



## **Episode 7: “The Long Haul of Fame”**

**Air Date: May 14, 2020**

**“Long Haul” Paul Marhoefer:** [00:00:00] Hey listeners – Paul here, packing up to take a load of food down to Florida. I just want to offer a personal content warning for this one. You know, the world we inhabit as truckers is not always G rated. And frankly, the way we talk about that world can get pretty coarse. We do our best here at Over The Road, to present these stories in an unvarnished manner, while still being sensitive to both our listeners and the people we’re talking about. To be truthful though, that hasn't always been easy. There have been some pretty tough calls along the way, especially in this episode. You'll be hearing accounts of drug use, homelessness, and sex work. Just know we thought a lot about it and feel like there’s meaning and merit in every story you’re about to hear. Here’s the episode.

[speaking to Todd Dills and Lacey Roberts] When we were mapping out this podcast, somehow this idea came up of just who are your personal heroes and who are people that just mean a lot to you? And somebody at that Radiotopia headquarters said, you know, we just need to make an episode about these people. That’s why we came up with this title.

**Todd Dills:** So Paul, I have a question.

**Paul:** Yeah, go ahead, Todd.

**Todd:** Are we really going to do the title, the trucking magazine pun thing with the word haul for this episode? [Paul laughs]

**Paul:** Well, you know, here's the thing, Todd. We're broadcasting this to the outside world. And you're an editor for a trucking magazine, so it might be tired and moth-eaten to you, [Todd laughs] but to our Radiotopia listeners, it could be fresh and new.

Lacey, can you announce the title? Because...I don't completely remember it.

**Lacey Roberts:** Sure. [Todd laughs] Well, hit the music. [bluesy acoustic guitar comes in] We're about to enter the world of "Long Haul Paul's Long Haul of Fame." [Paul laughs] [theme song comes in]

**Paul:** These people...

**Idella Marie Hanson:** You know, I had tricks.

**Unknown speaker:** Oh boy...

**Paul:** They're not owners of truck stops or not like leaders of movements. These are people that I met by chance out on the road.

**Ken "Shoestring" Wall:** It was like Halloween down there, you know.

**Marcia Campbell:** And I didn't dream this, it was a God given plan.

**Paul:** And I have like this one rule. If you're going to be like my trucking friend...

**Idella:** They call the cops on you [laughs]

**Paul:** They have to be highly entertaining people.

**Evelyn Wrens:** When the going gets tough, the tough get trucking.

**Shoestring:** I mean there's stories after stories back in the day.

**Paul:** All five of these people are great entertainers in their own special way.

**Jim "Big Jim" Slekard:** No, no, no. You don't throw cheese away.

**Idella:** Oh wait a minute – I am an old woman!

**Unknown speaker:** She's like a trucking legend.

**Shoestring:** You know, baby, can I use your radio?

**Marcia:** Information and entertainment

**Paul:** from PRX's Radiotopia and Overdrive magazine. This is "Long Haul Paul's Haul of Fame" on Over The Road.

[to Lacey] Was that a little too strong on the "over the road," was that just a little too strong? Okay. Okay, okay. [theme fades out]

**Todd:** Well, should we get into the episode?

**Paul:** Absolutely.

**Lacey:** OK. [loud motor humming in the background]

**Paul:** So the first hero and mentor and friend is Idella Marie Hansen. [upbeat acoustic guitar music comes in]

**Idella:** My name is Idella Marie Hansen and I'm 69 years old. What was that other thing? Oh, wait a minute. [Paul in the background says, "how many years have you been trucking?"] 52 years. I've been driving in 52 years. Can't you tell? My memory's gone.

**Paul:** She's an interesting, interesting lady.

**Idella:** I get up in the morning and I get in that seat. I give that little wiggle and I'm ready for my day.

**Paul:** Idella is the ultimate bad ass trucker chick. She hauls money for a living and she wears a gun.

**Idella:** Oh, it's empowering. Who in the hell gives a 64-year-old woman a gun that never shot a gun before in her life, you know? Are you nuts or somethin'? You know, and I just make it a habit when they ask me, "well, what would you haulin'? And I just tell 'em, "you know better than to ask that. And you need to step away from the truck." [music fades out]

**Paul:** Can you give me your step away from the truck thing?

**Idella:** You need to step away from the truck!

**Paul:** That puts the fear of God in me right now.

**Idella:** Now ask me again: "What are you hauling?"... [Paul asks question in the background] You don't need to ask me that question, sir. You're going to need to step

away from the truck. What's going on here is none of your business. You need to move on. And you need to move on *now*.

**Paul:** So just imagine that: 64 years old, I think I'll just start hauling money and carrying a gun around. [Lacey laughs] Do you ever – you know, if I hauled money and if I wore a gun, I'm afraid I would stand in front of the mirror [Idella laughs] in the flying J and say, "Freeze!" Pull the gun out of the holster and say, "Freeze!" [Idella laughs] Do you ever do that? Do you ever like in front of the mirror or not?

**Idella:** We do have to do that. "Stop! Halt! Security officer." Okay. There is a little power in there. [Paul laughs]

**Paul:** Do you ever do that? You ever liked to stand in front of the mirror?

**Idella:** We do have to do that. "Stop! Halt! Security officer." Okay. There is a little power in there.

**Paul:** You know, there's people that start hanging it up at up at 64. But she's just like, she loves to trucks.

**Idella:** There isn't anything else. There just isn't anything else. I couldn't have been anything else but a truck driver. I don't ever want to quit driving. I really don't. [bright synth tones come in]

**Paul:** She grew up in like a middle-class business family but she had this thing in her from the very beginning.

**Idella:** I had a pedal car. Mama never let me have a bicycle, but I had a pedal car, one of them little blue pedal cars. And I was a speed demon...everywhere... [laughs]

**Paul:** [in the background] You just loved it.

**Idella:** I loved it. And my dad said, "she's going to be a driver." Dad wasn't real keen on it. He thought I should be a bookkeeper. Mother wanted to send me to a school in Ohio for music. And I wanted to drive. And for a long time, dad didn't talk to me. He would walk across the street. Wouldn't have anything to do with me. Then he became proud of me. He said, "that's my daughter out there. You see that? She owns that truck. She runs that business." And we've been a family. We were always a family of owning our own businesses. So having him be proud of me was something.

**Lacey:** So she was hauling by herself.

**Idella:** Most of the time. I'll work locally: chips, rock...

**Lacey:** And then she got married...

**Idella:** With Russell

**Lacey:** She was hauling with her husband, right?

**Paul:** Yes, they were in separate trucks, but they were always on the same gig. But then her husband gets injured and she has to go out over the road.

**Idella:** And what was I going to do? I had a truck payment. I had house payments, two kids. Was I going to go home and cry? It was time to go to work.

**Paul:** That's when you really see like the feistiness of her personality come through in these stories.

**Idella:** DJ McAdams. Pulled flatbed for him. Well, I was being pushed around and I was being taken.

**Paul:** So, you know, when she first started out, I think as an owner operator, like she had this boss, it must've been the seventies or eighties when guys were like wearing their shirts open to like the fourth button. [Lacey laughs]

**Idella:** He always walked around with his shirt unbuttoned...

**Paul:** like a manly man with a hairy chest and everything.

**Idella:** Real manly, really manly. And he had a habit of always something being wrong with your check. You were always short. Now, I remember thinking to myself, this ain't happening. This just ain't happening. And I don't remember where I got the little heat gun to take the signs off the truck. You know...

**Paul:** She had those stickers that she'd taken off the truck, which are highly adhesive. They're, you know, they're made to withstand wind, rain, snow.

**Idella:** And I heated them up and pulled them off. And I went in there and I took them signs, and of course now you know they're sticky. [Paul says, "Oh yeah" in the background] I wadded them all up and I walked in and he says, "you're not going to quit." And I said, "Oh, yes I am." And I stuck him right to his hairy chest. [Paul laughs heartily]

**Lacey:** Well, she really sounds like a legend.

**Paul:** Yeah. Yeah, she is. She's one of these few people who have actually had a truckstop named after her. Idella Hanson North Little Rock Petro. [Lacey laughs] And, Todd, can you remember the exact distinction?

**Todd:** It's called this the TA Petro Citizen Driver award, and they've been doing it for several years now.

**Paul:** Can you tell me the whole, how that whole thing worked out where a truckstop got named after you? How does that work?

**Idella:** I don't know how the hell it happened. [laughs]

**Todd:** I think they accept nominations from anybody in the trucking community, and it's always a driver.

**Idella:** She says, "I would like to nominate you for TA Petro Citizen of the Year." And I says, "you've got to be kidding me."

**Lacey:** Did you ask her what it feels like to pull into a truck stop that has her name on it?

**Paul:** Oh yeah, yeah, I did.

**Idella:** But now I got shot down. I got shot down on that. 'Course, my name's on the [00:10:00] top of the fuel receipt and my picture's right there, you know? So I go in, I was full of myself and I said to the gal there, "well, you know who I am, don't you?" [Paul laughs] You've got to be kidding. I couldn't believe I said that. And she says, "well, no." And she's looking right at the receipt and she's looking at my name. And never the twain shall meet. Right? And I was very polite. I says, I thought to myself, I deserved that. Who the hell do you think you are? It taught me a lesson. I go in there. If they say, if they hug my neck and say anything, that's great. If they don't, I'm not anybody special. I'm just the next truck driver in line. But you know, really, I think they need to make me a parking spot, a reserved parking spot with my name on it. That's mine alone, don't you? [twangy acoustic music fades out]

**Todd:** Okay, Paul?

**Paul:** Yeah.

**Todd:** Tell me about Shoestring.

**Shoestring:** My name's Ken Wall and I've been trucking for approximately 38 years now.

**Paul:** Well, Shoestring. Shoestring Wall is... this guy is such a storyteller. [blusey acoustic guitar music comes in]

**Shoestring:** There was this old hotel across the street there, and that's where all of the hookers and the cross dressers, it was all happening right there.

**Paul:** His stories are so evocative

**Shoestring:** and I got this drink and I don't even what kind of drink it was, I was so mal-nutritioned from running over the road. But it had all of this – it was a great big bowl...

**Paul:** Like Shoestring to me, like towers, *towers* over my stories. [Lacey and Todd laugh] I mean, because he...you had to go out and live that to get that story.

**Shoestring:** I figured it up one time you had to average about 70 mile an hour to get there. [guitar music fades out]

**Lacey:** I mean, just judging from the stories he told in that interview you did with him, he strikes me as a guy who had a tendency to get himself into trouble. [Paul laughs] [Todd affirms]

**Paul:** Oh yeah. Yeah. That's just a tip of the iceberg. [Lacey laughs] I mean, you know, you don't get stories like that by being the pillar of the community. You know, you don't get stories like that. And now, he became the pillar of the community, like, he's a stellar, stand up, salt of the earth guy. But I think there's this part of him that he loves to tell these stories about the wilder days 'cause he's resurrecting these memories and these characters and he just, he just gives it all to you. He gives you the good, the bad, and the ugly.

**Shoestring:** One time. I was in Columbia, South Carolina

**Paul:** There's this one story in particular, and this is vintage Shoestring. He's laid over for the weekend at this truckstop in South Carolina. And things really do take a bizarre and ultimately disturbing turn.

**Shoestring:** I backed my large car in, you know, and the parking place to my left was these old bed buggers. I got to talkin' to them. We all pitched in on some booze and everything and the party got out of control. It got out of control. Yeah. [simple beat comes in]

These were household movers and they started bringing the furniture out, the drunker and higher they got. [Paul laughs] So I bring over a bag of weed, and I throw it down. Well, I was their best friend then. I get a lawn chair off of the truck. Well, sitting over

from me was these chicken haulers. That night the barrels came out, busted up pallets, [Paul laughs] got the fire goin' and them old boys was hungry. They cut the seal on that wagon and got in there and they was bringing out whole chickens. And as the night went on more furniture came off of that. [Paul laughing] They bring out the couch. They had end tables. And that next morning when I woke up, there was truck drivers stretched out on these couches and chairs and the fire was smoldering and the party kind of died down, you know? But they were [00:15:00] stuck there for the weekend. And we all got it together. We refreshed, got more booze. We had forty-something pounds of chickens to eat, man. And these old boys, they weren't afraid to go in there and get them. [Paul laughs] And everybody started pitching in. Well, by Saturday night, it was really kicking. [muffled, garage rock music come in]

One of the bed buggers had a boom box. And this guy came on the radio and he was hollering that if somebody could help a young lady out to get to Florida. [indistinct chatter over the radio] Well, she came over to the party, he brought her over there, and she was just a, a young girl. She was something like eight months pregnant and she wanted to get back to Florida in order to have her child. You know, everybody was like, yeah, I'll give you a dollar. You know? And it was just a little bit. She needed some money and one of these guys came up with a great idea. He had a dry van. He opens up these trailer doors and he had an empty truck. He set that boombox up there and put her on the back, out on the radio, and charged truck drivers \$5 to come back to see the pregnant girl dance. 'Cause she had worked as a stripper at one time. And I'm thinking, wow, just when you think you seen it all and this poor young lady, pregnant, just wanting to get home, you know. [Paul affirms]

**Paul:** Sad in a way.

**Shoestring:** It's sad.

**Paul:** Funny, but it's kinda sad.

**Shoestring:** It's funny, but it's sad. And here she is up here, stripped naked, dancing on the tailgate of an old empty trailer to an old boom box, you know, with a cassette tape in it. And hey, she had a handful of money. And there was a Greyhound bus station at that truckstop. And she got her a ticket and got on there. And often wonder about her. Wonder what ever happened to her. But my goodness. you know, the kid would be, what, 35 years old or more by now. And yeah, it's been years ago. This wouldn't go on today out there, you know. [music fades out]

**Todd:** I wonder, any chance that person's out there and hears this and knows the story?



**Paul:** Yeah. Wouldn't that be something as if a result of this podcast, that lady gets a hold of us and says, *that was me*.

**Todd:** Wow.

**Lacey:** [laughs] I'd love to talk to her. I'd love to talk to her. [soft acoustic music comes in] [Paul affirms]

Alright. So Paul, you interviewed someone who's very important to you, who is not a truck driver. But plays a pretty big role in a lot of truckers' lives.

**Paul:** Yeah, that's Marcia Campbell.

Okay, well, Marcia, we are doing a podcast. And we decided to do an episode called "Long Haul Paul's Haul of Fame." And people who are heroes of mine and on our little old farmhouse, there's a picture of you that hangs on our wall because of... you were the one who kind of... [getting emotional]

**Marcia:** Let's talk about that. What are you feeling about? What are you feeling? You're getting' teary eyed and emotions are running and it's raw and it's real. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about the realness.

**Paul:** Well, I'm actually supposed to be the interviewer here. [all laugh]

**Marcia:** I apologize. [laughs]

**Paul:** But you know, nobody in any big radio outlet ever reached out and said, "I want to play your songs." And yet, you were the one who kind of... Okay. I'm going through Cincinnati with a load of orange juice, and I messaged you and requested a song. I don't remember what song it was, [radio static sounds in the background] and you played the song I requested and then you go, "and here's one from Long Haul Paul himself." And it was "Bessemer to Birmingham." ["Bessemer to Birmingham" by Paul plays in the background]

I don't know if I should say that song over the radio, but I had to pull over and pee. [Marcia and Paul laugh] I mean, I literally lost control of my bladder because I'm being played on WSM, the flagship station of the Grand Ole Opry and nobody did that for me, but you, so thank you for that. [voice cracks] [ambient tones come in] [Bessemer to Birmingham fades out]

Just kind of consider just [00:20:00] the importance of all night radio to a trucker. You find yourself on the night shift, maybe your load was late getting out of the dock and you've got to get North of Cincinnati before traffic hits and it's three in the morning and

you just need something to engage you, something to, to keep you awake and so you turn to, well, Marcia. [Rock music comes in - Marcia's radio intro, "Live from Music City, USA. This is the All Nighter. I'm Marcia Campbell 650 AM..."]

**Lacey:** So how did Marcia end up being the angel of truck drivers in the middle of the night wanting to hear the human voice on the radio?

**Paul:** But she's got this really interesting backstory. [bluegrass music comes in]

**Marcia:** I was a stay home mom. After my second son was born, I was looking at my walls, are covered with CDs and albums. So I called my local radio station and I said, "do you by chance have any time to meet with me about a programming idea?" And I went down and next week I was on the air doing a two-hour bluegrass show, free. [music fades out] [fast-paced bluegrass music comes in]

WDKN 1260 AM. That was my hometown radio station where the foundation was laid. Of course, I played the legends of bluegrass music. Bill Monroe, Lester Flatt, Earl Scruggs, but I would make tapes and record the show, and I would take this tape to my radio mentor, Keith Bilbrey. [music fades out abruptly with sound of cassette tape popping out]

**Paul:** She would send tapes to Keith Bilbrey, who was a professional DJ at WSM, and I think he also helped announce the Opry. And um...

**Marcia:** I said, listen to this and tell me what I need to do. [upbeat rock music comes in] I suppose I followed his guidance. He was in need of a radio host, syndicated across the country, over 25 different stations. [radio ad plays, "Trucking America is listening to the Interstate Radio Network..."]

Interstate Radio Network catered to the truckers. And my first night on the air, the phone lines lit up.

**Paul:** She just kept growing her craft and she winds up on the Interstate Radio Network and then she winds up WSM. [WSM sign-off jingle plays]

**Marcia:** WSM at that time did not have an overnight personality. And I went straight to the general manager at that time and I said, "can we talk?"

[radio ad plays – "It's America's trucking sweetheart, Marcia Campbell."]

I pitched another program. [radio ad continues, "This is the All Nighter 650 AM."]

We're playing music. We're doing This Day in History. We're doing trivia.

[radio clip – Marcia says, “Well, a number one song on this day in 19...”]

Tell me when your birthday is. I keep a calendar. It's like, I want to wish everybody a happy birthday. Talking joy, peace, celebration to everyone.

[radio clip continues, Marcia says, “Please slow down and drive with caution. Overnight, clear skies, dense fog and the low of 50...”]

**Paul:** This is what means so much to me about Marcia. See, after 2001, after 9/11 in particular, like all night trucking radio just turned into constant talk about, you know, all the angst that was going on in the country. [archival clip from George W. Bush speech and new coverage, “the United States military has begun ....”]

And through that, a lot of trucking formats just dropped music altogether. [all sounds fade out as if audio jack was pulled out] And, I personally, I kind of checked out after that. I'm not hardwired for constant angst, constant umbrage and, and that didn't keep me awake. What kept me awake was hearing Jimmie Rodgers, you know, Blue Yodel at three in the morning [Blue Yodel by Jimmie Rodgers plays in the background] and Marcia, it took her a few years, but she resurrected that format.

[radio clip from the All Nighter, Marcia says, “the Dixie chicks with “Asleep at the Wheel”... “Here's Johnny Cash, ‘Heartache Medication’ from John Pardi on the All Nighter... Chris Stapleton, ‘Millionaire.’”]

And for that reason, if she had never spun one of my songs, I would still consider her a hero. [soft acoustic guitar comes in, followed by harmonica thrill]

**Marcia:** Nighttime brings out more sensitivity. And if you're joyful, it's magnified, it's magnified. If you're lonesome, if you're sad, if you're hurting, when that sun goes [00:25:00] down, it's magnified. But when you know someone cares about you at the other end of the line, whether it's the radio line, the telephone line, because my phone lines are open. Call me. [Paul affirms] If you're struggling, then let's play a game, or let's play some music. [Paul laughs] Let's get you going. And you know, it may be that 20 miles or 200 miles. So I learned to be a friend at the other end of the line. And so my callers are honky tonkers. They're truckers, they're gypsies, they're nighttime workers. Or it may be Miss Mary that lives down the road who can't sleep at night. She's widowed and she loves country music. [laughs] So I have the audience that God wants me to have. And I pray that I can be a beacon in the middle of the night, whoever needs my light or my shine or my heart, my attention. I pray that I can deliver. [music fades out]

Long Haul Paul, I wish you happiness and good health, peace, and love, and I wish you enough. Godspeed, my friend. [gentle guitar tones come in briefly and fade out]

**Todd:** Who do we have next, Paul?

**Paul:** Well, I'm going to tell you about my friend Big Jim. This is about as old school of a friendship in trucking as you can come by. We met on a CB in Georgia. [upbeat acoustic guitar music comes in]

**Big Jim:** In North Georgia

**Paul:** I think I passed him...

**Big Jim:** Somewhere right around the scale there.

**Paul:** You know, he turned his lights off and on to let me know it was safe to come back in. And he was in a company truck then, and I was an owner-operator.

**Big Jim:** I think you saw who I worked for...

**Paul:** And I had talked to one of their drivers like the week before who said he was like doing about a quarter million a year on his 1099

**Big Jim:** And you made some kind of a comment over the CB

**Paul:** "how you like working there?"

**Big Jim:** And we ratchet jarred all the way through Georgia that night.

**Paul:** I decided I was gonna give this company a try and we celebrated that decision with a piece of cheese.

**Big Jim:** Free cheese as it may be.

**Paul:** Free cheese. [laughs] These guys were like running pure outlaw.

**Big Jim:** It was a thrill and it paid really well.

**Paul:** Like the principles of this company we worked for, we're like all wearing ankle bracelets, literally wearing ankle bracelets because of flagrant log violations. And back then, this was my mindset. [music fades out abruptly] I was like, "Cool. Where do I sign up?" [Lacey and Todd laugh]

One of these chance meetings on the road, which became a lifetime friendship and through now a span of decades, we've seen the highest of highs together. And really, the lowest of lows. [soft acoustic music comes in]

**Big Jim:** My name is Jim Slebard and I'm from a little town called Juno. No, not Alaska, the other one, in Wisconsin.

**Paul:** You know, the thing about Jim was he was just such a unique character because he grew up on this farm in Wisconsin and almost like this pristine Norman Rockwell town.

**Big Jim:** In Wisconsin, if it has a church, a bar, and a garage, it's a town.

**Paul:** I mean there is polka music on the radios in his family's farm. [polka music plays comes in]

**Big Jim:** We would acquire everybody's favorite alcohol and it would go in a big milk can with ice and fruit juice and that would like ferment. Then anybody walking through the barn would help themselves to a cup of the "wopawtoey" is what we called it. Because it had some "wop" to it, man oh man. [music fades out]

**Paul:** His family had like some of the top dairy cattle in Wisconsin, but he didn't want any part of that. And trucking was a way out for him.

**Big Jim:** And I went working for a buddy of mine who hauled exotic cars. [acoustic music comes in]

**Paul:** They just found like just the bipolar opposite of his upbringing.

**Big Jim:** [laughing] I picked up a Lamborghini in Kentucky. Convertible, black. And [00:30:00] nobody cared about the mileage. I had that car with me for a good month and I got my use out of it. [laughs]

**Paul:** And here's the thing, I live vicariously through these people. [Lacey laughs] It's like they lived a life I could not dare to live. And I've told Jim that so many times. Like, I just wanted to hear his stories because these weren't really stories I was ever going to live. [music fades out]

**Todd:** You said Big Jim was company driver when you guys first met on the CB on I-75 in Georgia there. But he did eventually buy trucks, right?

**Paul:** Oh yeah, yeah. No, he wound up buying a truck and he did well with it and then he bought a newer truck.

**Big Jim:** Fella down in Georgia had a decal shop down there and he made me. A hundred-dollar bills floating up the entire side of the truck. And I called myself Easy Money Trucking. [beat comes in]

**Paul:** And he was really popping there for a while.

**Big Jim:** Back then, we got paid by the pound on LTLs. So the more you could stuff in your trailer, the more you got paid.

**Paul:** So he'd go book, say 18 pallets of cantaloupes coming out of Pompano, and then he call around and he'd find a guy who's got a few pallets of watermelons or something, you know. And he was just a working machine.

**Big Jim:** It was partially for the money, but also partially just to see if you could get it done.

**Paul:** What we did was we would put on more freight than we were supposed to and dodge the scales.

**Big Jim:** So away to Florida we go. Stuff the trailer full, and I'm outta here.

**Paul:** It was almost like addictive. It was the cat and mouse game, and we were kind of in a culture where everyone was doing it.

**Big Jim:** Yeah, that's, that's pretty much true.

**Paul:** As I look back at that, I don't, I'm not trying to valorize what we did. It was just, it just seemed like the only way to make money at the time. So we were just trying to make every dollar we could. [music fades out] And I guess, Jim, all of our outlaw ways caught up with us. And in fact, you were the first one to my hospital bed, which I'll never forget. Can you talk a little bit about that solemn duty that you were somehow saddled with that you had to do for me that day?

**Big Jim:** I was actually at home when I got the call from the company we worked for that you had been in a wreck. [ominous tones come in]

**Todd:** We haven't really talked about this directly before and that, but I was wondering if you could just kind of paint me a picture: what happened that day of the wreck, Paul?

**Paul:** You know, you're doing multiple drop loads. You just had one person hold you up. You could really get in behind the eight ball. So I was behind the eight ball turning and burning and going from Florida to Wisconsin with produce and Wisconsin to Florida with

refrigerated product. And I just pushed it way too hard and I just nodded off. [tones intensify and then fade to silence]

**Big Jim:** So I found where they had towed your truck down there. And man, I was, Paul, I was surprised that you were alive. That truck was in that much of a wreck that I didn't – I was really surprised that you made it through it.

**Paul:** I was in ICU and, I broke my neck. You know, it just meant a lot that he was there. And I don't remember if we could even speak at that point because I had to write for awhile [Todd says, "oh wow" in background] 'cause they had me all hooked up to all that stuff. And, [laughs] you know, it wasn't until that interview that he was like, almost scolded me for all the cheese that I ruined in that wreck. [Todd affirms laughing]

**Big Jim:** Just so you know, I had to throw a lot of cheese that week. Everything had slid forward and just kind of exploded in inside, you know.

**Paul:** Really? I guess I never knew that. We never talked about that. What, you have to take a lot of cheese to the dump?

**Big Jim:** You never take cheese to the dump! You can use, that's like sacrilege for somebody from Wisconsin. [Paul laughs]

**Paul:** Like you could imagine [00:35:00] just the tragedy of the cheese. Okay. Yeah. Yes, you did incur some injuries, but you should've seen the cheese. [Lacey laughs] So now you're down in Miami, Florida at a junk yard, what did you have to do then?

**Big Jim:** Well, I looked to see, you know what I could recover for you from your truck. And quite frankly, there wasn't much. And if I remember correctly, the only thing that I really got for you is maybe a couple of clothes and your guitar. [soft acoustic music comes in]

**Paul:** You know, you and I – I don't think about this on a daily basis, but you and I have been through a lot.

**Big Jim:** Yeah. It's, you know, life hands you things and you got two choices: either deal with it and go on, or you let it get to you.

**Paul:** Now, your career as a trucker ended. Is it about a year ago now?

**Big Jim:** Yeah, just a little over a year. My kidneys finally gave out. So I'm on dialysis now and apparently the feds won't let you drive a truck when you're on dialysis. I don't know why, but apparently not.

**Paul:** The medical staff was very nice. He let us go interview him right there when he was actually in dialysis.

[to Big Jim] How has your life been since you got out of the trucking?

**Big Jim:** You know, I really don't miss it. You're a slave to that truck. And if, you know, at some point in time, maybe it's you figure out there's more to life than that.

**Paul:** Then eventually the machine went off and we were roused out by the nurse.  
[dialysis machine beeping]

We've been asked to step out, and we will be right back.

**Big Jim:** [quietly in the background] I'll be out in about 15 minutes

**Paul:** Okay. Yeah, we'll sit out. [music fades out]

**Lacey:** So our last honoree in "Long Haul Paul's Haul of Fame" is a fellow by the name of Fast Freddie. [guitar music comes in]

**Paul:** Yeah. I wrote a little essay about this because I just wanted to – I write better than I speak, and I just wanted to put this in writing. So this is called the "Pope of Pompano."

[reading] *We met in the phone room of the Florida state farmer's market in Pompano beach. [ambient sounds from indoor market] The room itself, as best I can remember, it was about 200 square feet with worn out carpet, a few dog-eared chairs and a wall with two, maybe three payphones. [sound of payphone being picked up] When things were really popping back in the nineties you might have to wait five, ten minutes until your turn for the phone came up. [phone rings in the background] For that reason, brevity was appreciated and expected. That said, there was no guarantee wouldn't get stuck behind some Truckstop Romeo who would throw etiquette to the wind while trying to work out some intractable relational snag with the second shift cashier from the Shreveport Petro. That kind of call would elicit the intentional cough, clearing of the throat, and after yet more time, the five minute "Jesus."* [payphone hangs up]

*This particular day, there was a Haggard looking man feeding quarters into a seven-minute apology to a New York judge. [muffled conversation over the phone] "Yes, your honor. I fully understand, sir. I give you my word. It will never happen again. Yes sir. I fully own it was a damn stupid thing to do. Thank you, your honoree. You won't regret this, sir."*

*And then best I can recall, he started running out of quarters and began just gesticulating to me smiling a bit, just needing someone to break a couple ones – fast. I*



*just happened to have the right change. [coins clinking into payphone] Truth be told, I was so engrossed by what sort of trouble this guy must've gotten himself into. I was enjoying the show. When the call finally concluded, his contrition evaporated abruptly concurrent [00:40:00] with the slamming down of the receiver. "Jesus!" was all he said. [phone slams and fades into an echo]*

*Turns out he went by Fast Freddie, and when my own call was done, Freddie was lingering by the door. "What are you, Polish?" he asked. "German," I replied, and we wound up at a table together. [music fades out]*

**Lacey:** So what did he do?! What was he apologizing for?

**Paul:** I dunno if it was a traffic thing, like he was a guy that stayed in trouble constantly. It's like trouble, [Lacey laughs] trouble was like his daily staple. So, so here's this chance meeting in this phone room, and I joined him. It seems like every other guy that's walking into this market is scanning the room, seeing Freddie and walking up to our table and like, like he's reporting for duty or something. [Todd laughs]

And, um. I'm insinuated into his circle without even trying because I've just happened to be sitting there. And everyone that came up, Freddie, he said, "Hey, I want you to meet my Polish friend from Chicago." And I'd say, "German, Freddie, from Indiana, German from Indiana." [Lacey laughs] You could not peel him away from that, screaming and kicking. I was always a Polish guy from Chicago to him.

**Lacey:** So Paul, I understand that Fast Freddie is no longer with us, but you had an opportunity to talk to his daughter, Evelyn.

**Evelyn:** [over the phone] My name is Evelyn Wrens and I am from Cincinnatus, New York.

**Paul:** Yeah. You know, what was so interesting about Evelyn was, like, she was embracing the whole thing.

**Evelyn:** I admired the shit right out of that man. You know, I was his number one mechanic when he was home. I was the flashlight holder. I was the one dodging the tools when he was getting frustrated.

**Paul:** She was driving a semi at the age of eleven.

**Evelyn:** I was tall enough to reach the pedals and see plenty above the steering wheel. So he would put it on cruise and he would go in the bunk and hold the steering wheel and I would sneak up around him and jump in the seat and drive for hours and hours out west. [cheery acoustic guitar music comes in]

**Lacey:** So Paul, do you remember seeing Evelyn out on the road when she was a little girl?

**Paul:** Oh, absolutely. All the time. Whenever – in the summertime, when you saw Freddie, you saw Evelyn, and you know, he was just a guy that always had to have those kids with him.

**Evelyn:** And he would always teach us sometimes how to go around the scales and sometimes how to be good. [laughs] So he'd be like, "Oh, well, we're going to go the scenic route tonight." You know? Oh, I'd be like, "Oh, you know, you got your log book all filled it out, Dad?" " Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh huh." I was like, "Okay, Dad, let's go!" [laughs] Yeah. There was no such thing as running out of hours. There was trucking and trucking and trucking and then you'd needa take a very short, quick nap and trucking some more. [acoustic music fades out]

**Paul:** After I came back from my wreck, I was kind of disfigured facially and my posture had changed. The first thing he said when he saw me is, "what the hell happened to you?"

[over the phone, speaking to Evelyn] And I told him. And he goes, "were you using drugs?" I go, "no." "Well, there's your first problem."

**Evelyn:** [laughing heartily] Exactly. I could see – yeah, if you were doing drugs, he would have been awake, not sleeping.

**Paul:** And, he was [Todd and Lacey laugh] like, scolding me for not, you know, using drugs. So that was classic Fast Freddie right there. But he, you know, Freddie, the thing about Freddie was he – I saw him as sort of like this outlaw trucker dude, but he had this complete other side to him that I would have never seen had I not been stuck in the Pompano market one Thanksgiving.

[soft acoustic music comes in] I think it might've been '08, '07, but it's the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. And Freddie stands in front of everybody, like he's giving this commission. He goes, "we're going to have a feast tomorrow. Call every crack whore, every homeless bum. I even want you to invite the flatbedders. We're gonna have a Thanksgiving feast, fellas."

**Lacey:** Wow. You know, it's a funny thing to say, but it almost sounds like a Bible story.

**Paul:** Yeah, it is. It was like, you know, we're having a feast invite the greatest to least, and there was a guy there who was [00:45:00] known as Alonzo, the broom boy, um, and Alonzo had a drug problem and he made his living by sweeping people's trailers out. And Alonzo sat away from everyone because he didn't bathe much and Freddie

made him a plate and sat there on the curb right next to him and they ate together and they talked like old friends. And then when they were done eating, he came over to me and told me Alonzo's whole story and it was just unbelievable everything he knew about Alonzo. And I realized in that moment, you know, where Ralph Waldo Emerson says, "every man is my superior in some regard." This guy who, you know, was always a mess, always in trouble, was also just this wonderful human being too. You know, the guy who's the most down and out, and I, that always stuck with me.

**Lacey:** Does Evelyn remember that night?

**Paul:** She absolutely does which that was the coolest thing.

**Evelyn:** I was like, you know, Dad, I really wish you were here for Thanksgiving and none of our family events, were ever peaceful, ever. [laughing] So he's like, "you know, I would much rather be down here with these people, making sure all these crack whores and all these bums are fed, then dealing with the nonsense at home today." And I was like, "you know, Dad, that's kind of cool. I'm not even mad about it."

**Paul:** And the crazy thing, this wasn't, I didn't know this at the time, but this was not isolated to Pompano.

**Evelyn:** No, no. He was like that, every – there were certain truckstops from home to Florida that he would stop at. And in each of those truckstops, it was the same type of thing that you seen in Pompano.

**Paul:** So up at Hunt's Point, you know, Evelyn tells a story where everybody even knew him up there, and Hunt's Point is a big place. It's not the Pompano Market. It's ten times as big as the Pompano Market and it's in the Bronx.

**Evelyn:** I remember I was like nine, ten maybe, and he'd be like, "well, you can go down to Mike's to the Chinese place and get yourself something. They're not closed yet" I'm like, "but Dad, it's dark. I'm little. Like mom says we should be scared." He's like, "Oh no." He's like, "I know all of these people here. You're fine." And sure enough, I could walk down to Mike's and my sister was with us and you know, we had to use the bathroom and this tiny little Chinese lady pulls out this machete as big as she is. And my dad, you know, started to go up and she'd go, "no, you stay here. I take bambinos." And up the stairs dragging your machete, she went. Things like that have stuck with me for all these years. Just things that you never – you don't experience any way else besides in a truck. [soft harmonica tones come in] We trucked until three days before he passed away. He had kept his sickness, the secret, and we knew things were bad, but he tried to avoid coming home as much as possible. And, he called me and he was in New Jersey and he's like, "I'm at this exit. I can't, I can't go anymore. You have to come

and get me." Off in the middle of the night to New Jersey we went. And that's when he took his last steps out of his truck. [guitar music comes in]

**Paul:** Apparently, after Freddie died, the truck was parked somewhere where it had to be moved away from.

**Evelyn:** And it had been sitting for probably six or seven months. It just, it refused to start. We had three or four guys come out and try to help us and it just did not want to start. One of the guys is like, "you know what, I'm sick of this. Evelyn, you get up there, you do this!" I had my youngest daughter with me at the time. She was like a year old, threw her up in there and I just sat there turning the key and hitting the gas going, "Come on, please start. Please start, please, please start. Come on Dad, please start." And then all of a sudden, *vrooom*, black smoke everywhere. I just instantly tears running down my face. And I was like, "alright guys, like, I don't have a CDL. I can't drive." And they're like, "what do you mean you can't drive?" I was like, "well, I can drive, but I'm not supposed to." And they're like, "well, this is no different." So one of my dad's friends jumped up in the passenger seat and he said, "come on, let's go."

**Paul:** It was the most wonderful thing. [00:50:00] The way I got to know Evelyn. I wrote a song called, "You Were a Good Hand" and the character in that song lived by a simple ethic: you put the load first and let the rest take care of itself.

One day a man wrote to me out of the blue and he told me how much that song reminded him of a driver he knew who used to run out of the Pompano Market. A guy who went by "Fast Freddie." I said, "you're not going to believe this, but I knew Fred and he was part of the inspiration for that song. "As it turns out, this man also knew Freddie's daughter, Evelyn. Someone I hadn't seen since she was just a little girl. Next thing I know, I get a message from Evelyn herself. I mean, what are the chances of that. [soft acoustic guitar music comes in accompanied by violin]

Evelyn would later tell me that her Dad's heart had simply exploded days after his last run. He had literally run himself to death, like a racehorse, always looking after the load. It's one thing to write songs about this kind of thing, but Freddie, man, Freddie was the song.

[Paul singing, "You Were a Good Hand"]

*Now your darkest days  
Draw hard upon you  
And accuse you to your face  
For the years squandered  
In the devil's cold embrace*

*All your friends  
Tried to warn you  
While your... meekly played  
Still a-wanderin' soul lies empty  
For the passion that it has spent  
Still they say you were a good hand  
You paid your dues to run on town  
'Til one day you  
Just turned 80 while still a man of 39  
And it wasn't for the money  
No it wasn't for the ride  
Just to hear twin turbos howlin'  
Across the clear Santa Rosa sky  
With a little brown bottle and toothpick leaves  
Heavy on the... this was to be your final run...*

**Paul:** 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 Michael Gilbert Ronstadt, Travis "The Snake Man" Womack, Terry "Two Socks" Richardson, Tisha Mingo, Jim Whitehead, Jan Grant Gullet, the late great Roger Clark, and Mr. Andrew Marshall. Additional engineering by Jeff Templeton at Milk House Studios and Donny Gullet in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

And a very special thank you to Damon Skull for connecting me with Evelyn. Over The Road is made possible by support from the folks I 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).

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Thanks for listening, hanging in til the end of the run. I'll be back soon with one more episode of Over The Road. [Paul continues to sing "You Were a Good Hand"]

*And it wasn't for the money  
Wasn't for some white trash dream  
Just to see the glass and the black top  
Shine like sequence down the bayou stream  
There's a road they call the B-line  
And it's US Highway 54  
'Bout an hour  
Outta Navassa  
Where the flatlands,  
They start to roll  
There the nights grow deadly quiet  
Til you meet a blast of wind  
Don't be troubled  
That just some drover  
Racing to the home he'll never see again.*

[00:58:34] **END OF EPISODE**