

Armellini Industries: the wheels that made the flower business roll

As a proud columnist for FCI, when I was encouraged to write a piece about my family's business, I knew it was an assignment I could not refuse. This is a story that I was, literally, born to write.

As the story goes, in 1943 during WW2 my father, Jules "Toots" Armellini, was about to enter the US Navy when he was approached by his flower growing half-brothers from the Mazzoni family. They told my father that when he returned from the war they would give him a truck and employ him under his own company name to haul their flowers and those of the other local growers to the New York City (NYC) market.

Fortunately, he did return in 1945 and as promised his brothers gave him the keys to a ten-wheel truck, unfortunately the truck was in a poor state of repair. Having honed his mechanical skills in the Navy motor pool he was able to repair the truck and with my mother, Sarah, at his side Armellini Express Lines was born in Southern New Jersey. It wasn't too long before he purchased his second truck. My mother and father both tell fascinating stories about those early days. One story in particular sticks out in my mind. My father would spend all day working on the trucks, picking up flowers from local growers and loading them carefully for the journey to market. Mom would return from her work as a nurse for a local doctor and prepare the billing. The tired couple would then get into the truck and head off to NYC. With Dad behind the

wheel and with mother sitting next to him he would get the truck up to speed and then let her hold the wheel so he could cat nap! Now that is what I call team driving.

Eventually, as South Jersey only has a summer flower crop my father's eldest brother, Willy Mazzoni, moved to Florida to grow gladioli in the winter. The obvious next move was to begin hauling flowers from Florida back up to the North East wholesale markets, which now included Philadelphia. As other growers in Florida learned of this new service they gladly jumped on the Armellini Express. Prior to refrigerated trucks the flowers were mainly transported by trains and airplanes.

With ice to cool the loads and lawn mower engines to turn the fans the flowers were delivered to markets in record times. This gave Dad a huge advantage and he used it to the fullest buying more and more trucks to service the long distances. On the return loads he was able to get general cargo destined for South America and Cuba and again this fast service was a godsend to the exporters in Miami.

During those early days there was just enough time-off to start a family and one by one my three brothers and one sister entered the world and then the work place. In our family



Sarah and Jules "Toots" Armellini.

when you were strong enough to lift a bucket of "Gyp" you were in the workforce. Child labour you say? No, just labours that the children were expected to do!

Headquarters move to Florida
As the years passed there were many highs and lows that paved the way to the business becoming what it is today. After a number of years based in the north east Armellini Express moved the company's headquarters to Palm City, Florida where a large number of domestic growers were located. By 1980 they had also

purchased several competitors and extended their service area to include all the states east of the Mississippi, plus Texas and Louisiana. More trucks were added, with special attention being paid to the trailers, so that in time they became the ultimate flower hauling machines. My father worked closely with the trailer manufactures and especially the refrigeration companies to improve and perfect these rolling coolers.

My brothers and I joined the company full-time as we finished our respective educations and Armellini Express was and remains a true family business. As time passed everyone in the family moved to Florida including my sister Judy who, having four boys of her own, had been busy up until then. All four boys are now employees of the company as well as another third generation family member.

Fast-forward to 2008 and we find a much larger Armellini industries involved in many facets of the floral logistics business: Flower Service is a full service custom house broker and logistics company; Armellini Air Express offers domestic air freight service; Armellini Onsite Storage leases storage containers; the mother of them all Armellini Express now operates 135 trucks and services most of the continental US.

My father is now 85 with my mother not too far behind. You can still find Dad at work most days, kicking tyres and asking pointed questions. Mom stays at home and is disappointed when she is asked to cook for less than 30 people at holiday dinners!

Question time

I sat down with Mom and Dad and asked them a series of questions.

What was your biggest break?

"In the winter of 1949 there was a strike involving the wholesale florist unions. The strike prevented Holland Highway Express, the other flower trucker, from entering NYC with flowers from Florida. A few influential wholesalers got together and worked out a plan to allow *only* Armellini Express to enter the market at pre-arranged times. During the next six weeks your mother and I never went to bed, always waiting for the next truck to arrive, of which there were

many. With a cardboard-insulated, converted chicken coop as our office and a pot belly stove to keep the coffee hot for us and the drivers, there was never a dull moment. Our youngest children, daughter Judy and son Richard, were put to sleep on a bed of rubber bands that were on hand to be sold to local growers."

Most difficult moment:

"In 1959 Cuba fell to Castro. Just a few days before we had received our Interstate Commerce Commission rights, allowing us to haul south-bound freight for export via the port of Miami. Through the purchase our largest competitor, Holland Highway Express, we had exclusive access to this haulage route. We had to act quickly, soliciting freight forwarders to find freight moving south for export but not via Cuba, which had been the traditional route."

Yet another challenge:

"In the 1970s the South American growers were starting to export their crops to Miami for the US markets. This was not good news to local growers who could only produce 6 months of the year whereas South America could produce 12 months of the year. At one point the US growers cornered me in the warehouse and threatened to stop shipping with me if we hauled these imports. I called an old friend Bob Dewey of the Pennock Company and asked if the South American imports were here to stay. With his assurance that they were here to stay I told the local growers that if someone was going to haul these imports it was going to be me."

Strategic planning?

"Recently during a meeting of young entrepreneurs I was asked about my business success planning and I replied that it took luck, guts, hard work and being at the right place at the right time. And, as your mother points out, having a loyal and helpful wife beside you."

Growth plan:

"When the business increased and I found that we did not have enough trucks I would take a deep breath and go and buy a new truck."

Trucking predictions:

"Through technology we want to be able to give the wholesale florist more and better information about

their shipments. Even to what is inside the box. Trucks will remain the major method of transporting flowers. In 1945, when we started, the trailers were 28' long and when I looked inside I thought they were a mile long. Now they are 53' long and wider, but I don't think they are going to get any bigger."

You have long been very vocal about standardized boxes sizes and never miss a chance in a public forum to say so. Where do you see box standardization in 10 years?

"One of the things I have always tried to do was to insure good airflow in our trailers. Without standardized boxes it will not get much better than today. I hope that the WF&FSA, the growers and importers will finally get together and reduce the amount of box sizes so that we can do a better job of cooling flowers in transit with less damage."

What is Armellini doing to improve the shipping and delivery process?

"Three years ago we started an annual forum involving wholesalers, shippers and growers. This group is tasked with trying to identify problems and solutions for the day-to-day flowers logistics business. We know that we must work together if we are going to improve and who better than our customers and shippers to help us?"

Do you consider yourself more in the flower business or the trucking business?

"Both of course, but we have always been a flower trucker and therefore it's the flowers that keep the trucks rolling." <

The four sons; Stephen, Richard, William, David

