

# Man of Many Hats

Dick Irvin of Dick Irvin, Inc.



# Roadwise





"I JUST HOPE I CAN KEEP DOING WHAT I'M DOING."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK BRYANT



# MAN OF MANY HATS

Years ago, Dick Irvin learned business basics from his father and applies them to several industries to this day.

BY TODD TRAUB  
Contributing Writer

Not more than five hours after Dick Irvin was born just over 80 years ago, his father Joe was at work delivering freight for the Great Northern Railway.

Not that Irvin personally remembers the moment, but he recalls the lesson.

"My Dad always taught me when you say you'll do something you do it," Irvin said.

Irvin has made a practice of keeping his word, like his father, and it led him to a series of successful business ventures, not the least

of which is Shelby-based Dick Irvin, Inc.

For Irvin, it has been about following through on promises, paying your bills, keeping your name off of as many bank notes as possible and paying cash whenever you can.

"That's the way we were raised," said Irvin, estimating he was born around 2 a.m., July 2, 1932, with his father heading off to work by 7 a.m.

"He started delivering freight for the Great Northern Railway the day I was born," Irvin said.

Joe Irvin was a trusted man with the key to several businesses in Shelby as part of

his delivery routes. He made his reputation following through on his promises and Dick adopted the policy early, while working for his father.

"I got out of high school in 1950. I had always been around trucks at the depot," said Irvin, who also worked part-time delivering groceries. "And once in awhile the guys let me drive."

In August of 1951, Joe Irvin loaned Dick \$3,000 to buy a one-and-a-half-ton International Truck. The money represented a sizeable financial commitment on the elder Irvin's part, and Dick's company was born.

"I was not educated and I liked trucks and



I just really enjoyed it," Dick Irvin said.

When he began, Irvin used his home as an office and his first wife Pat handled the phones, or phone.

"We had a house and two kids and somebody had to be home to answer the phone," Irvin said.

Unable to stray too far because of business concerns, it was an early sign of progress when Irvin was able to hire a woman to answer the phone and allow him and Pat some freedom.

The woman was wheelchair bound because of a disability, Irvin recalled, and enjoyed talking to the drivers during the day.

"She thought she'd died and gone to heaven," Irvin said.

Pat died in 1984 and today Irvin lives with his second wife Carol on the 320-acre ranch he and Pat bought between Columbia Falls and Kalispell, 25 miles north of Glacier Park on the Flathead River.

"I lucked out. I got two good women," Irvin said.

As for his company, Dick Irvin, Inc. is, by the owner's count, an 80-truck operation hauling dry bulk, lumber, metals, machinery, chemicals, grain, paper products and

HAZMAT.

A succession of equipment purchases, which Dick can recall in detail, led Dick Irvin, Inc. to its current status as one of the biggest pneumatic trailer carriers in the western United States.

"People have just been good to us and I try to do the same," Irvin said, summing up his success.

It is still very much a family business. Dick is retired from the day-to-day operations now handled by his son, Mike. His brother Dwayne, 74, still works for the company. Longtime co-worker, Mark Cole is still part of the company and Lester Nevins who recently retired, was with the company over 50 years.

Daughter Connie Jo (Irvin) Kasper is also a stakeholder in the business.

"We never had titles," Irvin said.

Speaking of titles, Irvin stopped to recall a title fight that gave Shelby one of its early claims to fame, or infamy. In 1923 the city landed the Jack Dempsey-Tommy Gibbons heavyweight championship fight.

An oil boom in 1922 had the city's leaders hoping to turn Shelby into an economic and tourist center, and getting the fight was seen as an important means to that end.

But Gibbons was not really a known commodity nationally, and the 15-round fight, won by Dempsey, became a huge financial loss for Shelby. An arena had been built but most people could not afford tickets.

"It broke the town," said Irvin, who owns an unused, \$50 ringside ticket from the event.

While Irvin was not yet born, friends of his family were able to get into the fight, possibly because the fence had been knocked down in a late crush before the main event, allowing many of the estimated 12,000 who turned out to get in free.

"The Indians broke the gate down and these people just walked in," Irvin said.

Shelby was pulling itself back together by the time Irvin was born, but the bad business deal serves as a reminder to Irvin of what can go wrong and underscores his driving philosophy — honor your commitments, don't overextend yourself financially and never sign anything if you can help it.

Not that it's always gone well. Like most successful businessmen, Irvin has endured his share of setbacks and troubled times.

He recalls one banker telling him: "I'm mixed up. Either you've got an account with us or we've got an account with you."



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There were times Irvin bought equipment, like the \$18,250 pneumatic trailer he purchased in 1964, only to find the job for which it was intended had not materialized.

"I told you I'd take it," Irvin told the dealer, who was offering to take the trailer back. "And I'll take it."

For a time, Irvin joined forces with a fuel distributor named Ben Taylor, who was 15 years Irvin's senior and something of a mentor.

"He taught me a lot of stuff," Irvin said.

He recalled an oil drilling enterprise in which the two worked together. The men had a shelter at the site stocked with food and other necessities, one of which was a bottle of liquor that Irvin accidentally broke.

Like many of Irvin's endeavors, oil was not immediately successful, but afterward he said Taylor would always remind him of one thing.

"We lost quite a bit of money and he said 'You broke the booze,'" Irvin remembered with a laugh.

"We made a few bucks," he said recalling the \$2.50-3.50 per barrel rates of the past. "I don't know what we would have done if we'd had \$100 a barrel like we have now."

Irvin was an advisor to the board of directors for Missoula-based Watkins &

Shepard Trucking, Inc., which he helped found with three other partners in 1974.

Irvin has succeeded partially because he keeps his eyes and ears open for business deals that take place outside of the normal setting of offices and boardrooms. He recalled the oil boom days, when deals would be signed on cocktail napkins.

While traveling with Carol in the couple's 35-foot, used motor home, Irvin became interested in the plush, Canadian-made Prevost Motorhomes that surrounded the couple one night at a motor home park in the late 1990s. He was introduced to the Prevost community by a trucking acquaintance he encountered on the trip, and soon Irvin had a Prevost for himself and Carol.

And through his Prevost connections Irvin also landed a cement-hauling project for his company.

"That's usually what we do," Irvin said of his business ventures. "I have had some wrecks but we've been pretty fortunate. It's a learning experience the people you talk to."

Irvin has diversified, buying ranches, a fertilizer plant and a storage and transfer business, among other things.

"I have a great family and good employees, customers and suppliers," Irvin

said. "People like Cummins and Kenworth and Peterbilt, they treat us very well."

Irvin is a board member of Davidson Trust Co., which is owned by Davidson Companies, an employee-owned financial services holding company based in Montana. Also part of the Davidson Companies family are D.A. Davidson & Co, the largest full-service brokerage firm based in the Northwest; Davidson Investment Advisors, a professional money management firm; Davidson Fixed Income Management, a registered investment adviser providing money management and other fixed income services.

Irvin has also been active in trucking industry organizations, serving as president and chairman of the Montana Motor Carrier Association in the 1970s.

"They gave me a gold piece," Irvin said of his parting gift from the association. "That Motor Carriers has really been an asset to our industry and they still are."

Though he is not running the show on a day-to-day basis, Irvin wants to be considered an asset too, and for a long time to come. It is one intention he might even put down in writing.

"I just hope I can keep doing what I'm doing," he said. **RW**

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