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BRAD GRAVERSON/DAILY BREEZE

Brian Oken, president and chief executive officer of Ventura Transfer Co. in Carson, checks out trucks in the company's yard. Oken, 42, joined the company early last year with no previous experience in the transportation industry but has made several innovations.

No ONE HORSE firm Carson company grew strong from simple roots

By Peter Sanders
DAILY BREEZE

Although Ventura Transfer Co. lists its address on heavily traveled 223rd Street in Carson, the family-owned business actually sits hidden off the street at the end of a curvy road.

It's scrunched on one side against the Alameda Corridor rail line and hemmed in on two others by the giant structures of an oil refinery.

Nevertheless, VTC's tractor-trailers rumble across the lot, picking up and depositing trailers used to transport everything from obscure yet potent chemicals to

bulk goods used in many types of manufacturing.

Chairman Randy Clifford, 48, one of four brothers who are employees but also serve on the board of their family's company, has a unique understanding of the 133-year-old company's somewhat low profile.

He has a copy of a recent newspaper clipping from Ventura, where the company was founded and based for many years. The article is a historical profile of the company's beginnings in the 1870s as a horse-drawn cart operation that hauled freight and passengers from the Ventura train station and barge depots at the harbor to destinations nationwide. The author notes that the company folded in the early 1900s as the automobile gained popularity.

"So that reporter was pretty surprised when I called him and told him not only did we not go out of business in 1915, but we are still here and still transporting," Clifford said.

Clifford's parents, Jack and Phyllis, bought the business in 1957. By then, the company was hauling mostly petroleum, and moved to its current location. The trucking operation expanded through the 1970s, hauling products for companies such as Exxon, Chevron and BP. It also began transporting plastic pellets and powders for manufacturing companies throughout the Western states.

In the 1980s and 1990s, VTC adapted to a changing industry and developed special chassis for transporting liquid containers and invested in a 45-ton heavy lift unit capable of picking up large cargo containers and placing them on trucks.

Today, Jack and Phyllis are retired, and in January 2002, Brian Oken was hired as president and CEO, a non-family member put in charge of the family-owned business.

The 42-year-old Mar Vista resident grew up in West Los Angeles and spent 10 years in charge of Holga

Inc., an office furniture maker in Van Nuys. He arrived with no experience in the transportation industry but quickly learned the details and helped VTC innovate.

"One of the first things I did was put together a comprehensive three-year strategic plan that we update annually," he said. "Among the things we want to do in the near future is patent at least two unique processes, including an upgrade of computer technology for both our company and our customers."

Oken said VTC also takes advantage of facilities it operates at rail yards along the West Coast. It's one of the few companies that can off-load products directly from rail cars and then deliver to the customer without using a middleman. It has nine such facilities, including the newest in Oakland.

He also has been finding ways to keep costs low without layoffs, and complying with the many security regulations imposed on the industry in the past two years. VTC also has expanded operations from hauling to limited amounts of packaging and warehousing products. Oken also highly values customer service and doing the job well.

"We are certainly not the cheapest company out there. We're not bottom-feeders," he said. "People come to us for our service and our intent is to provide the best. Sometimes, you can grow your business and profits by saying no, by not accepting every customer that comes calling."

Mostly, however, Oken focuses not only on increasing business and cutting costs, but keeping the family-owned company feeling like a family.

Improving quality and streamlining operations has kept turnover low and morale high since he arrived. "We want this to be a fun environment for people to work in everyday," he said.

And although Oken says VTC is "just a pea in the pod" in the competitive transport business, 65 percent of the company's work involves the industrialized South Bay area.

"Trucking is not a romantic profession. But it keeps goods and services and the basics of the economy moving," he said.

Business Watch

Name: Ventura Transfer Co.

Location: Carson

Founded: 1870

Owners: Clifford family; Brian Oken, president and CEO

Services/products: Transports liquid specialty chemical and bulk products from rail depots and ports to customers. The company uses specially designed trailers and transport containers.

Annual revenues: \$15 million to \$18 million

Employees: 120

Key customers: Large chemical and manufacturing companies and railroads nationwide

Information: 310-549-1660