



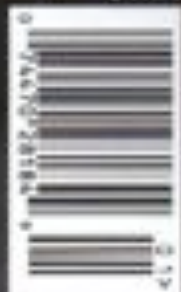
Wheels of Time



**2014
Awards
Issue**

**Fruehauf's legacy in trucking
Bryan Levernier's 1976 Peterbilt Patriot**

\$6.50



The Fruehauf legacy



Book recounts
August Fruehauf's
1914 invention of the
semi-trailer and the rise and
fall of the Fruehauf company.

By STORMY WYLIE

Singing Wheels

August Fruehauf & The History of the
Fruehauf Trailer Company



Celebrating the centennial of
August Fruehauf's 1914 invention of the semi-trailer

presented by

The Fruehauf Trailer Historical Society
Bull Eye Fruehauf & Barbara Norman

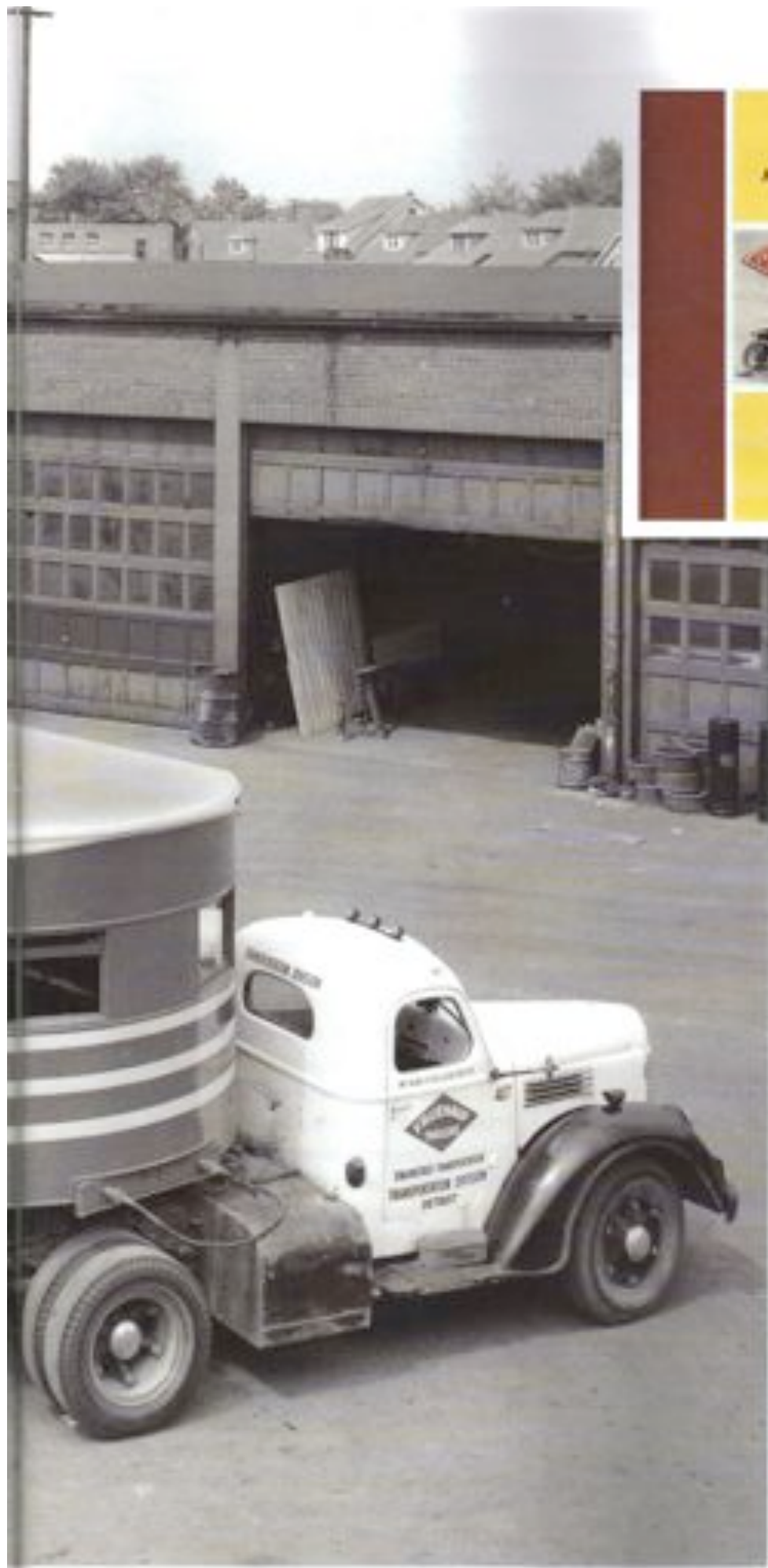
Written by Ruth Ann Fruehauf and Darlene Norman, the book "Singing Wheels: August Fruehauf and the History of the Fruehauf Trailer Company" is being sold through ATHS for \$29.95. For information, call (816) 891-9900.

Ruth Ann Fruehauf was eight years old when her father died in 1965. Throughout her life, though, she retained vivid memories of the charismatic and successful Detroit businessman whose company had transformed the American trucking industry.

Fruehauf had to reconcile those memories with fact in the book "Singing Wheels: August Fruehauf and the History of the Fruehauf Trailer Company." Co-authored with historian Darlene Norman, the book was released last year to coincide with the 1914 centennial of her grandfather's invention of the semi-trailer.

At the turn of the 20th century August Fruehauf began transforming the wagons built in his 1880s Detroit blacksmith shop — the kind pulled by four-legged horse power — into what he called "semi-trailers" for those upstart motor trucks.

Roy Fruehauf, Ruth Ann's father and the youngest of four sons of August and his wife Louisa, entered the family business in the 1930s. A natural-born salesman, Roy helped build Fruehauf into





FRUEHAUF Trailers
"ENGINEERED TRANSPORTATION"



August Fruehauf began building wagons and carriages in his Detroit blacksmith shop (below) in the 1880s. Soon after the first semi-trailer was built for a motor truck in 1914 for F.M. Sibley Lumber Co. (above), Fruehauf adopted the motto: "A truck is like a horse... it can pull more than it can carry."



the nation's largest semi-trailer manufacturer before the company disappeared into bankruptcy in 1997.

For much of the 1940s and 50s, Roy and his wife Ruth moved among Detroit's elite. Their children, Ruth Ann and her two older brothers, were educated in private schools and attended to by servants, including a Scottish housekeeper, a butler, and a chauffeur.

Much of that life disappeared after Roy died in 1965, the result of a fall. Still, Ruth Ann graduated from Michigan prep schools and American University in Paris, and made a career in fine art sales and marketing — a world far from that of trucks and trailers.

Fruehauf says her expertise and understanding of expensive works of art and the people who can afford them gave her "an awareness about people and power" — an awareness that helped her understand the man who was at the

peak of his success when Ruth Ann was born and who always seemed larger than life.

As she grew into adulthood, Ruth Ann encountered her father's friends, business associates, and colleagues in social circles from New York to Palm Beach, Paris to London. These people helped her fill in the gaps in her memory of her father.

"[They] would enthusiastically expound story upon story of his generosity, loyalty, business acumen, dedication to customers, and reputation as an all-out good guy with a great sense of humor," she notes.

Time and time again Ruth Ann would be asked the same question: "Whatever happened to the Fruehauf Trailer Company?"

She began to look for answers to that question after her mother died in 1997. Ruth Ann took home to California several boxes of Roy Fruehauf's personal and business papers, photographs, scrapbooks, and correspondence from a variety of historical figures that offered glimpses into both her father's life and the Fruehauf Trailer Company.

"I never knew what I'd find," Ruth Ann told the *Detroit News* in 2014, "but I knew that I didn't want [the papers] to be destroyed. Every so often, I would look at them and find a letter from Richard Nixon or a photograph, signed, of President Eisenhower."

She adds, "I was amazed to discover how truly enmeshed my father's life was with our country's history in the 1940s through the 1960s."

Some of that history was scandalous. Roy Fruehauf was investigated in 1957 by a Senate committee looking into Teamsters corruption; he was indicted and tried on charges that he'd bribed then-Teamsters president Dave Beck, who was convicted of tax evasion.

To Ruth Ann Fruehauf, confronting her family's history felt a little like opening Pandora's box: who knew what dark family secrets she might find?

Transportation revolution

The Fruehauf story, at least as it relates to the trucking industry, begins in 1914 in Detroit, Mich., when a local lumber baron strode into August Fruehauf's blacksmith shop.

The lumber dealer, Frederic M. Sibley Sr., needed to move an 18-foot sailboat to his summer lake home. As it would take days to move the boat by horse and wagon, Sibley asked Fruehauf to rig up a device that could hook onto his Model T Ford roadster.

After a few days of planning, Fruehauf and his partner Otto Neumann proposed cutting off the back of the roadster then attaching a coupling to the frame to pull a 20-ft flatbed trailer. When Henry Ford was told of the plan, he canceled the roadster's warranty. But this "semi-trailer," as Fruehauf called his invention, changed not only the focus of his company, it also revolutionized transportation.

After the boat was delivered, Sibley commissioned a stronger trailer to use in his lumberyard. "He figured that he would save man-hours and horse feed thus making trips more efficient," note the authors of "Singing Wheels."

Orders for more trailers followed, to be pulled by larger truck tractors instead of improvised automobiles. Recognizing Sibley's technical advantage, his competitors rushed to catch up.

By the next year Fruehauf had received \$22,000 in orders for his semi-trailers, thanks largely to advertisements in newspapers and magazines that carried the message: "A truck is like a horse ... it can pull more than it can carry."

Fruehauf hired a full-time engineer, and by 1916 his company was producing three types of

trailers: two-wheel, semi, and four-wheel. With more orders coming in than could be produced in the blacksmith shop, Fruehauf bought land and built a new plant in 1917.

Fruehauf Trailer Company was incorporated that same year, with August as president; his wife Louisa as vice president; their son Harvey as treasurer and sales manager; and Neumann as factory manager.

"August taught them the established traditions of men who worked with their hands and followed the Fruehauf creed: 'Do a good job, put everything into it of materials and workmanship, take pride in your work whether you get paid for it or not,'" the authors write.

Although others were building versions of trailers during this time, the book notes, including Herman G. Farr (the fifth wheel hitch) and Charles H. Martin (the rocking fifth wheel), Fruehauf continued introducing new products throughout the 1920s: van trailers, hydraulic lift gates, carryalls, and refrigerated trailers.

By 1926, August's sons Harvey, Harry, and Roy had joined him in the business. Sales soon surpassed the million-dollar mark, and by the end of the decade Fruehauf had distributorships across the country.

The family's social position mirrored its growing personal wealth. August joined the Free Masons/Knights Templar, and the Frue-

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August Fruehauf in his Knights Templar costume.

The hydraulic lift gate for trailers (below) was among the many Fruehauf innovations that helped revolutionize the trucking industry.





These photos from the AHS Archives illustrate the variety of products manufactured by Fruehauf Trailer Company from 1914 to 1996 for nearly every facet of the trucking industry, including (clockwise, from top left) open-top and beverage trailers, the classic freight trailer, and trailers that hauled everything from automobiles to planes to petroleum and furniture.



though Roy Fruehauf and other family members retained control of the company, still more troubles lay ahead.

In the late 1950s Roy Fruehauf was investigated by a Senate committee looking into union corruption. Dave Beck, then-president of the Teamsters, was convicted of tax evasion; Roy Fruehauf was indicted and tried on charges that he had bribed Beck.

Fruehauf Trailer Company had 16 plants and 48 distributorships across the country, "so there was keen interest in the trial all over," said Ruth Ann Fruehauf.

Louis Nizer, the nation's most famous defense lawyer at the time, represented Roy Fruehauf. Although he was not convicted, Fruehauf stepped down from his company's presidency in 1957 and resigned as its chairman in 1963. Two years later, he was dead from a fall.

Following the deaths of brothers Harry in 1962 and Andrew and Roy in 1965, the Fruehauf Trailer Company ceased to be a family owned-and-managed corporation.

An audit by the Internal Revenue Service in 1969 led to an indictment against Fruehauf's management six years later by the U.S. Justice Department. Top executives William Grace and Robert Rowan were tried and found guilty of tax evasion and conspiracy; Grace eventually went to prison.

Fruehauf's stock became vulnerable to outside buyers. Another hostile takeover was attempted in 1989 by Asher Edelman, a Wall Street raider. Fruehauf won this battle as well, but was left crippled and \$1.4 billion in debt.

"By then Fruehauf was making a commodity trailer not that much different from anyone else's," noted a 1998 *Forbes* report. "The trailer operation and some retail branches were sold, but market share continued to plummet. With the sale to Wabash [Trucking], Fruehauf's bondholders may be made whole, but a once-great company has gone to the graveyard."

On Oct. 7, 1996, Fruehauf Trailer Company filed for bankruptcy under Chapter 11. Wabash Trucking and founder Donald J. "Jerry" Erlich bought the Fruehauf name and other assets for \$52 million.

"A trucking insider speculated that Wabash

was primarily interested in the 40 or more distribution locations that Fruehauf owned," the book notes. "Wabash eventually ceased production of products carrying the Fruehauf label."

Although Fruehauf trailers continue to be built in other countries, in the United States the Fruehauf name "will continue to echo through the memories of business leaders, old-time truck drivers who hold a reverence for history and for a quality product that originated in a blacksmith shop in old-town Detroit 100 years ago," writes Ruth Ann Fruehauf.

This 129-page soft cover book is a fascinating account of the rise and fall of the Fruehauf Trailer Company. Ruth Ann Fruehauf confronted the demons of her family history head-



on to produce a tale of innovation and prosperity mixed with family discord and scandal.

A resident of Mariposa, Calif., Fruehauf recently joined the American Truck Historical Society. She also started the Fruehauf Trailer Historical Society, with a website (www.singingwheels.com) and a traveling exhibit containing Fruehauf memorabilia and archival materials. Two more books are planned for 2015. @

Stormy Wylie (stormy@aths.org) is editor of *Wheels of Time*.

Ruth Ann Fruehauf with a traveling exhibit that promotes the Fruehauf Trailer Historical Society. Fruehauf has co-authored a book about her family and the history of their semi-trailer company.

PHOTO BY STORMY WYLIE