

John T. Cyr & Sons: 100 Years of School Buses & Coaches



Left: A Cyr truck with its driver, and a Cyr charter bus in the background. Middle: Four buses in use by Cyr in the 1940s at the French Island location. Right: This 1942 picture shows one of the company's limousines at the garage on French Island.

By David M. Fitzpatrick
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Whatever John Thomas Cyr's ambitions were when he moved from Caribou to Old Town around 1903, we know what happened after he arrived. He worked for several years at Jordan Lumber Company, and in 1912, at age 51, he founded a company with his son that is still going strong a century later.

John T. Cyr & Sons began as a livery stable with 32 horses in Old Town, but after World War I he shifted his focus to a delivery and taxi service. It was May 21, 1912 when his son, Joseph, first applied for a truck license through the city of Old Town. His horse-drawn carriages served as everything from mail transports to coaches to hearses.

In 1922, he bought his first cars: Studebakers, to transport Old Town schoolchildren — the company's first bus contract. That year, he also began offering freight service. His first major freight customer: Old Town Canoe Company, hauling supplies from the railyards in and canoes out.

John and his son Joe both died in 1934, leaving Joe's younger brother, Albert, in charge. Soon his brother Harvey, by trade a teacher and principal in Grand Isle, Maine, joined him. The brothers added a bus service by 1939 that ran from Old Town to Great Works, Milford, and Bradley, and by 1945 expanded the run to Eddington, North Brewer, and Bangor. The run then backtracked up the Brewer side because, at the time, Bangor Hydro, which ran buses back then, had exclusive public-bus rights to the other side of the river.

During World War II, the company contributed to the war effort when it contracted with the military to transport German prisoners of war to detention camps in remote regions of Aroostook, Penobscot, and Piscataquis Counties. Later, they bussed those prisoners back so they could return home.

Three Generations

In the early 1950s, a fire destroyed the French Island garage, and the company lost all of its eight buses — the first night all the buses had been put in the garage. But the company only lost one day of bus service; the next day, Bean & Conquest in Bangor was quickly able to provide four buses to the company, which rebuilt and kept going.

Harvey's son Joseph, named after Harvey's older brother, had come along in 1940. By age 10, young Joe was working for his father; by 15, with his Uncle Albert having already passed in 1952, he was driving school buses (this was normal and legal then; even into the 1970s, half of the dozen school-bus drivers at Cyr were high-school students). After graduating from Old Town High School in 1959, he went to college for two and a half years, first at Farmington Teachers College and then at Husson. But when the company's bookkeeper, Harvey's cousin, died suddenly, Joe joined the family business, where he worked as a mechanic, bookkeeper, secretary, and payroll clerk.

The ubiquity of automobiles in the 1960s saw the end of the public bus service. And when Joe took over the company in 1967 following Harvey's death, he discontinued the trucking business to focus on buses. At that time, the company had 13 buses, two



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The Cyr family with one of its new coaches, which is emblazoned with "Serving you since 1912." From left is Ruby Whitmore; her mother Becky Whitmore (Joe's daughter), bookkeeper; Joe Cyr, president; Mike Cyr (Joe's son), Charter Manager; Pete Cyr (Joe's brother), body man.

trucks, and 14 employees.

In 1970, another fire struck the French Island garage, possibly started by welding. It wasn't as bad as the early-1950s fire, and the company wasn't slowed.

In the wake of the 1970s energy crisis, Joe tried to revive the Old Town-Eddington-Bangor run, but it didn't fly — although a shuttle service at the University of Maine in Orono did for a time. But the company's serious growth began in 1976, when it won the contract to bus Brewer schoolchildren, the first major account outside the Old Town area. The company landed the Bangor contract a few years later, and its growth began accelerating.

In 1975, Joe had also expanded into motor coaches when he'd bought a used 1959 GMC (which he still has today). In 1984, when the Highway Division of the Bangor & Aroostook Railroad quit its Aroostook run (which had begun following B&A's exit from passenger rail service) Joe picked it up; about 27 passengers per day used it, and Joe's wife, Suzanne, became the tour coordinator. In 1990, the company purchased Northstar Tours, which specialized in group tours and charter coaches throughout U.S. and Canada. The new company was Cyr Northstar Tours.

By 1991, Cyr was the largest school-bus company in Maine, with 120 buses, 25 vans, and 150 employees. That year, the Maine Society of Entrepreneurs named Joe and Suzanne Cyr Entrepreneurs of the Year, and former Sen. Margaret Chase Smith presented the award to them at her namesake library in Skowhegan.

The Aroostook run didn't fare so well. With just 16 passengers per day, it no longer paid for itself, but Joe wanted to provide people with the service and keep

a driver employed. He applied for a state subsidy to keep it alive; he got it, and has gotten it every year since, ensuring bus service to and from Aroostook year-round.

Recent Developments

In 1992, Cyr was maintaining 14 full-sized, 40-passenger coaches licensed to travel throughout the country, and offered 50 chartered tours that year, including one to Alaska. But something big happened in 1992.

After 70 years of John T. Cyr & Sons bussing its schoolchildren, the city of Old Town dropped the company in favor of a lower bidder on a three-year contract. Champion had bid \$576,267, \$21,123 less than Cyr. This was despite Cyr paying \$54,772.50 in excise taxes to Old Town in the fiscal year ending June 30, 1991 for vehicle registrations. Old Town came back to Cyr when the contract renewed three years later, and has been with the company ever since.

It has never been "all business" for Joe; he's always been very

active in his community, serving on the boards of such institutions as St. Joseph Hospital, Merrill Merchants Bank, and the Old Town-Orono YMCA. In fact, Joe had been one of the first, and strongest, supporters of the new field house at the Orono YMCA; when its cost ballooned to \$1.4 million, a group of volunteers from many organizations worked to finish the construction themselves and keep the cost at \$800,000. The Cyr Family Field House opened in 2001, and led to a marked increase in the YMCA membership.

In December 2003, the company acquired the former Maine Line Tours & Charters of South Portland, which had been operating as a division of Massachusetts-based Peter Pan Bus Lines. The acquisition made Cyr the largest tour bus and charter company in Maine, with plans to offer 125 tours per year. A year later, Cyr leased the former Maine Line facility in South Portland and kept the manager on. In 2004, Metro Magazine

named Cyr Bus Tours its Operator of the Year. But while the new acquisition was profitable, by 2007 Joe and Mike realized they preferred to stay in the Old Town area. They soon sold the South Portland business — to a man who had actually approached them hoping to sell his business to Cyr.

Today and the Future

Today, the company consists of two major divisions: John T. Cyr & Sons, which operates school buses; and Cyr Bus Lines, which operates motor coaches in and outside of Maine.

The company employs 235 people and has over 250 vehicles, including 200 school buses for 18 school departments and 21 coaches doing 4,000 charter trips and tours. Last year, the company traveled 3.1 million miles and burned 500,000 gallons of fuel. Cyr does 95 percent of its own vehicle service, from tuneups to minor mechanical work to major engine and transmission rebuilds to body work.

And it's still a family business. Joe is at the helm, and his son Mike runs the motor-coach division and takes care of the company's computer needs. Joe's brother Peter Cyr handles body work, and Joe's daughter Becky Whitmore is the company bookkeeper.

Joe has two grandsons: Becky's 8-month-old, Ian, and Mike's 12-year-old — named John T. Cyr. Joe hopes the family's interest in the business will continue.

Joe said it's hard to guess what John T. Cyr would think of the operation today, because he never knew his grandfather. But "My father — his stomach would growl, because it would be too much; he was a worrier," he recalled. "My grandfather probably would be the same way. It's grown... we're a pretty big business."

And the future? "We've taken growth as it's come," Joe said. "We haven't gone looking a lot. I think we're just going to go on as we're going."



For 2012, Joe Cyr personally applied stickers celebrating the company's centennial to every one of the company's buses.



Joe Cyr, president of John T. Cyr & Sons and grandson of the founder, at the Old Town headquarters in November 2011, as one of his many school buses pulls out of the yard. (BDN photo by David M. Fitzpatrick)

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