Johnson Bus Service has logged decades on the road in all conditions

It would be an understatement to say Johnson School Bus Service grew from humble roots.

Aaron W. Johnson started the company in 1942 when he converted an old milk truck and two logging trucks into West Bend's first school buses.

Today, his grandsons Steve and Dan Johnson are the president and general manager of the company.

After more than 67 years in business, those family names may be just about all that would be familiar to the company's founder. The service has grown to a fleet of more than 500 vehicles maintained at 12 terminals scattered throughout southeastern Wisconsin.

Two of those terminals dispatch the familiar yellow buses to communities in Ozaukee County.

The Town of Port Washington site on Highway KW generally serves the Port Washington-Saukville School District, while the Cedar Grove yard on Commerce Street houses the buses that serve the Cedar Grove-Belgium School District.

Terminals are also located in West Bend, Beaver Dam, Fond du Lac, Kewaskum, Menomonee Falls, Oakfield, Plymouth and Waupun.

In all, the company has the bus contracts with 14 school districts.

“Providing school bus service certainly is our bread and butter,” said Steve Johnson.

However, the company keeps busy by doing more than just hauling youngsters to and from school and sporting events.

A division of the company, Special Transport Services, handles four shared-ride taxi services. Those rides serve customers in Port Washington and West Bend, as well as Ozaukee and Washington counties.

Ozaukee County has renewed its contract with the company for this year, the final year in its initial five-year deal.

To provide on-call rides, the company maintains a secondary fleet of 45 smaller vehicles.

Johnson said the importance of both missions is not lost on the drivers.

“We take the responsibility of delivering children to school very seriously. We are also honored to have the contract for the shared-ride taxi service, helping people get to places they need to be,” he said.

Of course, that means meticulous attention to vehicle maintenance, and determination by drivers who are not daunted by fickle Wisconsin weather.

“Now that we have all of our buses plugged into block heaters, it is not a problem starting them up on cold mornings,” Johnson said.

“The greatest challenge of the job is facing snow, sleet and fog, sometimes at the same time. We can deal with the cold, but eight to 10 inches of snow can be a different matter.”

Company officials keep in close contact with school superintendents whenever threatening weather is heading the way.

“The superintendents confer amongst themselves about possible cancellations, and we are the first ones they call once a decision is made,” Johnson said.

He said he and his brother and sister have all put in time behind the wheel as bus drivers, something he considers a valuable management experience.

“I found you learn a lot by being out on the road,” Johnson said.

Johnson has worked at the bus company for 20 years. He previously worked for another family venture, West Bend Sand and Stone.

He said the economic slowdown experienced across the country has provided a bit of a silver lining for the bus company.

“In today’s economy, we have no shortage of qualified drivers and our company has seen very little turnover, especially in Ozaukee County,” Johnson said.

“With the economy the way it is, we now have an abundance of drivers. That usually keeps me at my desk, which is probably where I can do the most good now.”

That means having a team of some 530 drivers available whenever they are needed.

“At most factory jobs, if someone is out sick you can always double up and get the work done. If a driver is sick, we can’t do that. We need another body to fill the slot,” Johnson said.

Training is critical, because each driver is responsible for the well being of their passengers and their vehicles. Today’s buses cost more than $75,000 each.

That price tag is going to rise this year, Johnson said, now that federal requirements for energy-efficient buses have gone into effect.

Some added option are also making new buses more expensive.

One of those features, Johnson said, is video cameras that can be used to monitor the conduct of passengers — especially unruly children.

“We have them installed on a number of our buses and plan to add about 50 each year. They are expensive, but they sure help with discipline. When kids behave like kids, we can take the cameras to the schools and show officials

exactly where the problems are," he said.

All of the company's buses also feature Child Check-Mate systems, which require the driver to walk to the back of the bus after every route to deactivate — checking along the way to make sure no children are left on the vehicle.

Joyce Buchholz, Johnson's terminal manager in Port Washington, also brings a background as a bus driver to the job.

"I used to love driving because it allowed me to bring my kids along, and I could work around the routes to get my housework done before going back out in the afternoon," Buchholz said.

She has been with the company for 20 years and previously logged two decades with Valley Transport before Johnson bought out that carrier.

Buchholz said the stereotype of bus drivers being school moms and retired men "largely holds true," but they are all rigorously tested before taking to the road.

She also said some of the company's best shared-ride taxi drivers have been retired teachers.

"They just love it. They say it is the best job they ever had. The key is you have to love being with kids and people," Buchholz said.

She discounted the suggestion that bus driving is a seasonal job.

"We are finding we get a lot of business now from groups and families that want to take a bus to the zoo or an amusement park. We are also popular with weddings, bridal showers and bachelor parties where they want to have a good time and not worry about driving," Buchholz said.

JOHNSON SCHOOL BUS SERVICE maintains 12 terminals that serve different school districts. Above, veteran driver Don "Charlie" Brown steps off his bus at the Town of Port Washington terminal. Photo by Mark Jaeger