

"The Perfect Spot: Iowa 80's Journey from Iowa Cornfield to the World's Biggest Truckstop," 2004

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40th Anniversary, Iowa 80 Truckstop, 1964-2004

Iowa 80: Safe Haven in Bad Weather

For 40 years, Iowa 80 Truckstop has been a place where truckers and travelers could take care of a variety of needs with one pleasant stop. They could fuel up, have repairs made, eat dinner, shop, visit a barber or dentist and much more.

But the World's Largest Truckstop also has been a safe haven during storms, particularly the winter blizzards Iowa can serve up now and then.

Shirley Gieblstein, who has worked at the Iowa 80 Kitchen for nearly 40 years, remembers a bad snowstorm in the early 1970s. A woman who worked as a cashier at the time was diabetic and out of insulin. "Some of the drivers took it upon themselves to go into Davenport and get her insulin," says Shirley.

"They're good to us," she says of the drivers. "Most of them are very nice."

Shirley and everyone else who has spent more than a few years around Iowa 80 remembers the big snowstorm in the winter for 1978-79. It hit in December. "There was tons and tons of snow," says Iowa 80 Kitchen owner-operator Bill Peel, "Nobody could move. The lot was just plugged."

He says there were way too many people in the building for its size during the snow emergency, "but where else were they going to go?"

Restaurant manager Wayne Meincke and his wife had bought a house in Walcott shortly before the snowstorm hit. He can't remember if it was a Friday or Saturday, but "I happened to be off that day, and they came and got me with a snowmobile." Meincke says he then worked two days straight.

Hundreds and hundreds of people were stranded at the truckstop. But they were warm and safe. "You took care of them during the day and about 8 or 9 o'clock at night, they just kind of drifted off," says Wayne, whose wife opened up their house so waitresses, who were transported back and forth in four-wheel drive trucks, could get five or six hours' sleep between shifts.

"I came to work on Saturday morning and didn't leave until Tuesday," says Terry Peel, now retired Iowa 80 Kitchen owner-operator. "My oldest son Michael was off work that Saturday, and I had forgotten my billfold. So he brought it out, and he didn't get home until Wednesday."

Bill Peel had just returned from a trip to sunny Florida as the storm hit and arrived at the restaurant about 5 in the morning. "We didn't get out of here until about 72 hours later," he says. "Travelers and truckers were pouring into the truckstop as Interstate 80 was slowly closing down," Bill remembers. "It continued to snow, and Interstate 80 eventually closed to all traffic. There were truck drivers and entire families stranded here for several days."

Walcott firefighters and members of Walcott snowmobile club plucked many stranded motorists off Interstate 80, and took them to either the truckstop, the Walcott church or some private residences in Walcott.

Snowmobiles and four-wheel drive trucks also shuttled dozens of folks from the truckstop to the church where they slept on pews, were fed chili and given blankets. The church received enough donations in the months following to buy cushions for those pews.

Bill Peel recalls that he and his brother Terry shut down the back of one restaurant dining room and turned out its lights to also create a place for stranded motorists to sleep. Someone brought a TV to the front part of that dining room, and people either watched it played cards to pass the time. "If you wanted to eat," Bill says, "you had to get up and get in line out in front and wait your turn just like everybody else."

Bill says Interstate 80 Kitchen never ran out of afford during the snow emergency, "but our customers started running out of money. So we just served them anyway. You couldn't let people go hungry."

Some people, he notes, would discover their restaurant ticket six months or a year later, then show up to pay their bill.

One story nearly brings tears to Bill Peel's eyes. "I remember one young mother with three little children trying to stay awake to watch over them," he says. "A truck driver asked if he could watch her children so she could get some rest. He told her that he was away from his grandchildren and would enjoy it immensely. She was so tired, she agreed to it."

The big trucker walked a baby around until it quit crying. "He fed it a bottle and changed some diapers," Bill says.

Some other customers helped take care of the woman's two younger children. "It was just that kind of atmosphere," Bill says. "I think that happens anywhere. But it happened here. And it's happened on more than one occasion where people have stepped up to help total strangers. It's just really neat."

Three days after the storm had hit with a vengeance, it was gone and the interstate opened again, the close-knit strangers left and the truckstop hummed with new travelers.

Mike Hutchison

Mike Hutchison remembers all too well the winter of '78/'79. "I was working at Iowa 80 after school and on the weekends," recalls Mike, "But I was here 'round the clock for three days when the big storm hit. All of the interstate in Iowa were shut down, but Iowa 80 was still open and operating."

Mike assisted with plowing snow, shuttling people and wrecker service during those three days. "We would pick people up and bring them to the truckstop, but we didn't pull out their vehicle because we couldn't find it under the snow," says Mike. "Heck, we even plowed the exit ramps just so we'd have a clear spot to pull cars to once we found them."

He also tells a funny story involving Bill Moon and the road grader. "I remember that we were plowing the lot after the storm quit and there was this one snow drift giving Bill some trouble so he just kept hitting it harder until we got through. Well, we found out what the hard spot was when out of the bit snow drift rolled a VW bug."

-Mike Hutchison, Facilities Manager, Iowa 80 Truckstop

Iowa 80 Truckers' Warehouse Store: Bigger and Better

Customer service is what brings people back again and again to the huge store at Iowa 80 Truckstop.

"That has to be number one," says Jim Morris, who has managed the store since 1982. "There are a lot of places that carry similar items. But the only thing the customer is going to remember is how they were treated when they came here."

"It is really something to be part of a truckstop company that is among the top 10 in the world"

- Jeff Corley, General Manager, Truckomat, Hebron, Ohio

Following customer service, product selection is the most important attraction for customers, Jim says. He tries to go outside the trucking industry to find and buy products drivers are going to need.

Jim also notes that what product is hot at the moment is always changing. Then, when every truckstop is carrying the popular item, "you have to go out and find something different to keep the merchandise fresh and appealing to drivers."

That philosophy must be working for Iowa 80 Truckstop's store. Expansion tell the tale, Jim says the facility was just 1,100 square feet with three full-time and two part-time employees in the early/80s when he joined the team.

It expanded to 3,000 square feet in the mid '80s and about 8,000 feet in 1988. Then, in the early 1990s, the store expanded to its present size, which is around 18,000 square feet.

"Today, there's 42 full-time and 16 part-time store employees," Jim says.

"Iowa 80 Truckstop is successful because the family continues to put money back into the business. We are also very aggressive. Bill Moon was a pioneer in this industry, and we have just carried on that tradition. We want to be first in class. We don't just want to be the diffest truckstop; we also want to be the best."

- Jim Morris, Store Manager, Iowa 80 Truckstop

The ever-larger floor space has also led to a wider array of products in the store. In the early 1980s, about 4,000 to 5,000 products were available to the driver, Jim recalls. Today the store sells more than 50,000 items.

"Everyone who comes in here can find something that they need," he says.

A huge store with lots of merchandise and great customer service is important to truckers, says Jim. "Our customers are on the road 300 days a year, and they don't always get to shop. During their down time, they have the time to browse here, and the men are probably tougher shoppers than women."

Women? Yes, that's right. Plenty of the store's customers are, in fact, women. "In the early days, it was mostly men who were on the road," Jim explains. "Now it's a lot of team drivers - husband and wife drivers, and solo women drivers."

As for the merchandise he offers, Jim says the number of products available to Iowa 80 from suppliers in the 1980s was limited. "Log books, paper products and the basic truck supplies were the only things that wholesalers carried."

But Iowa 80 realized they could be different from their competitors by providing professional drivers with a number of items that were not available at another other truckstop.

"It was an opportunity to make a name for ourselves and bring the customer back to use," Jim says. "There are many times people have say, 'Wow, if you can't find it at Iowa 80, it must not be made!'"

Some of the out-of-the-ordinary items the truckstop began carrying, says Jim, included chrome and stainless accessories. But it also includes products like cargo control equipment to make a driver's job easier and safer.

“Drivers are professionals,” Jim says of today’s truck driver. “They need the right equipment in order to do the job right.”

While the Iowa 80 store has changed drastically in size and the type of merchandise it has carried over the years, so has the type of driver who shops there.

Owner-operators now account for about 15 percent of the industry, Jim says. “And those are the ones who look for the shiny stuff - the chrome and all the accessories to deck out their trucks.”

The other 85 percent are company drivers who need the right equipment to do their jobs. And both owner-operators and company drivers find what they want at Iowa 80.

That makes Iowa 80 Truckstop the place that truckers and motorists want to stop, Jim says. One trucker told him he had to drive 200 miles out of his way to visit Iowa 80. “He said, “I just had to come by here to see what new and exciting things you had.””

Iowa 80 doesn't stop trying to serve customers, even if they can't make it to the truckstop. In 1997, the Iowa 80 Catalog was born. This gave drivers the opportunity to get the items they needed from Iowa 80 from anywhere in the country.

“We would hear many times from drivers that they wished they could shop here more often, but many times their route didn't take them through here. We listened; and figured a mail-order catalog was the way to go,” says Jim Morris.

But, Iowa 80 didn't stop at a printed catalog. In 2000, www.iowa80.com, an e-commerce web site that features over 30,000 items, was launched. This gave drivers 24-hour access to shop from home or their truck. “One of our goals is to be always open and accessible to drivers. This is one more way we can accomplish that and serve our customers better,” says Will Moon, President.

Jim Morris points out that customer service at Iowa 80 goes beyond helping customers pick out the right bumper, Iowa 80 employees, for example, have driven truckers with non-life threatening medical problems to Davenport emergency rooms, stayed with their family members while they were treated, then driven them back to the truckstop.

Truckstop employees also regularly help motorists tie down mattresses and other shifting loads they're carrying on their vehicle's rooftop luggage carriers. “We will find plastic for them and duct tape, and we will help them secure that load to the top of their vehicle,” says Jim.

“You don't get the kind of service at the mall,” he adds with a laugh. “And, you know, we do things like that all the time. Iowa 80's reputation is known coast to coast. And I think it's because we really enjoy our customers and we have a family atmosphere.”

Jim Morris has worked at the Iowa 80 store for more than two decades now. And he says he's there for the long haul.

"I enjoy this job and the Moon family is just a wonderful family to work for," he says. "They put money back into the business to make it comfortable for professional drivers and other highway workers."

Iowa 80 Service Center: People with Pride

The popularity and growth of Iowa 80 Truckstop Service Center came as no surprise to Tom Houston, its general manager.

It has to do with pride, people and quality work. Those are the things that make a difference to a customer whether he or she lives just down the road or is thousands of miles from home.

Tom says his technicians all take pride in their work, and they care about their customers. It's what you'd expect of Iowans. "We have a good work ethic," he says.

Iowa 80 employees also stick around. Tom notes that the average time a technician serviced with Iowa 80 is seven years, which he says by industry standards is "phenomenal. I think turnover in our business what kills many operations. In our particular business here, we are fortunate to have many employees that have been working with us over 20 years."

"Though Iowa 80 is large and serve thousands of people every day we really emphasize how important every individual customer is, even if he or she doesn't work for one of the huge trucking companies. We try to give everybody the same quality, care and concern."

- Rom Crino, General Manager, Truckomat, Walcott, Iowa

Tom says customers prefer to drive up to a truckstop and see familiar faces. "In most of our industry today, every time a customer comes up, maybe once a month, they're always seeing new technicians. And that scares them in the repair business."

But the general manager says it makes him feel good to know that a customer can drive up to the service center at the Iowa 80 and see the same technician who served him or her the last time they stopped.

Says Tom: "They see the same technician and get to know them. A customer can come up, for example, and say, 'I want Lee to work on my truck,' knowing that he's been here a long time and give good quality service."

The current Service Center opened on March 15, 1993. An additional service bay was added in September of 1998.

"We wanted to do something a little bit different than any other truckstops," says Tom. "So we started doing tractor and trailer alignments in that new bay."

“We built one of the bays to do more tire work,” he says, “but then we also added a bay dedicated to chrome installations for items like the chrome tool boxes and bumpers that are available at the Iowa 80 Chrome Shop.”

“In our company, customer satisfaction is the No. 1 priority. We like to showcase our truckstop and, in order to do that, we’ve got to take care of the customer.”

- Tom Houston, Service Center Operations Manager, Iowa 80 Group

While pride, people and quality work set Iowa 80’s Service Center apart from others, Tom believe other factors are at work, too, including: Cleanliness. “We repeatedly win the TravelCenters of America Cleanest Shop Award every year,” he beams. “Our shop is by far the cleanest one out there.”

First class training of technicians.

More variety. “Right now, for example, we’re carrying six brands of tires! That’s basically unheard of.”

“I think our people care more than any truckstop around,” he says, noting that Iowa 80 is known nationwide. “The customers tell everyone on their CB radios that we have a good staff of people here, and we’re really friendly.”

And they’re right!