

DAVE: Here we are in Trucker Territory everybody, with Progressive Commercial Insurance. Hey, you got your ears on? Well, this is Dave Nemo.

TIM: Tim Ridley.

MICHAEL: And Michael Burns.

DAVE: And we want to welcome you to "Got Your Ears On," our series of podcasts designed for you, and thanks to the folks at Progressive Commercial Insurance. You know, we've been talking about a lot of different aspects of trucking because it's well beyond a job. It's well beyond a career even. It really becomes a lifestyle that encompasses that job and that career. We've talked about some of the things that are affecting or will affect the-- the landscape, the driverless trucks, how to become an owner/operator, *if* you should become an owner/operator. We've even talked through the ELP mandate that when it comes right down to business and-- well, not so much just the business but certainly some-- one of the aspects about business that-- really, the most human portion of that-- building relationships. And you know guys, when it comes to our topic this time-- truck stops, the ins and outs-- you know, you got your brick-and-mortar. You got your asphalt and your painted lines. You have your exits from the interstates, but it really comes down to the people at those truck stops. Tim, you and Michael have spent a lot of-- a lot of hours sitting at that coffee counter, and I've visited truck stops quite a bit in my career doing all-night broadcasts on the radio, and we're going to kind of get some perspectives on who, what, where, and maybe even the whys of truck stops this morning. Tim, you basically know what you need at a truck stop probably more than the other two of us here, although Michael as-- as I say, has been out there quite a bit. And I know, Michael, you've got some favorites, but, Tim, what are some of the things that today's driver looks for at a truck stop?

TIM: Well Dave, today's drivers look for a myriad of things at a truck stop starting off because the-- the truck stop is actually an oasis for the driver. It's a home away from home. So one of the things they look for is a friendly atmosphere. They-- they look for that. That is something that is extremely important because they think of the truck stop employees as an extension of their family. So it is their extended families out there, and as you mentioned with Michael, you know, most drivers have their favorite truck stops that they like to stop at. Another thing is that they look to feel-- and I know I did when I was out there. It was very important to-- to feel welcomed. You know, I wanted to feel like a part of-- of that truck stop team and-- and fill-- fill that-- felt-- I wanted to feel that they looked forward to seeing me as well as-- as other drivers, too. Another thing, Dave, is-- that's-- that's very, I would say, high priority to truck drivers is they want to feel safe at a truck stop and not, you know, be bothered by people

banging on their doors or having the concern of safety as they get out of their truck and walk across the lot. So the-- these are just some of the things that drivers are looking for.

DAVE: Michael, things that drivers are looking for have changed quite a bit over the last heck, even 10 years.

MICHAEL: They have, and our relationship with truck stops and fuel centers and all the different names they have now has changed radically, and it's strange because I was there in one of the periods of a metamorphosis as we saw this where we all used to have our own favorite independent truck stop, and it may have been because of the breakfast there. It may have been because of a waitress there. It may have been because of, you know, the way the place looked and-- and so forth. And what happened was trucking companies and trucking leasing companies started negotiating contracts with specific chains and so forth. So that-- that changed it a little bit because you weren't going to stop at this stop because that wasn't part of your fuel network. And we saw that kind of a change. But there was a time when it was a matter of favoritism. They were almost tourist attractions. I'm not going to go back to the old bunkhouse days, but-- [laughs] that's way before my time. But the-- the truck stops were kind of unique and kind of-- you know, the whole phrase of lions and tigers and bears, oh, my-- they would put things in their truck stops to say, well, have you been there? Because, you know, they have a collection of vintage motorcycles or they have a collection of vintage guns. And they would actually bring things in to be a tourist attraction. And there were many, many places that were famous for maybe their tiger, [laughter]. You know? And it-- it was-- it was fun because those places were very different. As time went on, they became a little more homogenous. As the bigger chains started swallowing up some of the independents, they took on a different kind of thing because people basically changed from wanting to have an individual adventure to what I call the McDonald's theory, which is, you know, no matter where I go, it's going to have this and this and this. And I know the food's going to taste this way, and I know the coffee's going to taste this way, and that kind of predictability became part of the truck stop world, too, travel centers.

DAVE: You're absolutely right there. Long gone are the days of the original places where trucks stopped. They weren't truck stops. They were roadhouses.

MICHAEL: Yeah, they were.

DAVE: And there's a great movie starring Humphrey Bogart and George Raft called "They Drive by Night." It was made back in the late 30s or early 40s. And to be a truck driver, you had to be everything. You had to be a mechanic. You had--

you-- you took care of it all out there on the road as you went, and the only place to stop to get a bite to eat or a cup of coffee were roadhouses where they sold alcohol.

MICHAEL: Right.

DAVE: They were actually bar res-- bars, restaurants, you know, and the ubiquitous pinball machine would always be in the corner.

MICHAEL: Always there.

DAVE: And there's a great scene in the-- in the movie where Humphrey Bogart and George Raft, they were brothers who started their own trucking company, and they went into the roadhouse, and everybody knows everybody. Again, Tim, to your point, it was really a family affair back in those days. It was a small world, but there was no real cross-country trucking at that time.

MICHAEL: Right.

DAVE: Because there weren't any roads that essentially-- I mean, for all intents and purposes, we didn't start going cross-country until we got the interstate system going.

TIM: And cup holders.

DAVE: And then cup holders. [laughter] But there was always a guy play-- it was the same guy. He was always playing the pinball-- does this guy ever drive, you know? And it was just part and parcel of the whole thing. And then when the interstates came along, well, then, the truck stop as a place for truckers to stop came along. But, you know, I was just thinking back to some of my early days [stammers] on trucking radio, going back to the very early 1970s. We had a-- a-- a-- an advertiser at that time called the Mass 10 Truck Stop up in Auburn, Massachusetts. And Charlie Douglas-- the late, great Charlie Douglas dubbed it "the dump" because it was.

TIM: Mm-hmm.

DAVE: It was a truck stop that had no gasoline pumps. It was a truck stop that had the bunkhouse. It was a truck stop where the owner would take drivers out fishing on the weekends at a local lake. It had that-- that-- that old-world charm, if you will...

TIM: Right.

DAVE: ...in-- in terms of-- of what it was, but it was affectionately called "the dump." They did so much business thanks to Charlie Douglas that it was written up in Time Magazine at the time, and I think it probably, Tim, was the last vestige of that-- that original concept of, okay, if you want a truck stop, we want truckers and trucks, period, end of story, that's it. And-- and of course, that model kind of metamorphized into the travel center-type idea.

MICHAEL: Right.

TIM: Yeah.

MICHAEL: Well and, you know, the facilities were so different then, too, because generally, you were parking your truck in the remnants of a packed-down gravel parking lot, generally full of-- we didn't have the speeding problem in truck stops then because they would tear your front axle off your truck if you tried that. [laughs]

TIM: Yeah, not to mention the pot-- the deep potholes, too, 'cause you--

DAVE: No Truck Stop 500 in those days.

MICHAEL: Right. Right.

TIM: Right.

MICHAEL: And of course now, you know, the drivers' expectations are much higher. The drivers expect, you know, paved parking lots, pave this, and facilities and-- and your outboard-- or on-board generators, and if they don't, then they-- they hook up to a power source there in-- in the truck stop and so forth. So the facilities have become so much more costly, and you can actually plot out what it costs to-- to park a-- a 9-foot-wide, 75-foot-long piece of asphalt that a driver can safely move onto, and over a period of time, that cost gets really expensive. And, you know, the asphalt can't just be the same kind of asphalt you put in your driveway. It's got to be fit for trucks. And it has to be-- and so all of this stuff adds to the cost of keeping the facility up. And then of course, we expect more as drivers now than we used to once we step inside. We expect clean showers. We expect-- some people have ruined us, okay? There are people in this industry that have gotten us used to white marble showers and so forth. [laughs].

TIM: Yeah, and you come to expect that at every stop in both of you-- Dave and Michael, both of you brought up some good points in terms of the gravel versus

the asphalt now whereas the gravel was-- that was what you were accustomed to. You didn't look for anything else. And this was yesteryear. And even some of the lots were even dirt lots, you know? And if it rained, you-- you-- you were susceptible to getting stuck in the mud and having to be pulled out, but that was-- that was all you knew. And-- and the point I'm-- I'm getting to is that I got to the point myself where I judged truck stops in terms of the parking lots, you know? I'd want it nice, asphalt and-- and-- and very minimal potholes, if any, and I think that's what-- you know, that transition is what drivers became known to look for. For the most part anyway. Not-- you know, not every driver. But, Michael, you were mentioning about the-- the marble showers and so forth. Our expectations are higher now. In the past, Dave, no one even thought about-- as far as a truck driver. And I'll use for an example, when my dad drove, I-- I don't think they thought about an exercise room. I don't think they even thought about a movie, a theater in the truck stops, but now, you look for comfortable theaters. You look for-- in some cases, a lot of drivers, as-- as with myself, too, when I was out there-- looked for an exercise room. Even in my case more so than the-- than the game room. And if they did have a game room, you wanted a nice selection of games and-- and very clean. So these-- and-- and the TV room. Think about how many drivers, you know, spend their time-- a lot of drivers don't have a TV in the truck, and then some who do have a television in the truck, they just like the camaraderie and the fellowship of being with other drivers in the TV room, you know, watching a movie or watching a TV show together or watching the news or what have you. So these are some of the things that-- that drivers have-- have-- have come to expect now, even walking trails and-- and truck stops, I think now have jumped on board, you know, for-- for most of the truck stops have jumped on board to take on these things in terms of getting-- putting these things into play, into motion, because truck driver health is very important now, you know, more so than it used to be, rightfully so. So truck drivers are keeping up with that trend-- uh, truck stops, rather, are keeping up with that trend.

DAVE: And those trends will continue to change. They will continue to vary from one thing to another and-- and-- and kind of move through to what's current in the overall society. And I think that plays a lot to the fact that the truck stops have expanded. And this may sound a little counterintuitive, but I think a lot of those types of improvements have basically played-- have become possible, and the catalyst might be the fact that they've gone from truck stops to travel centers so that--

MICHAEL: You're right.

DAVE: They-- they want folks to get a bigger picture of what the image of trucking I think is portrayed in-- in a great-- in-- in a great many ways by the facilities and the amenities that a truck stop has, if that makes any sense.

MICHAEL: Yeah, sure, sure, it certainly does, and I-- and I think you-- you're absolutely on point with that in you know, where the truck stops are, and they are travel centers now, and they offer more, you know, and speaking of which, Dave, as far as-- Michael can attest to this, too, I'm pretty sure, but you come to-- you come to look for truck stops with a nice store inside, whether it's-- it's you know, chrome or accessories or stainless steel you're looking for or perhaps clothing or-- or even toys or things that you can take home-- back home to your kids, grandkids and family.

DAVE: You know the little penguins that you put on the little track and it's like a little roller coaster, and they go up and down and swirl around the little track?

MICHAEL: Oh, yeah. Right.

DAVE: [overlapping] You know what I'm talking about? I got one at a truck stop, first truck stop I ever went to, doing a remote broadcast and had to bring that home.

MICHAEL: Well, you know-- and that's-- both of you have touched on part of the problem because, okay, let's design the perfect truck stop. Let's go ask this truck driver that now works for Dave Nemo. Mr. Tim Ridley, what do you want in a truck stop? And of course, he says things like clean showers and-- and exercise rooms and this and that and the other thing. Then you go to another truck driver who now works for Dave Nemo and go, "What do you want?" Don't waste any space on an exercise room. And please, let's put some audio in there that counts. And every driver you go to is going to have a different answer. And I don't know-- you know, we ran into it recently with-- with one of our sponsors who's a large truck stop, and they mentioned, you know, that there was a-- a kind of an argument or dissent over reserve parking, and we learned it came from the Driver's Board. It was a-- it was a suggestion that came from their Driver's Advisory Board. So, you know, what one driver loves in a truck stop, some other driver is going to hate. [laughs] And-- and it's-- it's like that old joke that we used to have-- if you want to start a conversation on CB, all you gotta do is ask what-- one driver what time it is. [laughter] Because you'll be getting five different answers to that, you know?

TIM: Right, and every answer is right according to the driver.

MICHAEL: [overlapping] Yeah, absolutely.

DAVE: One of the things that trucking-- or truck stops have been known for are telephones and food, and at one time, truck stops ranked a very close second to airports in terms of how many cell phone-- not cell phones. Well, listen to me now. Payphones that they had.

TIM: Oh, yeah.

DAVE: Airports had more payphones than anyplace else, and truck stops were right under them in terms of the amount of payphones they had. And then late '80s, early '90s, you had to have plug-ins-- I forgot what they're even called now-- to- telephone jacks...

TIM: [overlapping] Charging stations.

DAVE: ...to plug your modems in.

MICHAEL: Oh, okay, yeah.

DAVE: You get the [imitates modem sound]...

TIM: [overlapping] Right.

DAVE: You know, to get online, and all of that has changed a bit. Ron Ziegler-- most folks-- if you remember President Nixon, he was President Nixon's Press Secretary, and Ron Ziegler then became the president of the NATSO, the National Association of Truck Stop Operators. In 1986, he said truck stops were surpassed only by fast food chains as-- chains as the largest feeders of the United States. By the late 1980s, more people were eating at truck stops only second to fast food joints. He's not just talking about truckers. He's talking about everybody wanting to go down to the local truck stop. I have been to places in the country-- you guys have, too. You go to a truck stop out in the middle of Kansas on a Sunday afternoon after church, all the locals come to the truck stop.

MICHAEL: Oh, yeah.

TIM: Oh, yeah, for Sunday dinner.

DAVE: For Sunday dinner, yeah.

MICHAEL: For me it was steak and eggs. There was no other place to get steak and eggs.

DAVE: Exactly.

MICHAEL: The only place it was ever done right.

DAVE: Yeah, yeah, at fast service and friendly service, and it be-- so they kind of-- in some areas, they serve as a community center, in-- in a sense. You know, as opposed to just being for the travelers.

MICHAEL: Right. Yeah.

TIM: Yeah, absolutely, they-- they certainly do. So you-- and for truck stops, they-- they have to be versatile because, you know, you want to cater to the truck drivers, the professional drivers, and also for those who, you know, are bringing their families there as well and even travelers. You know, you mentioned the small towns and-- which-- you know, you're right, myself, as well as Michael, too, have seen this where-- where you will see a whole family there eating-- eating dinner, you know, Sunday dinner. And then you have the old-timers, you know, the guys who are retired in the-- in the area and-- and they'll meet up at truck stops, and then you have the travelers as I-- as I was mentioning, that prefer to stop at the truck stops because a lot of times, not only truck drivers, but regular, you know, travelers look at a truck stop as a one-stop shopping place or shopping center. They can stop, get fuel, go to the bathroom, go get a bite to eat, you know, whether it's sit-down, restaurant type-style eating or perhaps fast food and then fill up the coffee thermos and get back out to the car, you know, maybe grab a few snacks. So you-- you can get everything pretty much that you need in traveling. And I know I still-- and I know it's a habit because I drove, but I still prefer, when we're traveling, to stop at truck stops and that's what we do. We stop at truck stops to fuel and to get things that we need.

MICHAEL: And in spite of what people say and in spite of some of the other subjects that we've-- or discussions that we've had, rather, there is an affinity out there between the four-wheelers traveling and-- and truck drivers, and they kind of want to get a glimpse of what's going on inside that world. I think if you put two places together, one of them was a small gas station and the other one was a typical combination diesel/gasoline travel center, you know, big shop, I think the-- the public is-- 90% of them are always going to go to the travel center because it's a little vicarious thrill there, you know?

DAVE: Yeah, I think you're right. I think you make a good point there. You sure do. You know, I mentioned a little bit earlier that before the interstate highway system, there were no truck stops. There may have been some, but essentially, truckers just had to stop at the cafés along the highway. A lot of them were so-called

roadhouses, and they were basically bars and restaurants. So they had the alcohol served there and whatnot. I did a little research, and going back to NATSO again, the first truck stop on the interstate was built in 1956-- well, it became the interstate, now I-75, but it was built in 1950 right after President Eisenhower signed what's been known as the Interstate Act. But it was called the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. That is, on paper, the birth of the interstate system. And it was called Trucker City. That's in Wapakoneta, Ohio. And I wonder if either one of you guys have been to the TA in Wapakoneta.

MICHAEL: I have so many times...

TIM: [overlapping] I have, too, yeah.

DAVE: Yeah. Well, that was the first...

TIM: [overlapping] It's interesting.

DAVE: ...truck stop on the interstate highway system. And I didn't know this, but there was a Miss I-75 beauty contest. And it ran all the way from Florida all the way up. And it was held every year at that truck stop. They haven't done that in many years now. But isn't that something else?

MICHAEL: Yeah.

DAVE: Yeah.

MICHAEL: How times have changed.

DAVE: How times have changed.

TIM: [overlapping] Absolutely.

DAVE: Boy, that's for sure. That is for sure.

MICHAEL: Originally, most of the truck stops as-- as we call them now, were a product of oil companies' desires to expand and so forth. Phillips 66 was very, very big in that. There were a lot of other oil companies involved. And they finally realized that it was so far out of their venue that it was not a gas station, that it was not about fuel, and that they-- they pretty much got out of it as-- as the oil companies just finally let go of-- of trying to run, operate truck stops and left it alone and turned it over to the hospitality industry.

DAVE: Mm-hmm, yeah, yeah, you're right. You're right. You know, you guys, to kind of get off the truck stop parking lot and getting out back onto the highway, the trucking industry has been at the forefront of opposing tolling of existing roads, and that has come back time and time again. It's really current right now and the thinking of the current administration, and the truck stop industry is also linked arm in arm with the trucking industry in opposing tolls, and so they are using the clout they had to forestall that, which is a real good thing, and I think it just goes-- goes to show how-- how friendly the truck stop/travel plaza industry is to the trucking industry itself.

MICHAEL: Yeah, very-- very much so, and you know what? We-- I-- we need to do a podcast on tolling. [laughs]

DAVE: Oh, my goodness.

TIM: Oh, yeah.

DAVE: Don't get me started.

MICHAEL: [overlapping] Let's get that one out there.

DAVE: Don't get me started.

TIM: That would be a good one.

DAVE: We're doing our podcast here, of course, Trucker Territory. It's called "Got Your Ears On," and this is number five in our series and I hope you are enjoying them. We certainly enjoy being able to visit with you here in Trucker Territory with Progressive Commercial Insurance. You know, Michael, you mentioned something a little bit earlier about the stuff that you can get at truck stops and, you know, the things you can buy. I-- back-- and I keep going back to my-- my radio days-- well, I'm still on-- in radio, but the all-night radio on the AM stations, you know, back in the mid-'80s, when I started traveling to the truck stops and doing broadcasts, it didn't take me long to figure something out, and that is every truck stop store had two-- you could always count on two things in those glass display cases. One of them would be a-- and in-- in many cases a fabulous collection of knives. And the other was fairly nice collection of harmonicas.

MICHAEL: Oh, yeah.

DAVE: And I thought, okay, what's more-- what-- what better thing to carry-- if you wanted to play a musical instrument, what better thing to have than a harmonica in a truck?

MICHAEL: Absolutely.

DAVE: And it didn't take me long to figure out that a harmonica on the telephone was basically-- it sounded pretty good because of the-- the-- the-- the audio range of a harmonica.

MICHAEL: Very narrow frequency.

DAVE: Very narrow, and it kind of just matches right up with that...

MICHAEL: It sure does.

DAVE: ...tinny phone sound that together-- you try to play a guitar over the phone, it sounds horrible.

MICHAEL: Horrible.

DAVE: But a harmonica actually sounds pretty good. And we used to have what we'd call the-- the-- the old road gang harmonica festivals. And every once in a while I'd call-- I'd ask drivers to call in and play a tune.

MICHAEL: I remember.

DAVE: [overlapping] And they would be at a phone booth someplace out in the middle of nowhere. They'd prop that phone up and play that harmonica at 2:00 in the morning, and it was all basically inspired by seeing those doggone harmonicas at all those truck stops.

TIM: Yeah.

DAVE: It was a common thread. But it kind of circles back to that common thread that you guys were talking about a little bit earlier.

MICHAEL: Yeah. It-- it was-- it was so much better to-- to have that, and, of course, you know, Bob Dylan came up with the hands-free version of it. [laughter]

DAVE: You playing that harmonica while you're driving, son? Yes, sir, but it's a hands-free harmonica.

TIM: It makes a difference.

DAVE: Tim, I wanted you to speak about this a little bit, too, because talking about some of the amenities and some of the things that you find at truck stops now, TV rooms-- some of them have been around for a long time, don't get me wrong-- TV rooms and now the exercise facilities, which are relatively new, but there's something else out there that is a real cornerstone, I think, for the trucking industry, and those are the chapels. Sometimes they're chapels in trailers on the lot such as Truck Stop Ministries. Others will have services in the TV room sometimes on a Sunday morning. And that-- that's a real-- a real valuable thread that we see around the nation.

TIM: Yeah, absolutely--

MICHAEL: [overlapping] And there's...

TIM: Yeah, go ahead, Michael.

DAVE: [overlapping] ...been a great attempt, you know, at-- at-- on several occasions, and I know it's starting up again, to provide medical contact for the drivers in that facility because you obviously can't take a truck and park it in your doctor's parking lot. So there have been several outreach programs like chapels and so forth and medical facilities to reach the drivers there and do well, and I think it's going to continue. I think someday in the future, perhaps the truck stop of the future is going to look like a strip mall.

DAVE: Hmm, interesting. Yeah.

MICHAEL: And we've seen a couple of those experiments. There's one in Arizona where there's a beauty salon and a barbershop and-- something else-- and then a-- a therapist. [laughs] And a dentist. All in one, you know, one facility. And--

DAVE: Do you see a therapist before or after the dentist, that's the question.

MICHAEL: I would have to go immediately from the dentist to the therapist.

TIM: Yeah, I would, too. And those things are-- are extremely important because, you know-- to the chapel, all of it, but we'll-- we'll-- we'll start with the chapel. Drivers have-- you know, truck drivers have same-- the same needs as we do, but we're home where we can go and talk to our priest or our-- our clergyman-- clergymen or clergywoman, for that matter. We can-- we can talk to our pastor, but when you're, you know, miles and miles away from home, and you're having some issues, things that you're trying to deal with and cope with, you

know, that's a wonderful sight to pull up on a parking lot, truck-stop parking lot and-- knowing that there is a Truck Stop Ministries chapel there, a Transport for Christ Chapel and there is a-- a-- a friendly chaplain that's willing to-- to-- you know, ready to talk to you and to counsel you or to pray with you, whatever those needs are. And then as far as the doctors' offices are concerned, you know, you can't-- like Michael said, you can't just drive your rig up to a-- a doctor's office and-- in-- in-- in most cases, and so having that, you know, again, going back to the one-stop shop where you can get everything that you need, whether it's-- it's physical, mental, or-- or, you know, something for your truck, mechanical. So that's-- all of those things go into play in terms of a place to stop or choosing a place to stop at.

DAVE: You know, when we call trucking-- and we call it like it is, trucking is a lifestyle, and if anything can enhance the lifestyle out there, it's got to be the truck stops, the travel plazas, the service plazas, where people meet and-- and greet one another, where people stop for food or medical care, for spiritual care, for a shower and-- and for a harmonica. They are extremely important. And for rest, too, for that matter. Truck stops, the ins and outs. Well, guys, that's going to kind of burn up all of our time here in Trucker Territory this go-around, but we'll get together for another "Got Your Ears On" podcast thanks to the folks at Progressive Commercial Insurance.

[end of file]