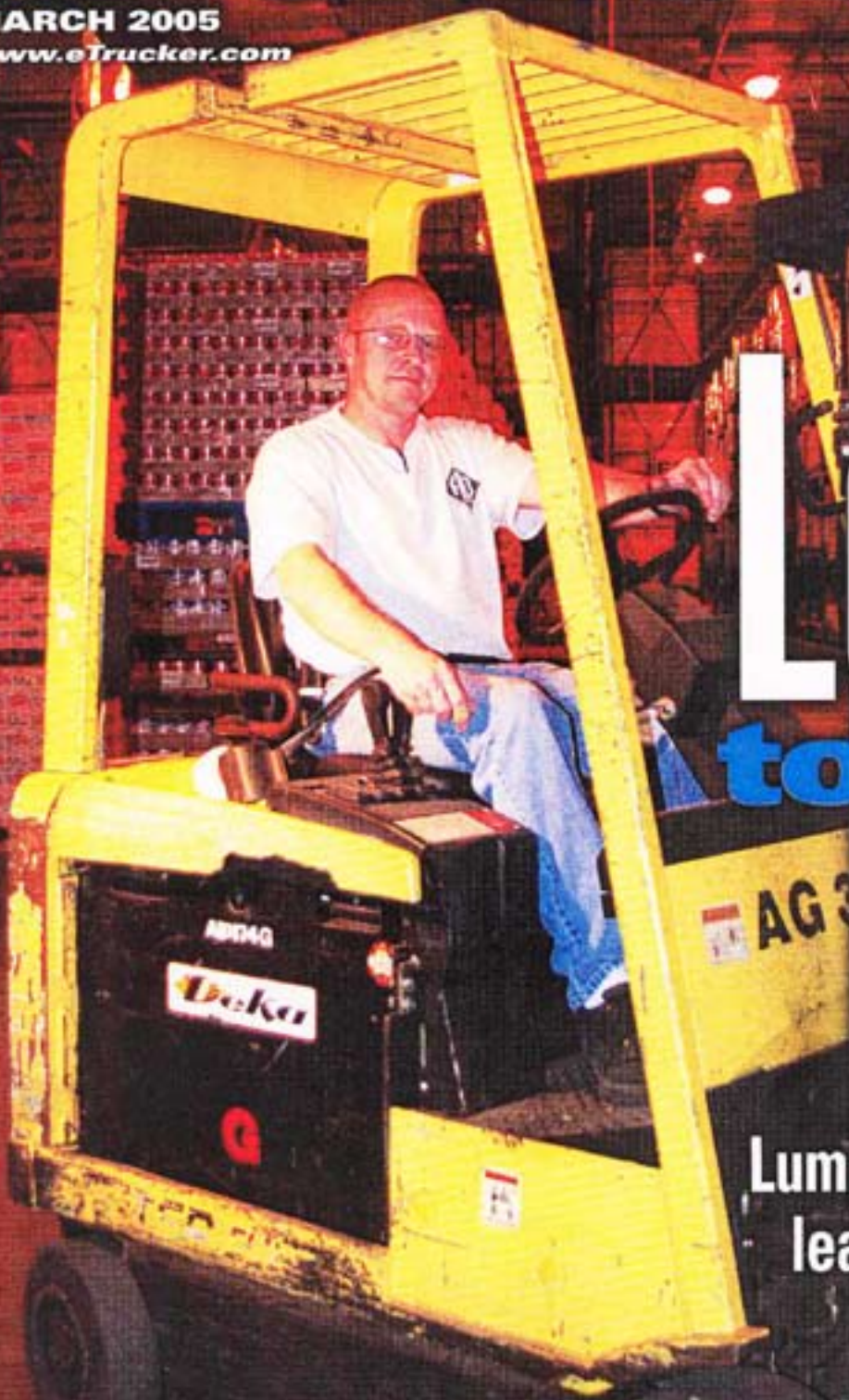


# Truckers NEWS

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# Loads to Bear

Lumping problems can leave drivers playing the waiting game **22**

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# Wills of Steel

Wheelchair-bound trucker, one-armed driver exhibit determination and devotion to trucking

By Lance Orr

It's a disability you'd think would rob a man of any chance to be a driver. But in the case of Barry Owens, being paralyzed from the waist down not only didn't stop the man from driving, it also didn't stop him from being one of the best.

Owens, 46, has been hauling loads in a truck since he was 19.

"I worked on a farm in northern Mississippi, and when we didn't have anything to do, we would haul stuff on the farm owner's truck," Owens says.

While on one of those hauls in November 1981, Owens, then 22, locked the brakes of a bob-tailed truck and rolled it. Owens was paralyzed.

But the crash didn't keep Owens down for long. In March of 1982, as he was recovering from the accident, he stopped by to see an old friend — the farmer whose truck he crashed.

"He was going on a haul and asked me if I wanted to come. I told him sure, but I didn't think we would be able to get my

[wheel]chair into the truck. But we did. He used his forklift," Owens says. "About two minutes into the drive he looked at me and asked if I was OK, and I asked why he said that. 'Because you're as white as a ghost,' he said. But after five miles, I was fine and never looked back."

Owens found he wanted to drive again. The first obstacle was how he could operate the foot pedals with paralyzed legs. "I have hand controls on my steering wheel like on a handicapped vehicle," Owens says.

"The steering column works the brake and the gas, and I don't have a clutch." Owens uses an Allison automatic transmission in his Freightliner.

He also had to pass the Georgia DOT's skills performance test to get the documentation that allowed him to legally drive a big rig.

In 1985 Owens started driving hot shots — overnight light freight hauls — and by 1992, he had his own authority. But the



The fact that Barry Owens is bound to another set of wheels — his wheelchair — hasn't stopped him from piloting this Freightliner's wheels down the road to a successful trucking career and life.

years between 1985 and 1992 were tough. "I had to do it all myself. I had to go hunt down and bid on loads because no one wanted to lease me out," Owens says.

But eventually, with some help from his brother Frank, Owens got leased by Southern State Transportation in 1995, after he bought his second truck.

SST asked Frank to drive for them, and he told them if they

wanted him they had to take his brother, too.

"At first they didn't want to, but I told them to give me 90 days, and if I wasn't better than half of the [SST] drivers I would leave and never say anything bad about this company," Owens says.

But Owens didn't drive better than 50 percent of the SST drivers. He did better than 90.

"I've never been out of the top 10 percent," Owens says.



Though Owens' current lift is built with stable hydraulics, his first lift was a home-rigged job; a fall from it put him in the hospital for six weeks.

When Southland Trucking bought out SST, the Owens brothers went along with the deal. When that company closed its doors, Owens moved to Empire Express but did not stay long because 90 percent of what that company moved were hazmat materials. "Someone handicapped can't drive hazmat; it's the one restriction on my license," Owens says. "They were a good company, but I felt like I was a thorn in their side."

Now Owens hauls Pepsi bottles for Promise Transportation.

But while his battle for employment is over, wheelchair-bound Owens still has to face one issue every day — how to get in and out of the truck. He turned to Handicapped Unlimited, based in Memphis, Tenn., for help. The company rigged his current 1998 Freightliner with a lift that allowed him entry via a specially cut door in his sleeper. Then his driver's seat swung around so that he can crawl out of his wheelchair and into it. The bunk folds up so that he can have a place to store his chair while driving.

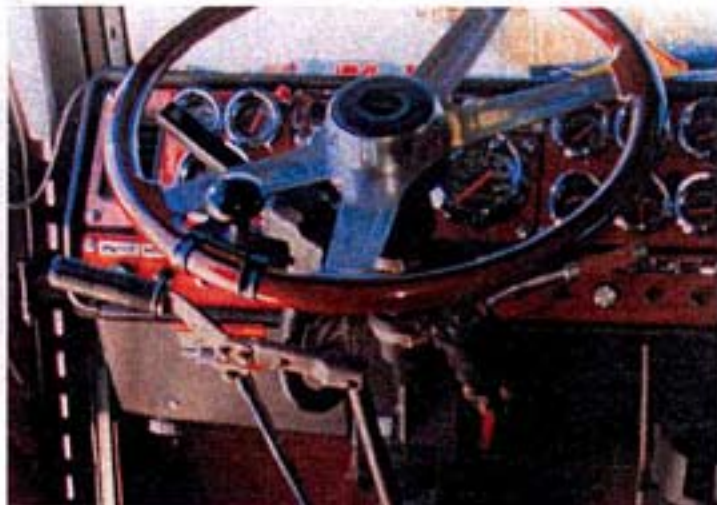
To outfit his current truck with all of this cost about \$10,000 in 1998, but Owens says it is worth it. He crossed the million-mile mark with his current truck on Jan. 9, 2005.

But even with the specially outfitted truck, Owens doesn't want to have to get in and out too often. For all hauls, Owens stipulates that he does not load

or unload anything, but he sees no problem with that.

"CDL stands for commercial driver's license, not commercial dock laborer," Owens says.

Owens also has to be careful about where he goes for gasoline. "I'm pretty picky about where I get fuel. No Flying Js



We don't need no stinking feet! Owens operates his gas and brake through hand controls on the steering column.

because the islands are so wide I can't reach them," Owens says.

Owens says he would not have been able to do any of this — recover from the accident, drive like he does, raise his daughters Mollie, 17, and Katie, 15 — if it wasn't for his wife, Kathy.

"She was with me before the accident, and she's with me now," Owens says. "She's the reason I do everything. If she wasn't with me, I wouldn't be able to do half the stuff I do."

Though all the "stuff" Owens has done includes clocking in 1.6 million miles wheelchair-bound

## A Long Walk

Parking is an issue for most drivers, but for disabled drivers it can become a serious problem

Fred Faerber, 66, of Kingston, N.Y., has been driving full-time since 1957. He owns Smith Avenue Moving and Storage — a household goods shipment and storage agency.

"I can drive in the 48 states, but I only operate in 27 — Mississippi and those to the east of it," Faerber says.

And he does all this with only one foot.

Faerber operates out of his hometown of Lakeland, Fla., and owns two Volvo FE 42 straight trucks fixed with pump trailers and coconverter dollies. He says he is the American Moving Association's February 2005 Certified Moving Consultant of the Month, but as successful as he and his business are Faerber still faces a daily battle — walking from his truck to the truckstop.

Five years ago, he accidentally dropped a 50-pound barbell on his left foot while delivering a load. "By the next morning it was in pretty bad shape, and it just kept getting worse and worse," he says.

Because of his dedication to the job, Faerber couldn't get home to his family practitioner for 12 days. When the doctor saw his green and black foot, he referred Faerber to a specialist who told the trucker he needed to go to a hospital. Faerber refused because he had two more loads to ship and his "customers come first."

Faerber returned from the hauls and visited a clinic in Kingston, where he was again advised to visit a hospital. He swore he would, just as soon as he drove one last shipment of cargo to

New Jersey.

When he returned to the hospital, physicians told him his wound had contracted gangrene and they would have to amputate half of his foot. He remained in the hospital for 16 days.

Now Faerber walks without a cane or a crutch and shifts through his nine gears with the aid of a specially made steel-soled boot.

"I still load deliveries, and I climb a five-foot ladder into my truck," Faerber says.

But despite how good he is at working around his handicap, it still hurts Faerber a lot to walk long distances.

That is what makes it hard for Faerber to walk from his truck to his loading destinations. New York does not differentiate between handicapped commercial drivers and handicapped civilian

drivers, so there are no handicapped truck parking spaces.

"Sometimes at a truckstop I have to walk 300 feet from a building and then 100 feet to the men's room. That is tough," Faerber says.

Faerber says the town clerk who gives him his handicapped ID gives him a designation that fits on both his CDL and regular license. Faerber says the state does that so it can remain ignorant of the number of handicapped drivers currently hauling and the need for special handicapped parking spaces.

He has called his state senators and Kevin Cahill, his state assemblyman, but so far his complaints have gone unanswered.

So for now Faerber walks in pain each day to and from his truck. "What am I supposed to do?" Faerber says. "Park in the handicapped spaces? I'm 65 feet long; they'd ticket me for sure." ♦

with only one moving violation — a September 1999 improper lane change charge — he said he is ready to get out from behind the wheel for a while. So he can call attention to the trucking industry's positive facets.

"I want someone to sponsor me with a show truck so that I can ride around to schools and Special Olympic events and promote trucking and its good aspects," Owens says.

Many of Owens' friends think that is a fine idea, but they'll be sorry to see him stop hauling fulltime. Promise Transportation owner Ronnie Foundren has nothing but praise for Owens and his skills. "Anyone who thinks they can run hard should go run with Barry and then come talk to me," Foundren says.

#### Battling the system

While Owens has been able to work through his disability by combining dedication with a little technology, veteran driver Scott Cook has taken a different road. Cook's dislike of being told that has to use a prosthetic has put his longtime passion for trucking in limbo while he wages a stubborn battle to prove himself able-bodied.

When Cook was 5 years old, he lost his left arm above the elbow in an electric meat grinder, but his disability hasn't slowed him down at all. He was climbing trees the day he got home from the hospital. He doesn't even consider himself disabled. Maybe that's why he refuses to wear a prosthetic arm. And that refusal is why he can't currently drive.

Cook grew up in, and now lives in Bandon, Ore., and hauled lumber between there and Alaska for more than 20 years. He has never had an accident or damaged property. But after an Oregon DOT motor carrier enforcement officer cited him in January 2001 for driving without a prosthesis, he was barred from driving unless he wears the arm.

Cook refuses to wear the arm and has taken the case to court many times, contending he does not need the arm to be a safe driver, and that the false arm is more dangerous than not having



Yes, it's hard sometimes, but Owens loves trucking. And trucking loves him. He's ready to give something back to the industry by working as a spokesman, telling people about trucking's positive aspects.



Owens tries to remain modest but, the pride he feels in his accomplishments sometimes shows through. "I don't want to pat myself on the back, but I don't think you'll find anyone who has done more than I have," Owens says.

one at all. "Prosthetics are worthless," he says. "I can use my arm like I use my hand."

Every time he went to court his claims were thrown out. He has filed lawsuits claiming the laws go against the Americans with Disabilities Act, but so far those suits have led nowhere. The Oregon State Court of Appeals upheld the original court's judgement on Jan. 19, but there have already been motions

to take the case to the Oregon Supreme Court.

So to make a living while not driving, and to prove to the Oregon DOT that he should be able to drive without the arm, Cook fishes the dangerous waters off the Oregon coast.

"Fishing is a tough business, and to make enough to survive you have to do it by yourself," Cook says. "Compared to fishing, trucking is easy."

Tough as fishing might be, it is not a foreign enterprise. Cook sailed a double-rigged shrimp boat out of Bayou Le Batre, Ala., in 1977. While working as a shrimper he sailed to the West Coast and passed through the Panama Canal three times.

The road and the open ocean aren't the only things that Cook has conquered. He has a pilot's license, but even the sight of that irks him. "I could legally drive a 747, but I can't drive a truck," Cook says.

So Cook decided to use his flying ability to try and get his CDL back.

Cook got his pilot's license when he was 16 and bought his first plane in his mid-20s. In 2005 Cook plans to fly around the world in his 1945 twin C-45, a model also called a Beech 18. His route will take him across the United States; into Europe; and south through the Middle East, Asia and Australia before returning to Oregon by way of Hawaii. He plans to use the flight to show the world that people should be judged on their abilities and not what others think of their disabilities. He also wants to prove to the Oregon DOT that if he can fly around the world without a prosthetic arm, then he should be able to drive without one, too.

But Mac McGowan, an Oregon DOT public information officer, disagrees with Cook on exactly what government entity will not allow him to drive.

"Oregon doesn't have that law, it is federal. Nothing about that law is specific to Oregon," McGowan says. "You can change the law by an Act of Congress or go through the proper court system, and that's what he should do."

Whatever the outcome of Cook's case and flight, and if Owens get his sponsorship or not, these two men are examples of not letting bad luck and the sight of an uphill battle stop you from going after what you want to do.

Sure, they may not drive just like every other CDL-certified driver, but that doesn't stop them from living their lives just the same as everyone does. ■