



## Episode 3: A Brief History of Trucking in America Air Date: March 19, 2020

**Ruben Carrion:** [00:00:00] Hey this is Ruben Carrion, owner operator from Kissimmee, Florida. Quick note before we start: there is some strong language in this one.

**“Long Haul” Paul Marhoefer:** [00:00:11] So far on the show, we’ve talked a lot about the culture of the trucking industry.

**Mike Landis:** [00:00:16] It’s the freedom of it.

**Devrie Jones:** [00:00:17] You gotta live it, love it, breathe it, bleed it.

**Paul:** We’ve heard about the importance of freedom...

[Various voices say “freedom” in succession]

**Paul:** ...and autonomy...

[One person says, “I’m my own boss” followed by another who says, “your own boos”]

**Paul:** About the pride in getting a job done right...

**Mike:** Do what you gotta do to get the job done.

**Paul:** On your own terms...

**Kenyette Godhigh-Bell:** [00:00:33] This is not insurmountable.

**Paul:** Sometimes in spite of the rules...

**Mississippi Tim:** [00:00:38] Turn 'em miles, turn and burn, man!

**Paul:** And often in spite of the personal cost. [Harmonica comes in trilling]

**Jared Sidlo:** [00:00:42] Scares me a little bit honestly though.

**Paul:** Some truckers even like to say that we are like the *last American cowboys*...

[Trucker says “not dealing with the people”]

**Paul:** ...living by our own code...

[Trucker says, “a loner”]

**Paul:** ...apart from the rest of society.

[Trucker says. “doing my own thing and my own rules” while motor runs in the background]

**Paul:** But, where did this culture of independence come from? [Theme song begins]

**Finn Murphy:** [00:01:05] This is— I love this subject. We have to go back to food.

**Paul:** Today on the show, we're talking history. And also, food. With some help from author, and trucker, Finn Murphy.

**Finn:** let's just dial it to about 1933. That's where it all starts about food.

**Paul:** Finn's gonna help us get to the bottom of this whole mythology of truckers as the last American cowboys. He'll take us on a journey that touches on everything from Humphry Bogart to the Lord of the Rings, and from Ronald Reagan to Franklin Roosevelt.

**Finn:** Roosevelt's basic problem was how am I going to boost farm incomes and provide cheap food at the same time. And that's the birth date of the American trucking myth, culture, and everything else that comes from that.

**Paul:** This is Over the Road from PRX's Radiotopia and Overdrive magazine, I'm Long Haul Paul. [Theme music continues]

When you're an over the road trucker, part of your job is to cavort with your brethren over coffee— addressing the international geopolitical situation, maybe the breakdown of the modern family— all while hurling invective at your fellow drivers who don't come from the same part of the country as you do. It's pretty much what we do. So you can think of this episode as just that: a good old fashioned “truckers only” counter discussion between Finn [Finn says, “wow”], myself [Paul says to Finn, “Hey, Finn”], and my colleague here at Over the Road, the bull-hauler's daughter herself, [Lacy says, “I know it's over the top” followed by laughter from Paul and Finn] Lacy Roberts.

This is the type of brisk repartee you used to hear in the TV room of The New England Truck Stop in Sturbridge, Mass. [Lacy, Paul, and Finn joke and laugh in the background] The veritable

rotating think tank in its day. Or in Kenly North Carolina, where some drawling denizen of Big Boy's truck stop would expound at length on how "al y'all Yankees ruined NASCAR!" So consider yourself warned: things are about to get pretty heady in here. [Theme music fades out]

Okay I admit it. I discovered Finn's book, *The Long Haul*, while googling myself: *Long Haul* Paul. Let's face it, nobody gets to own that phrase, but still, who was this other Long Haul guy? Two paragraphs in and I was hooked. Man, could that guy write. And as I read the book, I realized just how much Finn and I have in common.

**Finn:** Well it started when I was about seventeen and I worked at a gas station.

**Paul:** Like me, he was a gas jockey...

**Finn:** And next door to the gas station was Callahan Brothers Moving and Storage.

**Paul:** ...who looked up to the truckers.

**Finn:** I was sort of in awe of these guys 'cause I could see the sweat sort of caked on their t-shirts.

**Paul:** But like me, Finn decided to go to college.

**Finn:** So that was my summer job as a local mover at Callahan brothers.

**Paul:** Like me, he got three years in.

**Finn:** But then the summer of my junior year, I ran into this long-haul driver named Will Joyce and I took a road trip with him down to Virginia.

**Paul:** And like me, he dropped out.

**Finn:** I was just bewitched by the whole life by seeing the country, by the work and by the money. I decided that I would get my tractor trailer license and do exactly what my friend Will was doing.

**Paul:** But this is where my story and Finn's diverge. You see, Finn took the high road, in a sense, following Willie Joyce into that most artisanal form of trucking, that of the high-end household mover. He's the guy you call when you need to move an \$80,000 collection of Chinese artifacts into your new vacation home in Aspen. Very few truckers out there can do what Finn does. You have to be strong, but also smart, and able to mix with the well-heeled clientele. Me, I suppose I wound up on a lower road, pulling reefers – loads of lettuce, pork loins, watermelons– food that is. My loads took me to the dirty sides of towns: to the old warehouses; to the produce and meat markets. I was awake when everyone else was asleep, with a Lucky Strike in my hand. *[Paul imitates blowing out cigarette smoke]* Seeing what the ol' Pete could really do in Western Kansas. And all of it coming back to food. Out there with the cow trucks, the chicken haulers, the hopper bottoms laden with grain, rolling through the nameless fields of the great alone.

**Finn:** It all starts about food. [Folky, acoustic music begins]

**Paul:** That's what Finn was starting to explain at the top. So let's hear him out.

**Finn:** In the late nineteen teens, the food cost for an American household was a significant portion of their annual income. I've seen numbers all over the place but forty to fifty percent maybe sometimes even higher. So food costs are rising and you have this nascent trucking industry, and it made it easier for small farmers to get their goods to market. *[Archived audio of news report from depression-era stock market crash begins. Reporter says, "the tremendous crowds which you see gathered outside the stock exchange, are due to the rations..."]*

So let's just dial it to about 1933. *[Archived audio from Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration]* FDR is elected president and remember now so we've got a very depressed farm economy, *[Folksy, acoustic guitar music continues]* catastrophically depressed now. *[Archival footage continues]* And so you had way more trucking capacity than the economy needed at that time: 1933, '34, '35. So the trucking companies were all cutting each other's throats under bidding freight rates. So we've got this three headed monster: we have high food prices, we have trucking companies going out of business, and then we have this farm catastrophe all happening at the same time. *[Acoustic music continues]* *[Audio from FDR speech]*

**Paul:** The Roosevelt administration came up with a plan: *[Audio from FDR speech continues]*

**Finn:** They regulated the interstate trucking industry.

**Paul:** The Motor Carrier Act of 1935.

**Finn:** Which is, you know all of this sounds kind of mundane, but when, you know, if you ever talked to any trucker, almost everybody is going to know what the Motor Carrier Act of 1935 is. Even if, you know, if they have trouble reading or never finished high school. We know about the Motor Carrier Act of 1935, what it did is it regulated all aspects of interstate trucking; it set the freight rates for every single commodity – it was a federal offense to charge less than that – and then it exempted agricultural products because the only place to square that Gordian knot of higher farm incomes with cheaper food is to lower the transportation costs. So they left farm products out of the Motor Carrier Act.

**Paul:** That means, starting after 1935, if you hauled steel, say, there was a minimum rate that you had to charge. If you hauled cabbage, you negotiated your *own rate* directly with the shipper.

**Lacy:** [To Finn] I have a quick question. Can you just sort of paint a picture of what a driver's life was like before and after 1935.

**Finn:** Well there's a great movie. It's called "They Drive by Night" ... *[Opening music from film, "They Drive by Night" enters]*

**Paul:** *[As narrator]* ...starring none other than Humphry Bogart. *[Dialogue from "They Drive by Night"]*

**Finn:** And it's about two independent truck drivers in the 1930s about what their life was like. *[Dialogue from "They Drive by Night" continues]* And what their life is like then as independent truck drivers is Humphrey Bogart is, he's sleeping under his truck on some country road because the truck breaks down. He's paying too much money to get repairs. He's not getting paid the rate he thought he was going to get paid by the commodity guy who he contracted with.

*[Dialogue from "They Drive by Night" continues]* and he's working too hard for too few for too few dollars.

**Lacy:** And then it turned into a good job. After 1935 is what you're saying?

**Finn:** It turned into a great job. *[Music from "They Drive by Night" fades out]*

**Paul:** *[As narrator]* At least, it turned into a great job for some truckers. And it all started with those fixed freight rates.

**Finn:** So what happened after 1935 is that the trucking companies who had goods that were subject to the motor carrier act, would go to Washington every year or every two years or whenever it was and then they would lobby for higher freight rates. *[Steady beat comes in]* And then the workers who were driving these trucks realized that these companies were making lots of lots of money.

**Paul:** *[As narrator]* So those truckers started to organize. *[Steady beat continues, and trilling harmonica follows]* *[Sound clip from archival interview with Teamster boss. Host says, "Our distinguished guest for this evening is Dave Beck, General President of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters union..."]*

By 1940, the Teamsters were the nation's *largest union*, with nearly half a million members. *[Sound clip continues, "...the most powerful union in the United States]*

By 1950, they could claim more than a million members. *[Sound clip continues, "And Mr. Beck your union controls everything from the delivery of diapers to the driving of a hearse..."]*

**Finn:** So what happened was the Teamsters and the trucking companies together would go to Washington to set the freight rates. *[Sound clip continues, "I certainly do work very closely with the business-people that employ our membership..."]*

So Labor's getting taken care of, the Teamsters are doing pretty good contracts for their people. *[Sound clip continues, "...and I am interested in every industry employing our people..."]* The trucking companies are getting the profit margins they want because the rates are fixed. So from 1935 to about 1980 all of the people regulated under the Motor Carrier Act were reasonably happy. *[Sound clip continues, "...will very definitely pull up." "Well, thank you very much, Dave Beck for being with us tonight."]* *[Music fades out]*

**Finn:** And then that left the drivers the truck drivers hauling agricultural goods who had none of that safety net at all.

**Lacy:** Why in the world would you haul agricultural products after 1935. Who has doing that, and why, and how?

**Finn:** There's a lot of people that don't want to punch a time clock; a lot of people that don't want to be told what to do on a day to day basis, and they're not going to become a Teamster because they would view that as giving up a certain amount of personal American autonomy. And those were the people that became the agricultural freight haulers called wildcatters called independents, there's a lot of different names for them. But those people, they would buy their own truck, and then they would find their own loads, a lot of times just driving up to farms but a lot of time driving up to, you know wholesalers, or things like that picking up a load of

watermelons or you know what have you, negotiate a rate with that shipper, deliver the item, and then get paid for that, and then do it again and do it again, but there was a higher level of independence for sure. [Slow-paced, twangy guitar music begins]

**Paul:** [As narrator] For many truckers, this wasn't some cultural choice you made, between becoming a Teamster, and becoming an independent or wildcatter. Often it just came down to where you were from. If you grew up in the rural South or Midwest, where there wasn't much to ship besides beans, corn and cows – no one around there was gonna to give you a union card.

But before we go any deeper into the history, I want to pause for a more personal take on all this, from one of my heroes.

**Theldon Thornburg:** [00:13:53] I'm getting too old and forgetful. I'm 93, you know.

**Paul:** [As narrator] Someone who actually lived the life.

**Theldon:** [Singing] ...*dirty old jail house the floor for a bed. For you know who's guilty, you know it too well...*

**Paul:** [As narrator] An old wildcatter from back in the day. Retired Indiana trucker and un-filtered World War Two veteran, *the* Theldon Thornburg.

**Theldon:** You know back in them days you didn't have turn signals on. So the only turn signal you had was your arm signal, and you just flash your lights. But they didn't have no front wheel brakes. They didn't have no shock absorbers.

**Paul:** [As narrator] Theldon was an independent trucker during this exact period we're talking about.

**Theldon:** I got fired three times from dispatchers at Craigs.

**Paul:** [As narrator] He didn't wanna punch a time clock...

**Theldon:** I've always hated the union.

**Paul:** [As narrator] ...or join the Teamsters, who over time got that reputation of being corrupt.

**Theldon:** You can't do what you want to do. You got to do what *they* want you do.

**Paul:** [As narrator] He'd take loads that other truckers wouldn't take...

**Theldon:** I hauled the first loads up the old Jacob's Ladder.

**Paul:** [As narrator] ...down roads where other truckers wouldn't go.

**Theldon:** A lot of people died there, 'cause it was so steep.

**Paul:** [As narrator] And he had no interest in being regulated, in any fashion.

**Theldon:** Throw them damn log-books away! [Twangy, guitar music fades out]

**Paul:** [As narrator] So I stop by Theldon's house one morning to cook him breakfast. [Sounds of Paul in the kitchen cooking for Theldon] And Theldon tells us his story...

[To Theldon] Now, when – did you start driving when you were in the service?

**Theldon:** The day I was twenty-one years old I got out of the service and I started driving for Ellis Trucking and I drove there for I don't know a year or two. Then I started wildcatting.

**Paul:** [As narrator] Back in the 1950s and 60's, Theldon was one of those independent truckers, Finn talked about – but he didn't just haul agricultural products. He was a *true* wildcatter – meaning he'd haul steel, paper, dry goods – anything he could get in the wagon. And he'd give an under the table discount to the freight rates set by the Interstate Commerce Commission. That's what wildcatting was.

**Theldon:** Back in them days there was quite a few wildcatters, and we didn't haul anything that was legal. [Paul and others laugh in the background] Everything was *illegal*, but you can make good money because the ICC had high rates on stuff, and you hauled it for cheaper. But if you got caught you're in trouble. [Music comes in, steady percussion and guitar]

**Paul:** [As narrator] Theldon had a truck he called Big Al.

**Theldon:** Big Al, it was a Powerliner with seven or eight hundred horsepower.

**Paul:** [As narrator] The name was a reference to its rare Allis-Chalmers motor.

**Theldon:** They only made 50 of them.

**Paul:** [As narrator] The motor itself was painted all in purple; truckers called it the Purple People Eater.

**Theldon:** In its, day it would pass anything that was on the road. Even if it was overloaded. One time I got arrested at a scale just before you got to the Continental Divide.

**Paul:** [As narrator] He and another driver got busted up there for being overweight.

**Theldon:** ...and me and that guy had breakfast together. I was five thousand pounds heavier than he was. So he said, "I'm going to show you way up over that Continental Divide." I said, "you do that." So I hung back behind, let him think he was getting a jump on me you know, when I went past him I was going about 40 mile an hour faster than he was in time I got up over the mountain. I had him out of sight.

**Paul:** [As narrator] But here's what I respect the most about Theldon. Yes, he drove fast, Yes, he broke the rules. But he did those things out of a profound sense of personal responsibility.

**Theldon:** I ain't take nothing to keep me awake except for oranges. I would buy me a whole pack of big navel oranges down there in Florida. By the time I'd get to Sweet Grass I'd have about two left.

**Paul:** [As narrator] In fact, he prided himself on his safety.

**Theldon:** If you're a wildcatting you didn't have no insurance, but you was careful,

**Paul:** [As narrator] He was governed by an interior code

**Theldon:** The amount of safety that you got is within yourself, not the truck, and I drove a damn truck five million and two hundred thousand miles, and never did have a chargeable accident.

**Paul:** [As narrator] For Theldon, it was all distilled down to taking care of the load – doing what you'd said you'd do; looking a man in the eye and giving him your word you'd be there.

**Theldon:** Some of us like to work

**Paul:** [As narrator] Logbooks, scalemasters, speed limits were all just impediments, obstacles that had to be circumvented.

**Theldon:** I wish I could still work because I enjoy working.

**Paul:** [As narrator] I wanted you to hear all that from Theldon, so you can understand where the culture around independent trucking *comes from*: guys like Theldon who flat loved to work hard, and do things their own way. And in part because of the Motor Carrier Act of 1935, that culture comes from *rural* America, because that's where there was food to be hauled.

Things were different around the cities, along the coasts – where the Teamsters were most dominant. But all that was about to change...

*[Clip from Ted Kennedy speech, "We restored competition to the market-place and I take some satisfaction that this deregulation legislation..."]*

So after the break, we pick up our conversation with Finn Murphy, and we'll hear how the whole regulatory system that Theldon grew up in, was turned on its head... *[Ted Kennedy continues, "...that each generation of Americans has a rendezvous with a different reality."]* ...and in a sense, we all became wildcatters. *[Twangy guitar music fades out]*

**Paul:** [As narrator] So Finn told us about the Motor Carrier Act of 1935, and how it basically split trucking into two parallel industries: agricultural and non-agricultural. That all changed in 1980. *['80s rock music begins]* But before we get to that, *[Old timey music enters]* let's take a little road trip through time. *[Archival footage from interstate promotional video begins, "In this century, America has become a nation on wheels..."*

After World War II, trucking quickly overtook rail as the dominant mode of freight transport. *[Promotional video continues, "...the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the things we use; but when we depend on wheel, we depend also on highways..."]*

In 1956, the Eisenhower administration started work on the interstate system. *[Promotional video continues, "... Congress responded with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956..."]* With the interstate, a cross country trip that used to take weeks, could be run in mere days. *[Promotional video continues, "...it will be possible to drive from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, from Canada to Mexico, without a single stop light or stop sign."]*

And the trucks were changing too... *[Sound of motor running in archival footage from Kenworth advertisement]* They had power steering, air-ride seats. Essentially, the job became a lot easier,



and a lot more comfortable. *[Kenworth advertisement...“It can pull a forty foot trailer load of 76,000 pounds of cargo 850 miles without refueling...”]*

By the time the 1970s were in full swing, there were more than 4 million heavy trucks working in America. *[Opening from the 1978 film, “Convoy” begins]* They were all over popular culture too. *[Dialogue from “Convoy” comes in]*

With truckers often portrayed as cowboys and outlaws... *[Clip from trailer of the 1977 film, “Smoky and the Bandit”] ...part of this same mythology we’ve been talking to Finn Murphy about. [Clip from “Smoky and the Bandit”: “The only time clock they’ve got to punch is the one in their heads, because out on the road, they’re on their own...”] [Fast-paced bluesy guitar music in background]*

The reality though, was that most truckers didn't fit the cowboy description. For most, trucking was simply a decent middle-class job.

**Finn:** With solid benefits, with pensions. In certain ways it was the golden age of truck driving and for trucking companies.

**Paul:** *[As narrator]* But the whole industry and culture of trucking took a big turn leading up to the 1980s.

**Finn:** The rub of course and this is how the deregulation juggernaut got going, is that consumer prices just kept rising, because transportation costs just kept rising. And there's a big groundswell to lower consumer prices and the best way to do that, according to some people in the government, was getting rid of the supports that we've already talked about.

**Paul:** *[As narrator]* A strange coalition came together to push for deregulation of the trucking industry. *[Simple melody begins with trilling harmonica]* It included some independent truckers, who were hoping for more freedom in what freight they could legally haul. But it also included some of the regulators themselves, consumer advocates, manufacturers of all shapes and sizes, and of course the retailers who bought stuff from them. Together, they took their concerns to legislators in Washington...

**Finn:** ...to say, essentially the Roosevelt administration is still running the trucking industry and we need to bring competition into trucking. And they did. *[Clip from a Ted Kennedy speech, “while others talk to free enterprise, it was the Democratic Party that acted and we ended excessive regulation in the airline and trucking industry...”]*

**Finn:** And that's when the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 came in and the freight rates were gotten rid of completely. *[Clip from a Ronald Reagan speech, “Together, we have cut the growth of new federal regulations nearly in half.”]*

**Paul:** *[As narrator]* In the end, the independent truckers who favored deregulation got what they wanted, too.

**Finn:** So now anybody in America could haul any item for any price that they could negotiate with the person paying to ship them. *[Music fades out]*

**Paul:** *[To Finn]* So let's dial back to 1980, deregulation has occurred. And can you talk about how the entire trucking industry changed in 1980.

**Finn:** So overnight we went right back to 1934. Before 1980, while trucking rates were being regulated and updated every couple of years, there was no incentive to thin out management ranks. There was no incentive to save fuel. There was no incentive not to buy new trucks every couple of years. There was no incentive not to do whatever the Teamsters wanted you to do. And that doesn't just go for movers, that goes for everything that was being transported in the United States.

And then the day after deregulation, I'm still charging \$175 dollars an hour for two men and a truck and then the mover next door says, "I'm going to charge you \$150 an hour" and then they mover next door to him says, "I'm going to charge you a \$130 an hour" and the mover next door says, "I'm going to charge you a hundred dollars an hour." So the freight rates were basically cut in half overnight. And the big freight companies that were stuck with a lot of management and these Teamster contracts were going bankrupt. *[Montage of archival news reports and coverage: reporter says, "The American labor movement as a whole is struggling just trying to hold its own..."]*

**Paul:** [As narrator] There's no doubt union companies took a beating after 1980. *[Montage of archival news reports and coverage: speaker share in succession, "We hit a low point. There's no question about that." "One reason union membership has been dropping to less than 19% of the for us last year..."]*

But it wasn't *all* bad. *[Atmospheric tones begin]* Independent truckers and start-up companies could now get official authority to haul stuff like steel and paper – freight that guys like Theldon used to only haul under the table. *[Archival sound clip: "Mr. Garrison foresaw the opportunity that would come from deregulation in the trucking industry and decided to get back into business..."]*

This change spawned a whole new class of entrepreneurs, who could get in the game and compete with the big fleets. *[Archival sound clip: "...went out on a journey. They began American Freightways, which has grown today to a billion-dollar organization..."]*

Remember Will Joyce? Finn's friend who got him into trucking in the first place? Well *he* was one of those entrepreneurs. In 1981, Joyce started his own company, Joyce Van Lines, with just *two trucks*, and quickly grew it into a nation-wide operation.

**Finn:** People like Will Joyce who came after 1980, who were not saddled with union employees, those are the guys that won. *[Archival news coverage, "...Organized labor movement. As NBC's Mike Jensen reports tonight, this is a trend that union leaders are battling..."]* *[Twangy guitar music continues]* *[Archival sound clip: "The days of the automatic raise every time a contract comes up seem to be over..."]*

**Paul:** [As narrator] Plenty of everyday drivers did just fine after deregulation, but the broad picture mirrors the rest of the working world: we all seem to be working more and more, for less and less. *[Sound montage of archival news clips: "...actually took pay cuts, averaging about 10%...", "...it's about the membership, the forgotten people...", "...1985, lower than the inflation rate.."]*

Here's the hard truth of it all. Truckers' average take-home pay in 1980 was just shy of 40 grand a year – that kind of money would be worth more than \$110,000 today. You can find truckers who pull six figures these days, but they're not exactly the rule. And the *average* take-home pay,

is nowhere even close: between 50 or 60 thousand for company drivers, and up closer to 70 thousand for owner-operators. *[Twangy guitar music fades out]*

**Paul:** [To Finn] Okay, but I do want to get back to culture here: what happens to the *culture* of trucking after 1980.

**Finn:** Well, I love— that's a great question because, the union drivers that I knew on the East Coast back in that in those 70s and stuff had a different way of conducting themselves and comporting themselves and dressing themselves. I'm a professional, I'm a middle-class guy. I'm not one of *those guys*, meaning the independent wildcatters down at the truck stop and he's the guy hauling the agricultural goods who's got the rural roots. He's either from the Midwest or the South. He doesn't want to work in a factory. He doesn't want to punch a clock for the Teamsters, wants to kind of run his own business. He's the one who sees himself as a latter-day American cowboy. And he's the one who's wearing the cowboy hat and the cowboy boots and the big belt buckle and the plaid shirt and talkin' real loud to the waitress in the coffee counter. That's great, that's fine. But what happened after deregulation was those professional guys, the union guys, the hourly guys, they didn't have anything left because what they used to do to put their chest out was, "I'm a Teamster and I'm middle class." When those two things disappeared, they're just another sharecropper on the road like everybody else getting paid by the mile. So as the union and professional middle-class men began to disappear the other truck drivers that are working for other companies, they adopt the cowboy myth *[Atmospheric tones come in]* because now they're living in the same penury and misery that the independents were. I totally get it, to a certain extent I agree with it. I have to be something, and something that can make me feel good, and so therefore I'm going to be the last American cowboy. *[Atmospheric tones fade out]*

**Lacy:** [To Finn] Can I just poke at this a little bit more because I think that you've explained it very well but this is this myth of the Cowboys something that me and Paul have been talking about a lot and I still don't get it. *[Finn laughs]* Like, I just don't understand why the drive to being independent is enough to make you live in poverty like that, you know, in the way that you describe.

**Finn:** Okay, well I think a lot of these drivers remember now coming from are coming from the rural Midwest and the rural South and the rural West. These people have already seen what government intervention has done in the farm business in the railroad business. There's an anti-statist, anti-union bias built into these folks, that goes way before any sort of cultural wars. This goes back to what they consider to be the pioneer guys in the Conestoga wagons, making their own way in the world, this is who I am.

**Paul:** [To Finn] I want to speak to your point a little bit because I am a rural Midwesterner who in so many ways does embody nearly everything you say. There is something about the circumvention of the law that becomes a drug, and then all of a sudden you know a guy says "Well I just went down to Florida with a hundred and seven thousand pounds, dodged the scales all the way, made thirty-five hundred dollars clear," like well if you can do it I can do it. And that becomes a thing, a peer dependent thing. And it does become its own culture.

**Finn:** If you were to do a you know a roster of CB handles from truck drivers you know the three most popular names are going to be Outlaw, Lone Ranger and Bandit and that just underscores what Paul was saying is you know we're giving the middle finger to the rest of society; we're living in our own society.

**Paul:** [As narrator] As you can probably tell, Finn does kind of look down on the whole cowboy trucker culture. I mean, you don't show up to move the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, all dressed up like Yosemite Sam. That just won't fly. But the funny thing is, even as he eloquently deconstructs this myth, I know he's never completely divorced from it. So here's what I do: in our interview, I read Finn one of my favorite passages from his book, *The Long Haul*, where he drives all the way down to Key West, only to discover his load has been given to another carrier. It turns out his dispatcher Gary has sent him on a 500-mile wild goose chase. Naturally, Finn is furious, and this is what he says...

[To Finn] You say, [Paul reading] *I pity you Gary. [Slow-paced acoustic guitar music comes in] You know what I just figured out about truck drivers? For all their pitiful myths. Most of them do this stupid job for one reason they can look themselves in the eye and honestly say they've held to their own standards without caving into pressure by society or somebody else's expectations. They might fuck up and they do but they own their fuckups and keep to those standards regardless of the personal cost. I'm a truck driver too. Fuck you Gary. Keep your split level in Fort Wayne. Raise your kids to be cogs in the machine. I live by a different standard that I just figured out. All these cowboys I've looked down upon they're better than you for all their faults.* [Music fades out]

And here we are, where, what now, Twenty– thirty-nine years after 1980 and yet this seems to be the thing that we all grapple with is living by our own codes our own standards. And can you speak to that, Finn?

**Finn:** Well, I've got to tell you, the chills went down my spine because of it's just that it's a sort of a declaration of an anthem which I hold. And you're right. I'm completely ambivalent about the myth. I mean I can excoriate it on the one hand but then I'm also bound up with it too. It's like Gollum and The Ring. You know Gollum hated the ring of power but he loved it too. [Soft tones come in] And I'm trucking for me as is kind of the same way. I like, you know, weirdos. [Laughs] I like people with opinions. I like people that have done something different with their lives and I like to hear about it. I like to talk to those people. I'd like to be around those kinds of people. And you can still find those people in trucking because where if you can't fit anywhere else you can fit where you don't have to fit at all. And that's as an independent driver. So yeah it is a place for people that can't quite toe the line in in certain other ways. And it's gonna be a tragedy when it goes. [Soft tones with harmonica fade out] [Sound of people getting in truck]

**Paul:** [As narrator] The day after talking to Finn, I've got a load of milk to haul, and Lacy rides along.

[To Lacy] [Sound of idling motor in background] Now, where is your cup?

**Lacy:** It's here. Talk a little about the importance of coffee to a truck driver. [Paul laughs]

**Paul:** [To Lacy] It's like we're always in search of the strongest coffee possible. We believe that there's no such thing as coffee that's too strong, there's just people that are too weak.

[As narrator] We find ourselves in the agricultural mecca of West Central Ohio, hauling by silos, steeples, cattle, and fields.

**Lacy:** Yeah, wow, no kidding you make this strong.

**Paul:** [To Lacy] Is that too strong?

**Lacy:** Nope. [Paul laughs] I'm not too weak Paul.

**Paul:** [To Lacy] Well I wasn't suggesting, there's no shame in saying it's too strong...

**Lacy:** There is definitely shame in saying it's too strong, what are you talking about... (Paul laughs)

**Paul:** [As narrator] When Finn talks about those people who can't quite toe the line in society, he's talking about guys like me – those shiftless, ne'er-do-wells who never quite fit in. *[Sound of Paul getting out of truck] [Paul says, "just out here on this lonesome old farm, picking up a load of milk, and dropping off an empty trailer]* Trucking somehow gave me a place in the world. It took my family out of grinding poverty. It gave me the best friends that I have on this earth. *[Sound of walking on gravel followed by heavy rainfall] [Soft atmospheric tones begin]*

And like Finn said at the end there, it feels like it's all starting to disappear. Electronic logs, digital freight apps – the kind of stuff we've been talking about the last couple episodes – not to mention the onboard cameras and autonomous trucks. These things are *changing* the culture of trucking, for better or for worse. *[Loud sounds of rainfall hitting windshield]*

**Lacy:** It's really coming down hard.

**Paul:** [As narrator] So as we drive down the road, I tell Lacy this story about one of those old friends of mine, and the culture that we shared.

[To Lacy] Kevin was my old boss. He overheard me playing my guitar in the terminal, and he asked me what song that was. And I said, "it's one I wrote." He said, "well, what are you doing with that messed up guitar?" because I had accidentally sat on this guitar that my daughter gave me. I threw it in the sleeper and I was tired one night, I sat on it and I broke it. It was held together by duct tape [Lacy says in background, "Oh no, that sucks!" and bailing wire. He goes, "what are you doing with that messed up guitar?" I say, "this is what I got, man."

[As narrator] Two weeks later, Kevin gave me this beautiful black Epiphone guitar. And all he asked was that I play a few songs for the boys in the warehouse.

[To Lacy] But Kevin was an old produce hauler and we understood each other – the bond of thieves and bandits, when we did these things.

[Paul sings his song, "One Too Many Straight Shots to Miami"]

*1989. Diesel was just a dollar  
So they came from the hills and hollers just to work that broken line  
See, you'd take ya a truck, with a big block mechanical Cummins  
Soup it up til it was hummin, just like them ol boys runnin shine  
We turned them second mornin out of Salinas  
slept an hour in Amarillo, and an hour in Illinois  
There was the bond of thieves and bandits we bore between us  
It was the golden age of the good ol boy...*

**Paul:** [As narrator] Tell you another thing about my buddy Kevin – he's from Kentucky, and he has strong opinions about which truck stop has the best *nanner pudding* on I-75.

**Kevin:** [00:42:07] No matter how much you ate, no matter how full you was, you had to get nanner-nanner pudding to go.

**Paul:** [As narrator] So in our next episode, we're going to settle that age-old question once and for all.

**Kevin:** And believe it or not, we've drove from Dayton, Ohio to the 49er for nanner pudding [Paul laughs]. That's good nanner pudding. You couldn't beat it.

**Paul:** [As narrator] We're taking a tour of my favorite Kentucky truck stops, where we'll also meet my favorite singing waitress.

**Favorite Singing Waitress:** [00:42:34] Keep yourself busy and make that twelve hours go by real quick.

**Paul:** [As narrator] Catch you next time, over the road.

["One Too Many Straight Shots to Miami" continues]

Our Over the Road pit crew includes producer and sound designer Ian Coss, and contributing producer Lacy Roberts at Transmitter Media. Our editor from Overdrive Magazine is Todd Dills. Our digital producer is Erin Wade, our project manager is Audrey Mardavich, and our executive producer for Radiotopia is Julie Shapiro. I'm Long Haul Paul.

All the music on the show is by Ian Coss and myself, featuring performances by Travis "The Snakeman" Wammack, Terry "Two Socks" Richardson, Jim Whitehead, Jan Grant Gullet, The Late Great Roger Clark, and Mr. Andrew Marshall.

Special thanks this week to my fellow writing trucker, Finn Murphy. The full title of his book is *The Long Haul: A Trucker's Tales of Life on the Road*. I've read it three times, and listened to it about five times.

The voices you heard at the top of the show belong to Devrie Jones, Mike Landis, Kenyette Godhigh-Bell, Mississippi Tim, Jared Sidlo, Jason Earlywine, and a trucker in Dallas who introduced himself only as Rattlesnake.

For further reading on the subject of trucking history, check out Shane Hamilton's *Trucking Country: The Road to America's Wal-Mart Economy*. Find Todd's distillation of owner-operator history, written on the occasion of Overdrive's 50th anniversary in 2011, via [overdriveonline.com/breaking-free](http://overdriveonline.com/breaking-free).

Over the Road is made possible by support from the folks I've have worked for, for a really long time - Moeller Trucking: now celebrating over 30 years of safe and reliable transportation for the food industry. For more information, check out [moellertrucking.com](http://moellertrucking.com).

Over the Road is a collaboration between Overdrive Magazine and PRX's Radiotopia – a collection of the best independent podcasts around. I just listened to the Kitchen Sisters on PRX Remix this morning while I was detailing my truck. The episode was entitled "No Tongue Can Tell" and it just gutted me. I mean it, reduced me to tears on the back forty of an Ohio truck terminal. I don't even think there's a word for the medium the Kitchen Sisters pioneered on this

network, but I call it sonic literature. Seriously, if you're into this quirky, off the wall stuff, find out more about the whole network at [Radiotopia.fm](http://Radiotopia.fm).

Look for Overdrive Magazine at [overdriveonline.com](http://overdriveonline.com), where you can read Todd's Channel One-Nine blog, hear the Overdrive Radio podcast, and explore news, business and lifestyle reporting about trucking.

You can find Over the Road online at [overtheroad.fm](http://overtheroad.fm). Be sure to follow us on all those usual platforms too – Facebook, Twitter and Instagram @overtheroadpod. You can see some of my videos on YouTube by looking for Long Haul Paul Music.

Thanks for listening, hanging in 'til the end of the run. We'll be back next week with more stories from Over the Road.

["One Too Many Straight Shots to Miami" continues and then fades out]

**Paul:** [To Theldon] So you raced James Dean. How did that go?

**Theldon:** Well, James Dean, he lived in Paramount and he ordered a new Indian Chief. And he spent more money souping it up than what he paid for the Indian. So then I went over there with my little Harley and I just had an old '61. And so, when I was over there, they wanted to pick a race out of me. Oh, I said, "well, with all the money you spend on it, just wasting– I wouldn't have a chance." So they called me chicken shit. [Paul laughs] I said, "there's one thing I ain't, I ain't chicken shit." [Paul laughs] So we got out there and I did peel the hell out of 'em.

[00:48:00] **END OF EPISODE.**