trucking industry of new, inexperienced drivers may actually result not from low wages, low accrued mileage, and infrequent home-time, but from new drivers' expectations that they will automatically be given the wages, miles, and home-time more experienced drivers have earned without having to work for it themselves.

Of the truckers I spoke with who had been behind the wheel for less than a year, the majority believed they would be earning more money and be given more trips and driving miles than they actually were earning and driving. Tom mentioned that this was not necessarily a reflection on the trucker's ability, but rather the fact that until a trucker proves to his DM that he can consistently meet delivery deadlines on long runs, he will continue to receive shorter, regional runs that might not allow him to earn as much money as he would prefer. "Remember the other Athens driver we ran into at the Flying J a week back?" Tom asked while we discussed drivers' on-the-job expectations.

"He's only been with the company for a few months and he's mad because his DM won't give him longer runs. He wants runs that pay better and don't have him sitting at a shipper because it was a 400 mile run with the delivery appointment time scheduled for two or three days after he picked up the load. What he doesn't understand is that his DM needs to know

he's reliable. He's just starting out so he hasn't proven himself yet.”

Because Tom had spent his childhood summers riding in his godfather's truck, he understood that the first year on the job requires a considerable amount of hard work on the trucker's part with few immediate rewards for his efforts. Reflecting on his first year with Athens, Tom said:

“I'm doing things now that I wouldn't have been able to do a year ago. Before when I drove for another company, I wasn't on tight delivery schedules because I was transporting oversized equipment. So, the first year I worked for Athens, I had to learn how to trip plan and how to drive with this huge box trailer that's more difficult to maneuver. I wasn't making much money. Now I'm running loads meant for team drivers because I've proven to my DM that I'm reliable, that I'm capable of getting whatever load they give me to its destination on time. I'm overall a more efficient driver.”

Now having passed his two year hiring anniversary with Athens, Tom has begun to look for jobs with other trucking companies. However, he admits the timing is not right.

“My wife's going to finish her Masters at UTEP (University of Texas – El Paso) and the job market there isn't that great. She's thinking about moving east to Houston, San Antonio, or Austin where she would have better chances of finding a job and be closer to her parents [who live in Sugar Land]. I can't find local job just yet, because everything's hanging on her right now and where she ends up in the next year.”

Tom stated that as a result, his time spent between home and his job is based on compromises. Staying out on the road for three or four months at a time without a break is physically and mentally draining.

“About every two or two and a half months I ask for a week off to go home. I need to be able to spend time with my wife and just get out from behind the wheel of that truck for a few

days. My DM doesn't like when I go home because I'm one of his most productive drivers and the truck just sits there for a week not earning the company any money. I'm not earning any money either while I'm home. I'm trying to save up so that I can purchase a house and go back to school. I don't get any closer to accomplishing that by not being out on the road.”

For truckers like Tom with significant others or children at home depending upon their income, the decision to either return home for time off or to stay on the road and continue earning money is a difficult one. Company drivers have little say about when they are able to take time off. Tom noted that even though he is out on the road to make money, he would like to be home more often. However, how long he is on the road before he receives home-time is not his decision to make.

“It's completely up to my DM. I can request time off, but it's unlikely that I'll get it when I want it. He (my DM) usually has me driving for three months at a time before I can get back home. By the time I do get home, I'm so burned out I just spend most of my time sleeping.”

Company drivers thus must engage in a series of negotiations with their families and driver managers in order to meet both work and family responsibilities.

Although sacrificing time spent with one's family is an unfortunate consequence of being an over-the-road company driver, it is necessary for these truckers to earn a living. In fact, in addition to his skills behind the wheel, a driver's relationship with his DM is key to his success as an over-the-road trucker. Company truckers at Athens are assigned a DM when they are hired. They may change DMs over the course of their time with the company as a result of the driver switching to another division or the DM receiving a promotion or moving to another division. In the two years Tom has been with Athens, he has had approximately

eight driver managers. While many changes were due to his DMs moving to other divisions in the company, he admitted that he had, on more than one occasion, asked the Southwestern regional manager if they could place him under a different DM.

A month into my field research, Tom found himself in such a situation. After taking time off to return home before beginning the three month stretch during which I conducted my field research, Tom was placed under a new DM with whom he was not getting along.

“I had to ask [the regional manager] to put me back with my old DM. I don't want to be working under that new guy because he doesn't know what he's doing and he doesn't keep me busy. I like the other one because, although we got started off on the wrong foot – I told him I'm not here to kiss his ass, he's not here to kiss mine, but just to do our jobs and make money – he knows how I like to be run. He knows that as long as he keeps me running and making money, I'm happy. Then he's happy because I'm not complaining in his ear about stuff every day. I do complain a lot though, so much sometimes that, under any other circumstances, the regional manager would have called and told me to suck it up or I'm fired. I guess that because I'm reliable, I can complain until I get what I want.”

Tom is able to get what he wants from his DM or the company the majority of the time because he has paid his dues. Obtaining one's CDL, receiving training as a trucker, and enduring the first year on the road are all a part of the individual's rite of passage into the trucking community. In addition to this socialization into the truck driving occupation and the culture of the industry, truckers face another challenge in their first year on the road: being separated from friends and loved-ones, coming to terms with the fact that life back home is going on without them, and adjusting to being alone.

### Social Aspects of OTR Truck Driving

The work environment for truckers is strikingly different from that of many other occupations in the United States. OTR truckers spend the majority of their time in their trucks. The truck performs various roles for the long-haul trucker; it is a place of work, an object of work, and a mobile home. Joseph A. Blake refers to the importance and centrality of the truck in each OTR trucker's work life, stating, “[The] abstract, but nonetheless real, relationship between driver and other elements of his social world [are] centered around a physical nexus: his equipment” (1974:210). For the solo OTR trucker, the high level of dependence on his truck and the nature of that truck's use, both as a tool to earn a living and as a mobile place of residence, means that he inevitably spends a considerable amount of his time on the job alone.

In accompanying Tom as his ride-along for three months, I saw first-hand how lonely the occupation can be. An OTR trucker's day (or night) behind the wheel begins after he has spent at least 10 consecutive hours off-duty in the sleeper berth of his cab within the last 24 hours. The next 14 hours of the trucker's day are typically spent on-duty. At most, 11 of the 14 hours may be spent behind the wheel driving. The other 3 hours are typically referred to as time spent on-duty, but not driving, which may include re-fueling or weighing the tractor-trailer at a truck stop, getting one's truck or trailer washed at a Blue Beacon truck wash, or waiting at the shipper/receiver for the trailer to be loaded or unloaded. OTR truckers will not always drive for the full 11 hours as their time spent operating the truck is dependent on the load's place of origin and final destination. However, even spending 8 or 9 hours a day driving and 3 or more hours on-duty, but not driving, is both lonely and physically taxing for

the solo OTR trucker. “I really enjoyed trucking when I first began driving long-haul,” Tom said.

“I loved the challenge and the adventure of driving a truck across the country to meet delivery deadlines. I was learning something new every day, and still am in some ways. But after two years on the road, it's gotten boring. I spend a lot of time alone in the truck, 11 hours driving alone, 8 to 10 hours sleeping alone, so an 18 to 21 hour period where I'm by myself. The only thing I find enjoyable about [OTR] trucking anymore is traveling, but I've been almost everywhere in the country now except for the extreme Northeast, like Maine and Vermont, so even that's not a fun as it used to be when I first started.”

In fact, Tom stated that his job keeps him so busy that even if he has time at the end of the day to sit down to a meal or watch television and talk with fellow truckers, he's often too exhausted and thus spends any available extra time sleeping.

Several of the truckers I spoke with that had the most OTR experience noted truckers in the past had not been nearly as pressed for time as they currently are as a result of changes in the last two decades to the structure of the occupation. For these truckers, socializing had previously been a benefit of being a truck driver. Carl noted:

“Back before they [FMCSA] made all these HOS [Hours of Service] and safety rules and regulations, you had time to sit down and have a leisurely meal and sit around exchanging stories with other truckers. Now we spend almost all of our time driving or sleeping or waiting at a shipper.”

The implementation of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, as Agar (1986) and Belzer (2000) have noted, has meant that OTR truckers have had to work harder in order to earn the same income they made prior to deregulation. This is due to the reduction in price controls and the escalation of competition between carrier companies to provide transportation

services at the cheapest possible rate while still making a profit. OTR truckers' pay-per-mile decreased rapidly in the subsequent decade, as Belzer states that deregulation increased income inequality and “converted middle-class jobs with reasonable benefits and retirement possibilities into low-wage jobs unlikely to provide career employment and carrying no retirement benefits” (2000:16)

While Andrew Gardner focused on the impacts of the 1995 intrastate deregulation on the Louisiana oil transportation industry, some of his findings can be generalized to changes in the OTR trucking industry as well. Following both federal and state deregulation, truckers are spending more time on the road and earning less money as a result. Gardner (2002:396) notes:

“Working for an oilpatch trucking company today means working for a company with administrative offices far away, for a company beholden to the tides of global financial markets and large insurance providers, and for a company that knows you by your Social Security number” (2002:396).

Gardner goes on to state that “the economic impact of these changes [is that truckers] work more and earn less...New faces struggle to make a living behind the wheel” (202:395, 397). These changes are compounded by the fact that, as my informants have pointed out, having to work more means less time to spend at home with one's family. Two informants' marriages dissolved as a result of their having to spend so much time on the road in order to earn a decent wage.

Deregulation has also meant OTR truckers have less time to socialize with other drivers. Deregulation turned the trucking industry into a competition between major motor carrier companies to provide on-demand pick-up and delivery of customers' products as

quickly and cheaply as possible. The ensuing increase in time spent on the road trying to earn a decent paycheck has meant less time available to truckers to spend socializing at truck stops. Now, socializing with other drivers is limited to a driver's off-duty hours spent at truck stops or while waiting at the docks of the shipping and receiving companies.

Tom and I rarely spent much time inside the truck stops if we were only on our 10-hour sleeper berth, as Tom typically spent this time trying to catch up on sleep. However, if we were parked at a truck stop for a 34-hour reset, Tom and I would often spend the majority of the time outside of the truck, which usually involved relaxing in the truck stop's truckers' lounge, grabbing a bite to eat at the truck stop's diner or buffet, doing laundry, and socializing with other truckers. Although many truck stop diners had televisions or "bar"-type areas in which truckers and other travelers could congregate to talk or catch up on current world events, truckers were often dissuaded from loitering in the dining area unless they intended to purchase food or beverage. As a result, our interactions with other truckers were limited to the truckers' lounges.

Tom had always welcomed the 34-hour reset period as it was a time for him to catch up on missed sleep and get out from behind the wheel of the truck. This was also the time in which Tom and I could sit down to chat with and interview other truckers. Truckers hanging out, watching television in the truckers' lounges of truck stops tended to have the most time on their hands. They tended to be drivers relaxing after a long day on the road or waiting out the weekend until they would receive their next load assignment on Monday morning. They were the most logical targets for interviews as they had the most time to spare; whereas, truckers waiting in line to order food, purchase a shower, or pay for fuel typically were on

tight schedules, often stopping into the truck stop to do just that and then leave.

If Tom and I stopped to refuel, we often attempted to accomplish multiple tasks while filling up the truck's and reefer unit's fuel tanks. While Tom was pumping diesel, I would often head inside the truck stop and place a food order to-go as time was tight; we literally had no time to waste sitting down for fifteen to thirty minutes to eat a meal. Talking with drivers while in line at fast food restaurants was at times the most socializing we would do for an entire day and these conversations were often cut short as we had a small window of time in which to stand around and chat.

While many of the drivers who had been in the industry for 20 or more years had grown accustomed to the changes associated with delivering on-demand goods, some described how increased competition between carrier companies and the introduction of stricter laws and regulations surrounding safety and hours of service had altered their perspectives on the occupation. For some, the changes in the trucking industry implemented over the last few decades have resulted in a loss of a sense of community. “There's no brotherhood anymore,” one trucker said,

“All this started in the 1980s, when we [truckers] began drive on-demand for immediate delivery and companies began competing to see who can pay their drivers the least and rake in the most profit. We spend all of our time in that truck now and get paid less for it. Doesn't matter where you go, nobody's happy to see you and nobody has any consideration for your time. Shippers don't care how big of a rush you're in, they'll take their sweet time loading your trailer...We're in such a rush that there's no common courtesy anymore. Truckers don't stop to help each other out if somebody's broke down on the side of the highway or needs help. Most of 'em only care about their own schedules and their own problems.”

Despite his negative view of the changes the occupation has endured over the past 30 years, the mention of a trucker brotherhood is an important point. The brotherhood, so to speak, may not be the same as it was in the 1970s and 1980s, but there is undoubtedly still some sense of camaraderie or unity amongst truckers. Truckers may no longer sleep with their doors and windows open, hold impromptu cookouts in truck stop parking lots, or even stop to help out a fellow trucker stranded on the side of the highway, but this is because trucking culture has changed over time in the same ways as American culture. Instead of cookouts, socializing involves truckers congregating in truck stop truckers' lounges or in the "truckers' only" section of truck stop buffets to shoot the breeze with their fellow truckers.

Another reason some of the truckers mentioned for the reduced sense of camaraderie was a steady increase in the national crime rate. A 66-year-old trucker with five decades of experience, pointed out, "When I first started trucking, I used to sleep in a hammock underneath the trailer. There weren't any big truck stops yet, no sleeper berths in the cab, and you didn't have to worry about anyone trying to rob you, kill you, or steal your truck." Truckers keep their windows up and doors locked not just because it is dangerous and unwise to do otherwise, but because the truck is for the majority of the year their home. Locking the doors and shutting the windows are habitual activities Americans engage in every time they leave the house or go to bed for the night. Regardless of what one calls home, whether it's a two-story house in a Dallas, Texas suburb or the cab of a Kenworth truck, sociocultural changes in the United States have made everyone reevaluate the measures they take in order to protect themselves, their families, and their property. Changes such as higher rates of crime and expanding media coverage of criminal behavior have also made truckers wary of

stopping to help out someone in need on the side of a highway, as an African American trucker with 8 years of experience noted,

“Truckers are just scared to help anyone now. More minorities are in the trucking industry now. Back when it was a white male dominated industry, there wasn't that fear of your kindness being taken advantage of. But I'll tell you, as a Black male, we won't even help each other. If we won't even help [people of our own race], why would we help anyone else?”

The issue of racism has become more pronounced recently in the trucking industry. This has taken a toll on the previously held ideas of brotherhood. Closeted and blatant racism and prejudice are obvious issues in the occupation. Many minority truckers face these challenges on a daily basis. While the majority of the truckers in the industry are white males in their mid-forties or older, studies such as the 2005 U.S. Truck Driver Shortage, predicted an industry-wide increase in the number of non-white, male truck drivers from 29.4 percent in 2004 to 35.3 percent in 2014 (Global Insight, Inc. 2005:35). Tom noted that minority drivers have to deal with prejudice from several angles, often including their company and/or DM, the shippers and receivers, and fellow truckers.

“A lot of people in the industry profile truckers based on their race or the company they work for. Some [truckers] see that if you're not the same race as them or drive for a different company, then they won't help you even if you need the help.”

However, Tom pointed out that he believed negative attitudes toward minority drivers may be changing:

“I try my best to help everyone out, no matter who they drive for or what they look like. I know there are a lot of drivers out there who do the same. The fact is you never know when you'll be stuck on the side of the road or having problems trying to back into a tight

spot. You don't know when you'll need help next, so it's better not to burn any bridges.”

While minority drivers face additional pressures and challenges as truck drivers as a result of their race and/or ethnicity, their growing numbers indicate that since deregulation, trucking has gradually become a less exclusive industry. Based on several accounts, the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities may have exacerbated white-nonwhite tensions in the industry. “You hear it mostly over the CB,” Tom said.

“I had [a CB radio] in my truck when I first started driving because the company owner had them installed in all of the trucks. Back then, they were useful because everything wasn't computerized. The majority of drivers didn't have cell phones yet, so you couldn't just call your carrier or a towing company to get you out of a jam. You can also socialize with other drivers over the CB, but about 95 percent of the time, all you hear is negativity. I always kept my CB off unless I really needed to use it, like in an emergency. There's a lot of drivers out there who use the CB as a way to put down truckers who drive for certain companies or to make racist remarks. Listening to that puts a lot of extra stress on me. It makes me upset.”

Another trucker chose not to use a CB for similar reasons.

“My girlfriend actually bought me a CB when I started truck driving again. It's sitting in my truck, in its box, still unwrapped. Racism's almost all you hear over the CB anymore. I don't run one anymore because all that negativity can affect your job performance.”

The CB radio's popularity began to fade within the last 20 years as a result of the development of new and cheaper communications technology. With cellphones and data plans becoming cheaper and network connections covering all but some of the most remote places in the country, the cell phone began to replace or in some case be used in conjunction

with CB radios for connections with people outside of the trucker's cab. The ubiquity of cell phones has meant that truckers are now communicating less with each other and more with the world outside of their trucks and the industry.

My informants held a wide range of views on the current usefulness of the CB radio. The majority of the older, more experienced drivers I spoke with still have and frequently use a CB radio to communicate with other truckers on the road and to gain up-to-date information regarding the locations of state troopers and nearby weight stations. The younger truckers, on the other hand, often noted that CB radios are non-essential to one's success as a truck driver. Of course, the CB radio is only useful if the trucker one is trying to communicate with has one. Otherwise, communication with other truckers occurs through non-verbal means when truckers pass one another on the highways.

To the uninitiated, non-verbal communications between truck drivers such as truck light signaling is rather confusing. I remember driving my car to meet Tom at his company's Dallas, Texas truck yard late one night in May to begin my field research. As I was driving west on I-40, I noticed a trucker in on-coming traffic flash his trailer lights. Having never seen this before, I asked Tom about it when I arrived. He pointed out that truckers often use their truck and trailer lights to signal to another driver that he is clear to pass or change lanes. Once the other trucker passes, it is considered common courtesy for him to turn his trailer, or marker, lights off and on in rapid succession to signal "thank you" to the trucker he just passed.

Aside from signaling with their marker lights, truckers will often signal one another by turning their headlights off and on several times. There are several situations in which is

used. Truckers often use this light signal to let other truckers ahead of them who are trying to merge know they are clear to switch lanes. Truckers may also use this signal to warn oncoming truckers of accidents, road hazards, or highway patrol cars parked on interstate medians. The signal is generally interpreted among truckers as a sign to reduce their speed.

While on the road, I tried to pay as much attention as I could to the kinds of non-verbal signals Tom would exchange with other drivers. He would frequently raise his hand off the steering wheel to gesture “hello” to a passing trucker with his hand open, fingers extended upward, and palm facing the passing trucker. Another common hand gesture among truckers also used to signal “hello” is a backwards peace sign or “V” gesture in which the trucker lifts his hand off the steering wheel with the back of his hand facing the other trucker and index and middle fingers extended upward. If another trucker was weaving in and out of lanes or merging without looking, Tom would often gesture to the other trucker by pointing to his temple or eye with his index finger signaling the other trucker to “think” or “pay attention.”

While cell phone usage has largely replaced the CB radio in terms of trucker communication with the world outside of their cab, they are not using their cell phones to contact the truckers with whom they share the immediate highway. Instead, cell phones serve the purpose of keeping the trucker in touch with his company and the shipper/receiver should he run into any issues in transit. The cell phone also allows truckers to communicate with their families and loved ones, making the time spent away on the road a bit more bearable. The cell phone ensures that they are consistently aware of events occurring at home in their absence. As a consequence, truckers can justify spending more time on the road away from

their families in order to earn additional wages.

For this chapter, I enlisted the opinions and experiences of my informants in order to describe challenges new and experienced truck drivers may be forced to confront during their trucking career. The first year a trucker spends on the road is undoubtedly the most difficult he will face and thus serves as a make-or-break moment for those just starting out in the industry. By the end of a trucker's first year behind the wheel, it should be evident to the trucker whether or not the occupation is able to meet his career objectives or whether he should seek employment in another industry. Brett Aquila, a 15-year truck driving veteran, indicated in his blog dedicated to providing a critical look at the occupation for those interested in becoming truck drivers, that trucking is an occupation that new truckers struggle with because no matter how much experience a trucker has behind the wheel, it is never easy.

“In my opinion you should give it at least one full year of being on the road...If you don't give it one full year then you'll never know if trucking was right for you. Quitting in less than a year means you made a judgment during the toughest times you'll likely ever face out there. You've only seen how hard it can be, but you haven't seen how great it can get” (Aquila 2010).

## CHAPTER 5

### Career Histories and Decisions

The truckers I met on the road were a varied lot, young and old, single, married, and divorced, some with young, dependent children, and some with adult children. In this chapter, truckers' statements outline their varied educational backgrounds, family units, career histories, how they were attracted to the profession, and why they continue to be truckers. Their statements also reflect their commitment to or interest in trucking in their futures.

Long-haul trucking is an occupation many pursue for a variety of reasons. Many described their initial excitement of driving through parts of the country they had only seen in pictures, movies, magazines, and in their dreams. A few mentioned the prospect of one day being able to own their own truck and being their own boss. However, the one thing that nearly all of the drivers mentioned in relating their choices to become truck drivers was money. Money, by far, was the most frequently mentioned factor in their decisions to become truck drivers. The eleven truckers interviewed who currently drive all envisioned truck driving as a way to earn the money necessary to pay their bills, care for their families, or to save for a house, car, additional schooling, or retirement.

Several of the truckers I spoke with developed an interest in the occupation from a young age, mostly from having relatives or close family friends who drove trucks for a living. Others, despite not having any family in the trucking industry, envisioned themselves as truckers when they were children.

### Vernon

On the second day of group interviews at the Salt Lake City truck stop, Vernon, a 66-year-old produce hauler from central California, was leaning against a tall bar stool chair in the truckers' lounge. At one point during the conversation, Ray turned to Vernon and asked if he would share his story of how he became a truck driver. After pausing to gather his thoughts, Vernon mused that truck driving was in his blood, something he was born to do. When he was 15-years-old, Vernon's father taught him how to drive a truck. "I was riding with him one summer," he said, "And we were on an open highway, no traffic. He threw me behind the wheel of that truck and told me to drive. I didn't even know how to drive a car!" After high school, one of the first jobs Vernon took was hauling bricks on a flatbed trailer from Clinton, Oklahoma to Joplin, Missouri. That company went out of business and he soon found himself hauling milk for a creamery in California for the next ten years.

Vernon was the oldest of the truckers I interviewed. Vernon has owned his own truck since 1975 and currently drives for a California-based company hauling produce to the eastern half of the United States. "It's the best company I've ever been with. I make good money and they keep me running. I'm rarely laid over [someplace without a load to get me out]." He further pointed out that another benefit of owning his truck and driving for a company that treats him so well is that he is able to return home to his wife in Fresno every weekend. Despite having a stroke years ago that left half of his face paralyzed, Vernon noted he is determined to continued truck driving until he can no longer physically perform his job.

Wayne

Although Wayne, 63, did not have any relatives who drove trucks for a living like Vernon, he had always been fascinated by trucks as a child. Growing up in a small agriculture-based town in Ohio, he drove field tractors from a very young age. He felt this quite naturally led to his desire to drive trucks as a teenager. When he was 15-years-old, he dropped out of high school and began driving for a carnival, transporting rides and equipment hundreds of miles from one coastal town to another in the eastern United States. A couple of years later Wayne was laid off. He joined the U.S. Marine Corps, and became a pilot. But it was not long after that he wanted to be back in the cab of a truck, indicating his real passion was truck driving. He found a job hauling steel out of western Pennsylvania and stayed with the company for years until he was involved in a major accident. He took a decade off from truck driving, but decided to return when his savings began to run dry. “I only started again because of the money. I mostly fished [during those ten years off], but that doesn't make money. Money's the only reason any of us are in it.”

Although Wayne was adamant that truckers now are only still in the industry for the money, trucking had become a way of life for him. After taking time of following his accident, Wayne returned to driving trucks. He now owns his own truck and spends his time hauling hay for race horses and Christmas trees to the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern states.

“I needed to get back to making money again. I make more money working for myself, hauling hay and Christmas trees than I would working for hourly pay. I've been at it for ten years now. It's ridiculous what they'll pay you to feed horses and bring trees to the big cities, \$250 per bale of hay and \$10,000 for a load of Christmas trees.”

The money was undoubtedly very good for Wayne. His decades of experience and saving up money allowed him to purchase a top-of-the-line Peterbilt truck and work as an owner-operator, something Agar points out is difficult to do without sufficient capital and experience (1986:36).

Like Vernon, Wayne will retire a truck driver. “[Trucking] is what you make of it. You can let it be fun or you can make it miserable. If you treat it like a job, you're not gonna be happy. Plain and simple. You have to treat it like a lifestyle.”

### Paul

Tom and I met Paul, a truck driver in his mid-forties, in a Denny's Restaurant attached to a Flying J truck stop outside of Denver, Colorado while eating a late dinner and watching Game 1 of the 2012 NBA Western Conference Finals match-up between the San Antonio Spurs and Oklahoma City Thunder. After commenting back and forth on the game and making predictions on which teams left in the NBA playoffs could win it all, Tom and Paul began to talk about their experiences as truck drivers. Paul stated that he was currently driving an oversized load down to South Carolina. He prefers driving oversized loads because, unlike other types of hauls, he was not on a tight delivery schedule. “I don't have a time frame for when the load needs to get there. When you're driving an oversized load, you get to your destination when you can.”

Paul began trucking 26 years ago after graduating from high school. Because truck driving is the only work experience Paul has, he plans to continue driving until he retires. While he intends to retire a trucker, he does not want his son to follow in his footsteps.

“My son recently got out of the Marine Corps. He told me after he came back, 'Dad, I want to be a trucker.' I'd taken him over-the-road with me before while he was on break from school and he's driven the truck before. I just told him 'no' and to look for another job.”

### James

While James, 38, did not have any family members to steer him towards or away from trucking, he also began truck driving at a young age. While in high school, James worked part-time as a driver at a juice factory in northern California. After graduating from high school, he got a Class A Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and worked for a garbage company for seven years. He took time off in between trucking jobs to go to school; graduating from college with a degree in engineering. After failing to find a job as an engineer, he returned to truck driving.

Although James was the only trucker I interviewed with a college degree, he felt there were still few options available to him that would pay nearly as well as long-haul truck driving. Even with a degree in engineering, he had struggled to find a job in his field. “I took the time off [from truck driving] to go to school and earn my degree. Only one of my friends from college got a job in his own field...as a park ranger.” James continued, stating that in order to get an engineering job, he would need to go back to school. He felt that he could not justify such a decision to take additional time off from work in order to attend a graduate program in engineering and place himself back in debt. “It would take me a long time to pay that kind of a debt off. I'd be working hard for the rest of my life.”

Even though he works hard now, James views truck driving as an occupation that will allow him to retire when he wants to because he has few other responsibilities. “My loans are

all paid off. I don't have any bills to pay, no mortgage, no wife, no kids. I live and work in my truck. The most money I ever spend is on food,” he said, holding up a soda he purchased from the fast food restaurant downstairs in the truck stop. “I still like trucking, but when it comes down to it, I'm a trucker for the money.”

While Vernon, Wayne, Paul, and James all began truck driving after either dropping out or graduating from high school, the other eight truckers found employment in other industries between finishing high school and becoming truck drivers. Many worked in related industries, as diesel mechanics, auto body repairmen, and parking attendants, while the other truckers previously held jobs as factory workers, food service workers, and various odd jobs and dead-end jobs.

### Tom

Several other truckers chose OTR truck driving after working jobs in other industries. Tom's story was very similar to Vernon's in that he spent a lot of time around trucks as a child. Tom, now 30-years-old, learned how to truck drive when he was just twelve, spending summer breaks on the road with his godfather. “By the time summer came around, my parents needed a break from me so they would put me in the truck with my godfather. It was the one way they knew I would stay out of trouble.” Tom accompanied his godfather on the same route every summer, driving the I-95 corridor from central Florida to the Northeast and back.

“He asked me one day if I wanted to learn how to drive a truck. As soon as I said 'yes,' he put me behind the wheel while we were on a straight-away. I had already learned how to drive stick [manual transmission] at eleven-years-old. He always put

me to work. I learned how to drive, secure a tarp, do all kinds of things. It was a great learning experience for me.”

Although Tom had spent summers on the road with his godfather, he initially sought employment outside of the trucking industry. “I think what spending those summers with my godfather taught me was that I needed to continue my education. I wanted to get a better job than truck driving.” After high school, Tom spent several years working as a diesel technician apprentice. He was close to getting his certification when he suffered a back injury off the job that required extensive surgery.

“After that, I couldn't go back to my old job. Working on trucks puts a lot of stress on your body. You spend your days lifting and moving heavy parts, like tires, and it just wears you down. I did everything that came to maintenance and repairs on a truck except rebuilding the engine. My body would have only been able to take it for a few more years [after the surgery] and then I would have had to find another job anyway.”

Then, at 20-years-old, Tom decided to earn his CDL and begin his career as a truck driver.

“I drove for six years before joining Athens. I drove lowboys, hauling heavy equipment. When I joined Athens, I started hauling dry vans. It's easier on me physically because there's little to no physical contact with the load. The job's more mental. You have to be able to think and react quickly. There's a lot of planning involved, as well.”

In 2009, Tom began driving for Athens Transport hauling freight from various manufacturing companies to distribution centers across the country. While he earned less than \$20,000 in his first year driving for Athens, having no expenses beyond his daily living expenditure allowed Tom to pay off all of his debts in his first two years with the company.

Despite earning nearly \$40,000 in 2011, Tom eventually wants to find a local trucking job or one that would have him home more often. “I'm getting older. I want to start a family,

but I don't think I can do that and drive [long-haul],” Tom said, noting that his goals do not involve being on the road for any longer than four more years. After another two years with Athens, he plans to look for a tanker job driving over-the-road for a year or two. At that point, Tom believes he will be able to look for a job transporting gasoline and diesel to local or regional fuel stations in Texas. “Before I can do that, I need the [over-the-road] experience.”

Tom went over his career plans several times with me as we drove from one shipping yard to the next. He admitted he was anxious about what would happen once he decided to go local. “I'm only staying long enough to save up for a house and get the experience I need to get a better job. I just want to be as prepared as I can.” He had prepared himself to only spend four more years on the road after having several conversations with his wife and reassuring her he would not venture beyond that mark. Tom said that with his physical condition and without additional schooling, he realized his options of a job paying as well as his current one were limited outside of the trucking industry.

“I enjoy truck driving, but I'm ready to get out. I don't enjoy being on the road for long periods of time, being so exhausted because I can't get any sleep. Yeah, I could quit and get an hourly job, but for what? I wouldn't be making anything. I made good money as a mechanic, but [because of my back injury] I can't do that anymore.”

### Marcus

Marcus, a company driver also employed with Athens, immigrated to the United States from Haiti in 2005 with his wife and children. He worked as a cook for six years before he learned to drive a truck. “They had me working long, hard hours. I only got paid

\$1,200 a month [as a cook] and my boss, he treated me badly.” Marcus chose truck driving because it was an occupation he could start almost immediately without needing a lot of additional schooling. “It's better than washing dishes, that's true.”

However, trucking is not Marcus's ideal occupation. “I don't make enough money. I lease this truck and almost all of my money goes to it. I have to provide for my family.” Marcus decided to lease a truck from Athens because he was told he could earn more money as a lease driver. “What they didn't tell me was how much money I would have to put into the truck. I pay for everything.” Part of Marcus's weekly paycheck goes toward paying his lease and covering other expenses associated with the truck. A portion of the money left over he saves in order to afford to return to school one day. The rest, he sends back to home to his wife and children. “When I get enough money, I'm quitting and going back to school so I can get a better job.” Marcus was not sure what he wanted to do for a career once he quit truck driving, nor was he certain how long it would take him to save up enough money to do so.

### Abram

An immigrant trucker from Somalia, Abram, also had a job prior to becoming a trucker as a diesel mechanic, but like others who have recently chosen trucking as an occupation, he had been laid off. Abram came to the United States in the early 2000s thanks to his brother, who had been living in the US since childhood. Because his brother was able to act as his sponsor, Abram said he was able to work to support his mother and two children of his own back in Somalia. While living in Somalia, Abram drove trucks for a living. However, he noted that there was a considerable difference between trucking in Somalia and

trucking in the U.S.

“In Somalia, we only used small box trucks. You didn't need a lot of training because it was unskilled work. Trucking in the U.S. is much more difficult because of the long trailers. In Somalia, it would take four to six trucks to carry the same load as one U.S. semi-truck.”

Truck driving was convenient because it freed him from bills, rent, and additional living expenses associated with having a permanent place of residence. The money he saves can then be sent to his family members in Somalia who depended upon him as their main source of income. Abram was unsure how long he would remain an OTR trucker, but seemed unconcerned as long as he was able to provide for his children and his mother.

### Mark

Although Mark spent his childhood summers on the road with his uncle as Vernon and Tom did, truck driving was not his first choice of occupation. He held a variety of unskilled and low-skill level occupations prior to truck driving that did not provide the money he needed in order to pay bills. He got married at 19-years-old and found that truck driving was the only occupation available to him in which he could make ends meet.

However, Mark faced a challenge in earning his Class A CDL.

“I didn't go to college because I'd always had issues with reading comprehension. So when I decided to become a truck driver, I had to go to a truck driving school to learn how to drive. Studying the book alone, I wouldn't have passed the written portion of the test.”

Once Mark earned his CDL, he began driving flatbed trailers and lowboys, hauling heavy and oversized equipment. “I've always worked for mom-and-pop-type companies. Never have wanted to work for a big one.” Currently, he works for a small company with

approximately three-hundred trucks hauling parts for Kia, Toyota, and other automakers in a box trailer, called a dry van, to the US-Mexico border and back.

Although Mark noted that he continued truck driving because it was the only occupation available to him in which he could retire with only a high school diploma, he, like Marcus, does not want to continue driving over-the-road until his retirement. While Mark was unsure of what he wanted to do after truck driving, he knew he was only willing to be on the road for five more years.

“I’m to the point to where I don’t think my body would let me do it for much longer. People have no idea how stressful truck driving is. I used to have chest pains, ulcers, and other physical signs of stress. I learned to manage the stress over the years, but it can still get to me at times.”

### Gene

Like Mark, Gene, a 59-year-old OTR company driver, did not start out as a truck driver. After high school, he got a job at a factory in southern Michigan making valves for diesel trucks. “It was going pretty good. I had been working there for about eleven years or so and then I got laid off in 1983 when the shop closed. I had to do something to take care of my family, so rather than make parts for trucks, I decided to try driving one.”

Gene started off hauling glass balls on a flatbed trailer that would eventually be made into windshields. “I was driving with a teammate then and couldn’t stand it. I did it long enough to get a year of experience and then got out.” Gene noted that he has moved around a lot, driving for several different carrier companies and hauling all kinds of trailers and loads, from reefer to lowboy to flatbed. The only work he has not done as a trucker is haul tanker

trailers. “I’ve taken steps up and down, but it was all based on what I needed and where I was living at the time.”

Unlike the other drivers I spoke with, Gene was the only driver who had at some point in his career held a local trucking job. “I tried driving local, I really did. I just couldn’t adjust to being at home and in one place. My wife finally got so fed up with me, she told me I had to find another road job.” Gene admitted that part of the reason he returned to OTR trucking was because he enjoyed the solitude.

### Carl

Carl, a 60-year-old trucker from New Jersey, held a career in another industry before turning to truck driving like several of the other truckers interviewed. After graduating from high school, Carl worked in an auto body shop. He continued painting cars and making repairs to car bodies until he got divorced in the late 1970s. Following his divorce, Carl moved to Florida with a friend. Tired of repairing cars, he got a chauffeur’s license and began learning how to drive trucks. “I started out as a lumper [loading and unloading cargo from trailers] then the moving company I worked for threw me behind the wheel,” Carl said, noting that the moving job was much more physical than working in an auto body shop.

Carl worked for the moving company driving local throughout the 1980s until he lost his license. Not stating why he lost his license, Carl mentioned that he went back to working for body shops until he could begin truck driving again. “When I got my license back, I started hauling dry van cargo, mostly over-the-counter drugs.” Having lost his license, Carl essentially needed to start over, working as an entry-level long-haul driver. He noted that he

could have continued working in auto body shops, but chose to return to truck driving because he enjoyed the occupation.

Carl's attitude toward the occupation had changed over the years, however. During the group interview, he often derailed the current topic the group was discussing in order to point out current problems in the industry and how the occupation has changed since the early 1980s. For Carl, the occupation had lost its appeal. He stated rather angrily, "Trucking used to be fun, but now it's just a job." No longer physically able to work as an auto body repairman, Carl continues to truck drive out of necessity, not because he enjoys the work.

### Ray

For Ray, a Black male in his mid-30s, truck driving is the only job available to him that provides for his family. He happened across truck driving by chance. One day while he was working at as a parking attendant at a hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, Ray happened to pick up a newspaper and read an ad for a trucking school. The ad stated that the school would train prospective drivers and then send them off to the trucking company of their choice for employment.

"Once I enrolled in the school, it only took me two weeks to get my CDL. I was getting offers from trucking companies for jobs before I even graduated. Job offers from carriers all over the country to truck drive."

Ray began driving trucks in 1999. He was employed with his first company for less than a year before he left because of a bad relationship with the company. He spent the next four years hauling cars. In 2004, he received a job offer from another company to drive and own his own truck. However, before he could take the job, Ray was busted by a state trooper

for transporting drugs from a U.S.-Mexico border city to the Midwest. He spent the next six years in jail for the felony.

“I got out of jail in 2010 and no one would hire me, so I started my own trucking company. I had to close down though because I didn't have the help or the finances to keep it going. It was impossible for me to do everything on my own.”

Since then, Ray has been driving for a small carrier company. While physically able to perform other jobs outside of the trucking industry, his options are limited because of his criminal record. Even within the trucking industry, most carrier companies will not hire a driver who has been convicted of a felony such as drug transportation. Ray said that, thankfully, he found a company that was willing to take a chance on him.

For Ray, trucking is his best option. “Nothing else will provide for my family. The money's good. Three years from now, I'll be able to buy my girlfriend and kids a house.” Unlike most of the truckers interviewed, Ray does not want to be an OTR trucker until he retires. However, Ray acknowledged that trucking is the only occupation open to him that provides him with the means to support his family, stating, “As soon as I save up enough money to buy a house, I'm looking for a local [trucking] job. I've got to find a local job. My kids are young. I need to be home while they're growing up.” Ray hopes that, in continuing to keep his driving record and criminal record clean since his felony, he will be able to find a trucking job that will allow him the opportunity to spend more time with his family.

Sameer

While held over for a few days outside of Flagstaff, Arizona, Tom and I rented hotel rooms to get out of the cab of the truck and the unbearable heat of the Southwest. While checking into the hotel, Sameer, the 62-year-old hotel manager stated, “You know, I could only do what you do [truck driving] for two months before I quit.” After we asked what he meant, Sameer continued, saying:

“I went to the [company] driving school outside of Dallas, Texas. I parallel parked perfectly, scored a 100 on the written test at the DMV, and graduated with honors, but then I got out on the road and it was completely different. I wasn't making the money I thought I would've been.”

Sameer, like many other truckers I spoke with who had been driving for less than a year, was under the impression that he would be able to begin saving money for retirement with his first paycheck. When Tom interjected, stating, “You were just getting started. The first year you spend paying your bills and paying off your debts. Then, after the first year, all of your money is in the bank.” Sameer responded, “That's what everyone's told me...that I should have just stuck with it a little longer and then I wouldn't have even wanted to leave.” With a sigh of remorse, he said, “I quit my job, left my home, left everything behind so that I could become a trucker.” In his mind, there was no question that, given the chance to do it all over again, Sameer would not have made such a hasty decision to quit trucking. He said that had he stayed in trucking, he undoubtedly would have already been able to retire and have corrective surgery for the cataracts in his eyes rather than having to wait until he reaches retirement age for Medicare to cover the procedure.

In the end, money and a lack of comparably lucrative options go hand in hand for

these truckers. With the exception of Gene, who prefers the solitude of OTR driving and finds it hard to adjust to life at home, each trucker's individual circumstances has shaped his decision to remain over-the-road or to find a position in or outside of the trucking industry which would allow him to spend time at home. Many claimed money was the reason they sought jobs as truck drivers. For those who needed to provide for their families, trucking was seemingly the best way to do so given their level of education, prior work experience, physical abilities, and, in Ray's case, criminal background.

## CHAPTER 6

### Analysis and Future Research Implications

The data from this research show that trucking, like so many other jobs, has become just a job, not to be romanticized as a culture of independence or as a means of achieving total autonomy in one's labor force participation as reflected in the popular media and some scholarly literature. My conversations with both current and former truckers reveal that over-the-road truck driving is just another means for persons in the United States to earn a living, support their families, pay off debts, or build up savings. The individual experiences of these truck drivers offer insights into the industry that are largely missing from non-ethnographic, social science literature and its analysis of decontextualized statistical data.

The majority of the truckers I interviewed had held jobs in other industries, with only a few having been solely employed in trucking. For all but one, the switch to trucking resulted in higher incomes than those they had earned in their previous occupations. However, such financial gains are not initially realized in the trucking industry as new entrants spend the first year of their trucking career gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their job adequately. The first year is a very difficult, trying time for OTR truckers as they must adjust to spending consecutive months on the road away from their families, earning little pay due to their lack of experience. However, if they are able to complete their first year, many truckers remain over-the-road for at least another three to five years. The majority who remain in the industry are making considerably more in wages than they were the first year as a result of obtaining more on-the-job experience, which makes

them better and more efficient drivers.

Provided they have not accumulated multiple moving violations or been involved in any serious accidents as a result of their own negligence, more opportunities become available that pay the truckers better or allow them to spend more time at home with their families if they so desire. After obtaining three to five years of experience OTR, several options can become available to truckers, including local trucking jobs, desk jobs as driver managers, company driver trainers, or transferring to a dedicated account within their company. Driving for a dedicated account within the company means more predictable routes and home-time for drivers as they transport products for a specific corporation, such as Wal-Mart, from the company's distribution center to its stores within the region. The trucker may also seek additional Commercial Drivers' License endorsements, such as tankers, double and triple trailers, and hazmat. All of these options provide opportunities for more stable and higher wages and/or predictable home-time.

However, this does not mean that every trucker elects to move beyond OTR trucking. In fact, several of the oldest truckers I spoke with chose to remain OTR truckers, often switching from one carrier company to another, but had little interest in seeking employment as a driver manager or with a local trucking company. They viewed their options as rather limited given their age or physical ability. These older truckers were mostly concerned with remaining OTR as long as physically possible in order to build up enough in savings to allow for a comfortable retirement.

The majority of the younger drivers, on the other hand, viewed OTR trucking as a temporary occupation, but one that nonetheless aided them in achieving their goals. For these

truckers, OTR trucking was a way to support their families either here in the United States or in their home countries, obtain a local trucking job, or save enough money in order to purchase a house, return to school, or pay off their debts.

For the truckers who had no wives or children or whose wives had their own source of income, OTR trucking was a way to quickly pay off prior debts or save up money for retirement. Earning around \$50,000 a year, their personal expenses were limited to cell phone bills, food, and entertainment while on the road. Likewise, those with dependent families found trucking an acceptable, if temporary, way to provide for their children and significant others by being able to spend less on themselves.

Overall, I have found that the information my informants supplied supports my initial hypotheses:

1. Over-the-road truck drivers remain employed as truckers because the occupation offers better pay than available employment alternatives; and
2. Additional career opportunities are possible with accumulating experience, something not often offered them by other occupations they might hold.

For those truckers who did not leave the industry after their first year on the job, OTR trucking offers better pay than alternative occupations available to them. First year drivers may experience an initial decrease in pay after changing careers to become truckers, but as their skills improve and they obtain more experience behind the wheel, they gain the confidence of their driver managers and thus able to receive longer and better paying runs. Many truckers found that as their on-the-job performance improved, their driver managers

were more likely to keep them out on the road running loads rather than sitting at a truck stop.

In addition to better wages, more career opportunities become available to truck drivers with accumulating OTR experience, something not often offered them by other occupations available to them given their skills, education, and/or physical abilities. Finding a local trucking job, running a dedicated route, or hauling tanker trailers or hazmat was appealing to several of the younger truckers who had planned to remain in the trucking industry.

The switch from OTR trucking to local trucking, dedicated routes, or a desk job as a driver manager is mostly dependent upon the trucker's own career goals and family circumstances. Whether they choose to remain OTR truckers, find a local job, or quit the industry altogether, meeting these financial goals and/or providing for their families is of the greatest importance to all truckers.

#### Possible Avenues for Future Research Exploration

Since it appears that the majority of my informants under the age of 55 plan to search for a local trucking position or quit trucking altogether sometime within the next three to five years, I believe more research could be conducted in order to understand why OTR trucking is perceived as a temporary occupation rather than a long-term career goal. I suggested in Chapter 4 that the introduction of stricter federal employment requirements in the past decade presents a barrier for those who may be interested in a career as an OTR truck driver. However, I believe there may be additional reasons beyond increased restrictions for truckers

to seek to quit OTR trucking after only a few years behind the wheel.

I also believe more research could be done in regards to minorities and immigrant drivers in the US trucking industry. These groups remain underrepresented in the industry as Global Insight, Inc. projects the industry will increase only 5.9 percentage points in a ten year span, from 2004-2014 (2005:35). In the US Census Bureau's analysis of recent census data, the Bureau determined that “more than half of the growth in the total population of the United States between 2000 and 2010 was due to an increase in the Hispanic population” (2010:3). Future research might seek to relate how changes in the national population are reflected in the demographics of the trucking industry. Additionally, such research might seek to understand how current regulations, hiring restrictions, and trucker culture itself may hinder demographic changes in the trucking industry.

An ancillary possible research topic would be women OTR truckers. Global Insight, Inc. notes that the percentage of women truckers in the industry, 4.1 percent, will remain unchanged from 2004 to 2014 (2005:35). Questions of particular concern regarding this projection which might be incorporated into future research include: Why are there so few women truckers? What restrictions do they face? Are these restrictions industry-based or culture-based?

A persistent theme expressed by most of my informants was their unhappiness and dissatisfaction with having to be separated from their families for long periods of time. These absences weigh on their minds and are known to cause conflicts at home. Being on the road for such long periods of time is certainly one of the most difficult aspects of the job for truckers who leave behind significant others and children. Further research on the impacts of

the OTR trucking occupation on drivers and their families would allow more family-friendly policies to be incorporated into the industry. OTR truckers would benefit greatly from not feeling they must choose between being absent and providing for and spending time with their families.

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