
Nickels and dimes lead bus company to gold

Personal touch takes family firm down a road to steady success

By Sarah Sue Ingram
Heather Charles/Daily Press

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WILLIAMSBURG -- Howard W. Smith Sr. knows first-hand that a successful business is built on a stable base.

Smith used to drive for two other bus companies before he decided to open his own - Oleta Coach Lines.

The year was 1986, and Smith had been driving buses for six years.

"What I learned from my dad was: 'Operate with integrity,'" Smith said. "Whatever you do, do it right, and you won't have to worry about doing it a second time."

"What I learned from a preacher was: 'Go slow and you'll grow. Go fast, and you won't last.'"

Smith figured it was crucial to have a clientele base before he opened his own business.

Smith had driven some of the College of William & Mary's athletic teams to away games, so he went to the coaches to see if they would support him if he opened his own coach lines. William & Mary coaches came through, and its School of Business wrote the company's first business plan at the request of athletic director John Randolph.

Smith found a 1966 39-passenger bus to lease, and then the biggest thing he had to worry about was paying \$12,000 a year in insurance to drive it. Two banks in Williamsburg loaned him \$5,000 apiece, and he came up with the remaining \$2,000.

The first few years were tough for the family-run business.

"It hasn't always been easy because we started this out of our pockets - nickels and dimes," Smith said. "It's a very expensive business to be in."

Now Oleta Coach Lines has nine buses. These days he gets a better insurance

price than the original \$12,000 - \$5,000-\$7,000 a bus - because he gets the fleet rate.

Oleta transports 41 athletic teams, including Lafayette, Jamestown and Bruton high schools when they go to the playoffs.

"We provided transportation for the Christopher Newport University football team in its beginning year," Smith said, "and they went to the playoffs."

The founder chose his wife's middle name - Oleta - to name the company because he didn't want to use his last name (Smith), to honor her, and because he thought Oleta would provoke curiosity in people's minds.

The couple has been married for 32 years. Towana Oleta Smith is the company's vice president and acts as general manager. Though he's president of the company, Smith still likes to drive William & Mary's teams.

"We enjoy it - meeting young people and seeing the freshmen that come in every year," he said.

William & Mary football coach Jimmye Laycock said, "Howard Smith and his family members have driven our teams for years, and I couldn't be more pleased. They add a tremendous personal touch to transporting us. They get to know our players, and our players get to know them, and it's really a comforting feeling."

In his 22 years of driving Tribe teams, there have been a few frightening episodes. Smith recalls in 1983 driving Bruce Parkhill's team to Lexington through freezing rain so it wouldn't have to forfeit a game.

"It was treacherous, and there were accidents all over the place - people in ditches, cars turned over," Smith recalled. "When we got to VMI, I had to bang the door open because the whole bus was like a candy apple - like it had been dipped in ice."

But the scariest episode happened on a regular tour-bus trip back from New York City's Christmas Show at Radio City Music Hall. A station wagon in front of Smith spun out of control and hit another car.

"I can't brake because there's ice on the road, and the station wagon loaded with kids comes across sideways in front of me," Smith said.

If the bus had hit the station wagon, it would have killed the people inside it, not because of speed, Smith said, but because of "the size of the bus and all that weight coming at you."

"A still small voice spoke to me and said, 'Go to the right,'" Smith remembered. "I didn't question. I didn't jerk the steering wheel. I gradually went to the right, and as we were going safely past the station wagon, I see those little kids looking up at me."

Sarah Sue Ingram can be reached at 247-4767 or by e-mail at ssingram@dailypress.com

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