Trucking with
W.H. "Buster" Varnes

By Marilyn Moore and Beth Allender

W.H. "Buster" Varnes with his last International Truck

Introduction

On a sunny afternoon just before Christmas, 1989, Beth Allender and I, Marilyn Moore, went to our mother’s, Emileene Lilley’s, home near Bath. We were anxious to begin our interview with W. H. "Buster" Varnes, Uncle Buster to us.
A large man about six feet tall with twinkling blue eyes, thick gray hair, and a never ending smile began to tell us about his life as a truck driver. He kept us intrigued for nearly two hours with his lively sense of humor and his descriptions of his experiences as a trucker.

**Life:** When were you born?

**Mr. Varnes:** When or why? I was born in Florida, March 13, 1915. This coming March I’ll be 75. I stayed in Florida until I was right at 17. I caught a ride all the way on a produce truck and went to Columbia [S.C.].

**Life:** Did you feel that you had been a long way when you got there?

**Mr. Varnes:** So far, I didn’t know because I rode in the back of a produce truck. The truck wasn’t big enough for all three of us in the cab. I had to ride in the back. It was loaded in Tampa, Florida, with produce—corn, beans, whatever. I made up my mind I had lived in Florida [long enough]. I was going to Columbia.

**Life:** Why did you pick Columbia?

**Mr. Varnes:** Because that’s where my older sister Mildred and her husband Wade Hampton lived, and that’s where the truck was going. The way they met, he went to Jacksonville [Florida] to work with his uncle on the railroad. His uncle was an official on the railroad. They met and got married and moved to Columbia. They started going to the market [The Farmers’ Market in Columbia, S.C.] with chickens and selling produce and fruit. After I found out I wasn’t going to get to go to college and stay in school, I decided I wasn’t going to stay in Florida either.

**Life:** How did you first get a job driving a truck?

**Mr. Varnes:** It was my brother-in-law’s truck in 1931. The street going in front of the state capitol [S. C.] wasn’t even paved. When I started, we had to build sheds in the middle of the street; it was a dual street. We had to build sheds on the market on Monday morning, and anytime after 12:00 on Sunday you’d put up a rack. This stall, you’d put up Monday and leave it until Friday night. And that’s what I did. I worked around that market there that first year.

The next season I started delivering stuff around the city. Before the year was over, he had me delivering for somebody else.

**Life:** Do you remember the first truck you ever drove?

**Mr. Varnes:** A 1932 Ford truck, a lot different from now. No sleeper, no trailer, just a straight truck. It was a lot rougher than now. They didn’t even have a paved road from Columbia back to Florida unless you stayed on U.S. 1 and went all the way through Augusta and Waycross [Georgia] and then into Jacksonville [Florida]. You had to go to Denmark [S.C.] and cut across to Danbury [S.C.], and then you could hit U.S. 17 down in Hennesee, S.C. You’d be on dirt roads for a while, and then you’d be back on paved roads the rest of the way.

**Life:** What did you haul?

**Mr. Varnes:** Produce and fruit.

**Life:** How much money did you make?

**Mr. Varnes:** Seven dollars a week. He paid for my meals while I was on the road out of town. When I got a chance to sleep, I slept and took a bath at their house. I didn’t rent a room.
Life: How long did it take you to make a trip?

Mr. Varnes: You could make maybe one road trip a week, and possibly start on the second one when I first started.

Life: That was taking dirt roads?

Mr. Varnes: Yes, because the dirt roads through Florida and Georgia had a “no fence” law. That meant the cows and hogs could just roam all over the roads and everything.

Life: How fast could the truck run?

Mr. Varnes: Forty-five miles per hour was the top speed; after you got loaded, it was not that fast. You could get there better walking now than you could then driving. No comparison in today and then.

Life: Tell us about when you switched jobs.

Mr. Varnes: A man at the market offered me $12.00 a week if I’d drive for him. I went to Wade and asked him if he’d pay me $12.00. He said no, he couldn’t pay me that. So I quit him and went up to work at the market for this other fellow. I was on the road then with him paying all the expenses. If I had to lay over, he’d take care of all my expenses and my room. I didn’t even draw all my $12 a week. I told him I didn’t want but $7 a week in my pocket and he could just keep the rest of it for me. I worked for him and saved up my money. When he sold out to the Senn Brothers, he asked about me, and they said they didn’t want anybody but the brothers. I told them fine with me. I won’t cause any disturbance about that; I just went on over and started working at the filling station.

Life: How much money had you saved then?

Mr. Varnes: I bought a used 1931 Ford roadster for $150. I kept it for about three years, had a lot of work done on it, and sold it for $250. I even rented a garage at the Market Lunch Restaurant [where the Market Restaurant is today in Columbia, S. C.].

Life: What did it cost you to eat out on the road without McDonald’s and all? How did you eat?

Mr. Varnes: A lot better than you do now! There used to be a place down at Midway, Georgia, that advertised all the shrimp you could eat for $1. You could get something decently cooked then. You can’t now at these fast food places. Everybody’s going after that almighty dollar now instead of looking out for each other.

Life: So you went on to work for the city bus company?

Mr. Varnes: After I worked at that station for about two years, then I went back up to the market for maybe a year. Then I gave up on it again and went and got a job driving a city bus in Columbia. I drove it for about three years. It was just before World War II, and then I got an application in at Greyhound. I went and asked the man at the city bus for three days off to go for an interview with Greyhound. He wouldn’t give me three days off, so I quit. I’d never asked for an hour off in three years.

I went to Winston Salem for an interview. I didn’t know at that time you had to go to school in West Virginia if you passed the physical. So when I got to Winston Salem after I passed the physical, the guy told me I’d have to wait a month and start another school. But I couldn’t stay out of work that long, so I said, “You’d better count me out then ‘cause I gotta go to work.” I went back to Columbia.
The man said, "Don't be too hasty now!" And they somehow squeezed me in that school they were starting the next week. They sent me a letter with a round-trip ticket from Columbia to Winston-Salem and return to Columbia when I went to be interviewed for Greyhound. Then, after I passed the physical, they sent me back home. The next week I got a letter with a ticket in it to Charleston, West Virginia. They paid all expenses, hotels, eats, anything pertaining to them. They did not pay you while you were at that school. There was no drivers' union then.

After you completed that school, you had to drive in that division and get ten O.K.'s from older drivers. So you were out of a payday for six weeks, without a penny coming in. I rode on the bus for three days, and they didn't call my name to drive at all. So I told the instructors, "If you're fixing to send me home because I can't drive (everyone was supposed to stay for two weeks), I want you to tell me in plain English right now because I'll be on the first bus smoking towards Columbia because I can't stay out of work!" He told me I didn't have anything to worry about as my driving was concerned because they knew I could drive, but there were some fellows in the school that they weren't sure about, that needed practice. Then I felt better about it, and I stayed up there and finished school.

They sent me back to Columbia to drive out of Columbia, and we got there just before Easter. The Easter rush had already started with war travel too. The supervisor told all six of us my seniority would not start until I had my ten O.K.'s from senior drivers, but he was going to let me drive a bus to double a schedule, and I would get paid for it, but my seniority wouldn't start. I was completely content, so I drove the Easter rush because I did have a little money coming in. It was not much because there was no union of the bus drivers then, but they were trying to organize drivers.

They didn't have too many people that wanted the union to start with. I was one of them, so I never did sign up to join the union. Towards the last end of the war, I was beginning to want to quit Greyhound anyway. I had bought a tractor and trailer while I was working for Greyhound, but the Office of Defense and Transportation (called the O. D. T. then) wouldn't give me an "A" stamp or anything. You were supposed to have a "T" stamp on your windshield of your truck, and they wouldn't give me any kind of stamp to buy gas with in that truck, not even for me to drive it from the house to work and back home. They wouldn't give me a sticker to buy a tire or anything.

Life: Why was it like that?

Mr. Varnes: I was wanting to make more money than I was making at Greyhound, but they [Office of Defense and Transportation] wouldn't let us quit our jobs or take us into service because our job was considered part of the war effort. I mean, it was essential because we were moving troops. I even went out to Fort Jackson [S. C.] and tried to join. I was accepted, and the man asked me which branch of the service I wanted to go in. I figured if you went in the Navy, you'd have your bed with you all the time, and you wouldn't be sleeping out in the cold. I said if you get a choice, I believe I prefer the Navy. He asked what I'd been doing. I told him I'd been driving a bus. He said the Navy didn't have anything for me to drive and I would be better suited for the Army. I'd moved enough Army troops and heard enough from those fellows; I knew they were having a rough time, so I told him, "A battleship's heavy equipment, ain't it?"

He said, "Yeah, I agree with you, but I don't think you'd qualify for it."
I told him that I'd seen some mighty big things running here with USMC on them. I asked him, "How about the Marine Corps?"

He said, "You mean to tell me you would rather have the Marine Corp over the Army?"

I told him I wasn't in the Army or the Marines either, but from what I'd seen and heard, I'd rather have anything other than the Army, yes, sir. I said, "I ain't just trying to run your Army down!"

He said, "You're the kind of fool they're hunting. You go over to that second barracks!" A corporal came over later and wanted to know who W.H. Vanese was. That wasn't my name, so I didn't say anything. He hollered it out a little louder. There was between 75 and 100 men in that room. He got on a little box and read out the whole name, Willard Horace Vanese.

I said, "If you're trying to say Vanese, that's me."

He said, "Don't you know your name when you hear it?"

I said, "I know it when I hear it, but you haven't said it yet. It's Vanese."

He called me up to the box and said, "What do you mean by answering this second question 'no'?"

Well, there was over 100 questions on it and the first time I'd ever seen the examination, and I said, "Well, I don't know. What is the second question?"

He said, "Do you want to join the armed forces? You're the first person that put 'no' down here."

I said, "Well, no, I don't want to join, but no, I ain't scared to join. Yes, I'll join."

He said, "Well, I like you all right. Out of this whole room you're the only one who told the truth. We're still taking volunteers. Ain't none of these fellows volunteered. So you take this stack of papers." People were to stay in that barracks over night, and Greyhound had sent a letter out there by me that I was to be rushed through because I had to move troops the next morning. He wanted me to be in charge of the people there.

I told him, "You'd better read that letter; I ain't in charge of nothing out here yet." After that, they dismissed me, and in about an hour they told me to take off. They took me back to town, and I went to Greyhound. Then I went down to Paris Island and picked up a load of Marines and started to Raleigh with them.

Life: Did you hear from the Army after that?

Mr. Varnes: I was accepted. I held up my hand and took an oath, but I never heard another word from them. Another fellow tried to tell me one time that I was entitled to forty years' back pay and that I ought to put in for it. I told him no. With my luck they'd say they didn't owe me anything but they'd been hunting me for forty years and were gonna shoot me.

It wasn't easy driving a bus, and I wanted to make more money. I wanted to start driving my truck that I had bought while working for Greyhound. I wanted more income, but after that I started hauling for hire for anybody that wanted something hauled on the market. I decided to get me a better outfit, and I bought two 1951 International trucks in 1952. An agent in Columbia [S. C.] had them left over for a year, and I bought a trailer to go behind one. I put a driver driving one
of the trucks, and I was driving the other one, but that didn’t work out too good. The driver put me in debt too much. I decided to sell the other truck, and wherever my truck went, I’d be with it. The other driver had charged stuff all along the way and told people I’d pay for it. He finally stole my truck and I had to go get it. Then I had to go pay off all his bad debts. I got them paid off though.

*Life:* Tell us about quitting Greyhound.

*Mr. Varnes:* People riding Greyhound wanted something to go wrong so they could sue. The buses were always loaded with people. If you could make it a year without any accidents or complaints, they’d give you a complete uniform as a bonus. One time a lady on my bus claimed she was hurt by a soft zipper bag that fell on her arm. She was hollering she’d broken her arm. There wasn’t even a hard corner on the bag. She was hollering, and I offered to take her to the hospital. She said, “Greyhound will pay for this! I broke my arm!”

I was fed up with her and told her, “If it had hit you on the head, it might have broke your damn neck!” She didn’t think that was funny, but they [the bus line officials] didn’t put her off the bus.

Once, a drunk got on the bus at midnight, and I told him since he’d been drinking, he’d better catch the next bus. He begged me. His wife and children were waiting for him in Greenville [S.C.]. I let him get back on the bus, but he had lost his seat and had to stand from Charleston to Orangeburg which is about 70 miles. Then he got a seat. When we got there, he started to tell how bad I’d been to him. I motioned to the dispatcher not to let him know I was listening. When he finished, I tapped him on the shoulder and said, “Didn’t you just come in on that bus?”
Mr. Varnes with his city bus

He whirled around and said, "You're the big so-and-so that pulled me off the bus!"
I told him, "You told my boss a lot of things that weren't true, and speaking as an employee of the company, you're mistaken!" But as one man to another, I told what I thought of him. I saw he was going to hit me, so I punched him in the solar plexus with my fingers stiff. After that I never heard from him.

That got me wanting to leave Greyhound. Then I got suspended for four days for being two hours late. I had gotten real tired on a late night run from Orangeburg into Columbia. When I got to North [S. C.], I pulled into the bus station. The phone was inside the filling station locked up. I just opened the door and got on the second seat and went to sleep. When people woke up, they started walking around outside. I woke up and pulled the air horn. They got back on the bus, and we took off. I pulled in, and the dispatcher was upset about me being late. I said, "Yes, sir, I stopped and went to sleep." I had to go see the boss. The boss said he'd already talked with Winston-Salem about it, and I had to be laid off four days. That afternoon when the boss was going up the hill leaving, I was coming down in my truck. I just waved and blew the horn.

The next day I was loading fruit in Florida. The second day I unloaded in Columbia, the third day I unloaded again in Florida, and the fourth day I unloaded in Columbia. The man asked me about another load, and I said first I’d have to talk to Greyhound. I said, "Mr. Fulcher, you laid me off for four days, and now I want to be laid off for four more days."

He said, "I met you the other day. It doesn't hurt you to be laid off, does it?"
I said, "No, sir, because if you let me off four days, I'll make as much as I would make with Greyhound in a month." Somebody on the market would furnish me with a gas stamp when I needed it. It finally slacked up so I could quit, so I did.
Life: When and what kind of truck did you start driving after that?

Mr. Varnes: A little GMC, I mean a little too. I used to load that thing and go up a hill, somewhere like Pennsylvania, and if a bird had lit on it, it would have started going backwards. Like I said, it was a little GMC.

Life: Did you stay with that little truck until you could buy the two big ones?

Mr. Varnes: Yes, in 1952. Then I had a contract with Bill Snyder to drive a gasoline tanker. I was making three trips a week on my truck. The man that worked for me never did that good.

Life: When were the roads paved?

Mr. Varnes: By 1935 or ’36 they were in pretty good shape. The road in front of the state capitol in Columbia, S.C., wasn’t paved until 1934.

Life: What were some of the things that happened to you when you were on the road?

Mr. Varnes: I don’t know where to start. Towards the first, before trucks pulled trailer, you’d take a spare axle with you, with a bearing already mounted on it. You broke so many axles and busted bearings until you almost had to have a spare one to get along. You’d see all kinds of wrecks. I went down [Highway] 17 one night where there was a sharp curve at Cuckahatchie, S.C. The man didn’t make the curve and ran off in a swamp. I stopped. His truck was on fire, and a patrolman came up about the same time I stopped. The man was pinned in the truck. We couldn’t get close enough to him to get him out. The truck was on fire, and the man begged the patrolman to take his gun and kill him. Another truck stopped, and that driver got aggravated and told the patrolman to go ahead and kill the man. But the patrolman wouldn’t do it. He said, “You take my pistol and kill him, but you’ll be charged with manslaughter.” He couldn’t kill him, and we had to watch the man burn to death because we couldn’t get to the truck.

In Alabama they had roads with curves so sharp that with a trailer you couldn’t get around the curves. In West Virginia, before they put the turnpikes up—through Mt. Airy and that way, from there to Princeton on into Charleston—if you made it in eight hours, you made good time. Now you can make it in two hours. It’s about 80 miles now.

Life: Tell us about any wrecks that you had.

Mr. Varnes: The worst one I had was at Ft. Mill. But before that, while I was still hauling produce, a man was riding with me who was the buyer. My job was to drive and load the truck, and his job was to buy. I got sleepy. When we left Tampa, Florida, we went on to Plant City and got loaded. When we got loaded, we went back to Ocala, Florida. I told him about 12 miles up the road there was an S turn to the right, cross a railroad track and then turn back to your left again. I was asleep, and he was going too fast when he tried to make the curve. Anyhow, he turned the truck over on its side. He was stomping all over me, trying to climb out the high side of the truck.

There’s been so many things both good and bad. You have to make your own good ones. I guess the one wreck at Ft. Mill was the worst I ever had in my 59 years of driving a truck. I got hit by a fellow from Clinton, South Carolina. He wouldn’t stay home with his wife and family and work for them. He was running around from one relative to another, living off them as long as he could. Then go drift off to somewhere else. The man that owned the car that he was driving when he hit
me was at work in the mill in Ft. Mill. The boy had started to go to work, but instead he went to the mill and hot-wired [started without a key by crossing ignition wires] his wife’s uncle’s car. He’d been seen in about three different bars in a couple of hours’ time period, from the time the uncle went to work at 6:15, on February 15.

*Life*: What year was that?

*Mr. Varnes*: Nineteen-sixty-two. He hit me in front of my left wheel between the axle and the bumper. The impact knocked the truck out from under the trailer, turned the trailer on the side, and the truck went straight up in the air on top of the trailer. It threw me out of the truck when he hit it like that. I fell against the left door, flew across the highway, and landed on the left side of my head, shoulder, and hip. I stayed in the hospital in Rock Hill, South Carolina, for two weeks, and then the doctor told me if I would fly home, that he would dismiss me. I thought Mabel, my wife, could come get me with an air mattress in the back of the station wagon, and I could ride home from the hospital. But the ride from the hospital to the airport proved me wrong, and I made up my mind to fly.

*Life*: How long were you out of work?

*Mr. Varnes*: About two months. I told the preacher at church, who came to see me, wanting to see how much I’d pledge for a building fund, “You know, Brother Jack, I’ve been out of work and hadn’t had a nickel for three months, and none of you brothers and sisters offered my family a loaf of bread or a can of beans or nothing, so that’s how much you can put me down for, nothing!” And that’s how much he got from me.

He said, “Well, you know it’s better to give than receive.”

I said, “Well, that’s true for the one that’s on the receiving end, but not too good for the one giving.”

In church, it used to be customary on your anniversary to wear a big corsage. It might still be to some people, but not too many of them do it anymore. We went to church one Sunday, and Mabel had a big corsage on. This lady saw her corsage and asked about it.

Mabel said, “It’s our anniversary.” The lady asked which one. It was the tenth or twelfth; I don’t remember which one.

The lady said, “What about Patsy, Billy, and Edward [the older children from a previous marriage]?”

I saw the lady was just a busybody, so I grabbed Mabel by the arm and said, “We just had a long courtship.”

*Life*: How did you meet your wife?

*Mr. Varnes*: I was driving the bus through Raleigh when I was driving for Greyhound in World War II. She was going to college there and working in a hash joint at night. I would get in about 12:00 at night off my run, and I used to go in there and eat. That’s when I gave her the sugar rationing spoon. I had a spoon cut so there was nothing but a rim left. She acted like it made her mad when people asked for sugar in their coffee, so I told her that with this spoon she could give them all they wanted, and she still has the spoon. I found out that I knew I loved her better than anybody else.

*Life*: When did you move back to Florida?

*Mr. Varnes*: We moved back to Florida when we sold our place in West Columbia to the City of West Columbia. It was where the fire department, city hall, and jail are now. At the time I was hauling stuff for the city to put the water system in West Columbia—soda ash, salt, and stuff to purify the water. They had the city hall and fire station down in a little hole there. We owned from one street to the other, and they asked us if
we’d sell it to them. When we sold it, I asked Mabel and the children where they wanted to live. They thought they wanted to live in Florida. We went down to Ft. Pierce and bought a place there, and I told the fellow I wanted to haul for him down there. When we got there, things changed a little bit from what I thought they would be like. The fellow, Tiny, said at one time when I moved down there, he’d sell me an interest in his brokerage business. When he found out how much he’d lose, he acted like he didn’t want to do that. We stayed down there until I had that wreck in Ft. Mill in 1963. I told them that I wasn’t trying to bust up a family or anything, but either we were going to need a house in Columbia, or I was going to need a room there. So we went to Columbia and found this house, and it was just what my family wanted. So we got it.

*Life*: After that wreck, how did you get back into trucking? Was your truck completely torn up?

*Mr. Varnes*: Oh, yeah! I bought another truck. I started hauling for Southgate and hauling fresh tomatoes for Tiny going up. Whenever I was going north, I’d call Mr. Barrett at Southgate, and he’d have a load of glass coming back into Norfolk. I’d call him and tell him where I was going to unload the tomatoes. He’d call around and line up a load of his products going to Florida or somewhere down that way. There was about a week involved either way you went.

*Life*: How did you end up hauling for Southgate?

*Mr. Varnes*: Well, there was a broker in Columbia that wanted me to haul and come back by Southgate, pick up a load and bring it back to him. I told him I would, and I went by there. Southgate was down on the waterfront [Norfolk] at that time. Mr. Barrett liked the way I stayed with the truck and saw it was loaded right and all. He said he liked the way that I looked after business. And, after I had the wreck in South Carolina, I wanted to stop that north run, anyhow. He told me he’d see that I got a load anytime I was around Norfolk. Anyhow, after peaches and tomatoes and all, I started hauling just for Southgate. That was when Mr. Pender had it. Mr. Pender sold out to Mr. H. B. Hunter, who had the ice cream toppings place. Then, Southgate had peanut butter and fish. But they dropped the peanut butter and fish and started hauling chairs and stuff out to Michigan.

That’s when Mabel [Mrs. Varnes] went with me that time and thought she was going to freeze to death. We left here going to Michigan. There was so much snow and ice you couldn’t see what kind of road you were riding on. I knew where to go, but they had plowed the roads and piled the snow in the median. They had made a wall so high that you couldn’t see the cars that were coming the other way. The first time I went up there, it was the last of September or first of October. And it started snowing. I stopped at a station and asked a fellow how long the snow was supposed to keep up. He said until next March or April. I told him I had planned to go on and get out of it. I came on into Norfolk, and it was about six weeks before I went back up there. I stopped at that same station and saw that same fellow that I had seen when the snow was so deep and asked him how long it had been since it wasn’t snowing up there.

He said, “We haven’t had three twenty-four-hour periods that it didn’t snow since the last time you were here!”

I told Mabel how bad it was, and we got a room at a hotel that night. The next morning I told her, “You stay here; I’ll go load the truck and then come back along by here to get you.” While I was gone, she called a taxi company in Travis City and wanted them to send a taxi to get her and let her go shopping.

The man said, “Lady, you must be kidding! There hasn’t been a store open in town for three days and nights. We haven’t
been running a taxi. Wherever you are, just stay there.” She decided it must be pretty chilly too!

I never did set a clock or tell anybody when to wake me up. I figured if I was sleepy, I’d get up there in the sleeper and sleep until I woke up. If you’re sleepy, you’re nuts to try to drive, and if you’re not sleepy, you’re going to want to drive to stay warmer.

I wouldn’t leave a truck running to stay warm in the winter or cool in the summer, after I got air conditioning. I was going on the Pennsylvania Turnpike after we left Michigan. I pulled into a rest area and cut the engine off. Mabel had gotten into the sleeper, and I got up in there too. I went to sleep, and when I woke up, I was going to wipe the glass off on the inside, but it had turned to ice. Mabel said she knew how it felt to be caught in an ice box.

**Life:** When did you first get a truck with a sleeper?

**Mr. Varnes:** The first time was after the wreck in Rock Hill, [S. C.] in 1962.

**Life:** What about air conditioning?

**Mr. Varnes:** Air conditioning didn’t come along until Southgate started leasing a truck from Columbia Truck Rentals in 1962.

**Life:** You must have thought that was the greatest invention.

**Mr. Varnes:** It was the life! It had an air ride driver’s seat. When you hit a bump, it would go with the truck. The others [seats] were bolted down, and every time you hit a bump, it would jolt you. Just shake you! I told them if I could have had a truck like that when I started, I could have driven until I was 100 years old, if I could live that long.

**Life:** Tell us about truck stops.

**Mr. Varnes:** I stop to get fuel and sometimes something to eat, but not too many of them are good to eat at anymore. They’re overpriced, and they don’t treat customers right. I’ve meet a lot of nice people in truck stops, too.

**Life:** Do you have certain stops that you frequent along the way?

**Mr. Varnes:** Most of the 76’s I stop at, and Gulf. Once in a while at an Exxon. I stopped the other night at a Gulf. It was one of these food self-service food places. She [the waitress] had one of the windows you had to talk through. The doors were locked. She said she’d take a Gulf card on diesel fuel. I had that diesel fuel on my hands, and I asked if I could come in and wash my hands. She offered me a paper towel. She had a policy that she couldn’t let anybody in. I said, “You mean I just spent a hundred dollars here, and I can’t wash my hands?” She let me in, and while I was washing my hands, another driver came in. I was ready to go, but I wouldn’t leave until he left. After he left, I left. And she locked the door back.

**Life:** Truck drivers are known as big drinkers, but you never drank any alcohol?

**Mr. Varnes:** I never tasted any whiskey or beer or wine, and I ain’t ever lit a cigarette. I never talked to anybody that did that stuff that didn’t wish he hadn’t. I didn’t want to start anything I couldn’t get any good out of.

**Life:** You didn’t drink coffee or anything. It must have been rough staying awake?

**Mr. Varnes:** No. I think all [the drivers] that have been in it as long as I have had it just as rough as I had, but that’s some of the things I never did do. I never thought sitting there sucking
on a cigarette and sucking up money—that’s what it amounts to—would keep you awake. I always figured if you’d stop and get out and move around, you’d get your blood circulating again. If you sit in that one position with nothing moving but your hands and occasionally your foot, it’s going to tell on you. So, if I begin to get tired, I try to never drive for over a two-hour period without stopping, even in a car, because that’s torturing yourself by sitting in that position.

*Life:* How about your log keeping?

*Mr. Varnes:* You’re supposed to keep a log for every hour for a whole day, even if you’re off. Like I’m off today, but I have to turn in a log at my company that shows 24 hours off. You’re supposed to keep it, but there’s very few of us that keep it right. Like last week, now I had to go to Norfolk on Friday; then, I had to take the load to Columbia, start making deliveries on Monday morning with it, then on to Greenville [S. C.] to Asheville, to Hickory, and Sanford, North Carolina, then pick up a load of plastic and go back to Norfolk. Well, I got up there on Monday. It was 2:00 in Asheville, and I knew if I went to Hickory, which wasn’t but 75 miles from Asheville, I couldn’t unload a thing there until 11:00 Tuesday. If I went to Columbia, which was twice as far, I was at home; I could take a bath and sleep at home and feel human and still be at Hickory before 11:00 Tuesday. So that’s what I did. When I got unloaded Tuesday, I got a load of plastic and drove on to Norfolk and unloaded on Wednesday. On Wednesday I left Norfolk, had a drop in Winston-Salem, let the night man take the two pallets. When they were unloaded, I went to Columbia. I was on my way to Macon, and I had already driven eight to nine hours then. I figured if I could stay awake, I could get to Macon. I did make it to Augusta when I got so sleepy that I stopped and slept two hours. I was over driving on my log book. But my log book doesn’t quite show it like that.

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*Life:* Would you get a ticket for that?

*Mr. Varnes:* You’d get more than a ticket. Those people are no dummies. If they didn’t have those rules, people would be getting run over and killed by trucks. I guarantee there’s a lot of truckers that just don’t care. You can talk to some that have been in it for only eight to ten years, and they want to quit. You have to want to do something to do anything.

*Life:* What is the farthest point West that you’ve driven?

*Mr. Varnes:* Clovis, New Mexico. Mabel went with me. We had to unload tomatoes in Houston, Texas, then go to Clovis for peanuts. I told her if she wanted to go to California, now was the time. She was tired enough when we got to Clovis that she decided she wanted to go home.

*Life:* How about north?

*Mr. Varnes:* I’ve been as far north as the road goes. I’ve been to Canada about three times and Maine. I used to run a regular route to Boston. While I was running tomatoes before I started with Southgate, there were some brothers that had a brokerage business in North Carolina. They had one brother that was involved in the brokerage of tomatoes from Florida. Then they’d move into South Carolina, Georgia, and brokerage peaches on up into the southern part of North Carolina where they lived. They owned half the town. I had gone into Johnson, South Carolina, to unload peaches, and one of the brothers called down there and told his brother to send the bottom three trucks on the list so he’d have them in the morning. Some of the brokers will tell you anything to get you to load. When I got up there, the other two fellows that were with me at that time wanted me to haul a refrigerated bunker. They owned an ice house. Then you put ice in a refrigerated bunker, and all you had was a fan blowing cold air back. You didn’t have all this refrigeration system like you
do now. That’s one reason that I stopped hauling tomatoes. The tomato people wanted me to spend the money to put a new refrigerator unit on my trailer, but they weren’t going to go up on the price of tomatoes.

I told them, “You mean I’m going to spend six thousand dollars in equipment and I’m not going to get paid any more than I do now to haul it?” When I got to where I was going, I would have to keep my truck running for their storage. I can’t see that.

He said, “It looks like they’re going to that.”

I said, “Well, see you later.” That’s when I made up my mind to move back to Columbia.

Life: How far northwest have you gone?

Mr. Varnes: Missouri, Minnesota. When I got through hauling peaches, I went to New Jersey and got a load of peppers. I hauled peppers into Minnesota. I know all the roads in the Eastern states I’ve been in. I don’t have much trouble finding anything.

Life: Do you have a route that you especially enjoy?

Mr. Varnes: Not really. Not with this kind of hauling I do now. If you’re a regular carrier hauling freight for other people, you do, but I don’t have that now. When Mr. Hunter sold out to this man in Spain, I guess I ought to have left Hunter right then, but I just wasn’t ready to quit. If I thought I was endangering anybody or anything, I’d be the first one to say, “I’ve had it, that is enough.” But I’m somebody that ain’t never done anything but work. I think from the time I was nine years old until my daddy died, I never remember him buying me anything but one pair of shoes. I looked out for myself. You can’t take somebody that never did anything but work and just say, “Old man, You’re too old, goodbye.” That’s the way I feel about it, but the way I feel don’t amount to nothing no more.

Life: You’ve spent a lot of time riding the road and thinking; you must have given more serious thought to things than anybody else in the world!

Mr. Varnes: Did you say “thinking” or “stinking”? I’ve been stinking a few times too. I went one time a long time ago when running was pretty hard when I was driving for Mildred and Wade. It was the rush between Thanksgiving and Christmas. I went three weeks in one stretch when I didn’t even take my boots off, I mean, to take a shower or nothing! And all the sleeping you got was bouncing down the road in a truck. I believe I put my body through more than the average man would have, but it was because I wanted to do something for my family.

Life: Well, you’ve sure done that.

Mr. Varnes: I hope so.

Life: I find myself worrying when I’m driving down the road. Do you do that?

Mr. Varnes: Don’t let your mind wander too far from what the main object is, staying out of other people’s way and trying to keep them out of your way, ’cause if you get to thinking about everything that could have happened or might have happened or you wish would happen, then you’ll get to feeling sorry for yourself, sure enough.

Life: Are you satisfied? Did you ever want to do anything but be a truck driver?
Mr. W.H. "Buster" Varnes, last year

Mr. Varnes: I'm satisfied; I don't know whether the family is or not. You spend a lot of time away from home. A lot of
people think if you’re out of sight of somebody, they’re out of your mind, but I never did feel that way about my family. Ain’t no use for a man to think you can love somebody and not want to do something for them.

Life: Did you ever have any injuries?

Mr. Varnes: In the wreck in Florida, I had ribs broken. The wreck in Ft. Mill was the worst; I got about seven ribs broke. The doctors were afraid I would puncture a lung; that was really the worst. I don’t think in 60 years of driving that was too bad. I don’t own the truck I’ve got now. Hunter owns it; I drive it. I’ve got 1,600,027 miles showing on one truck. The first truck that I had, a little gas truck that I had the wreck in, I put 240,000 miles on it. Everybody wondered how I was getting so many miles out of a truck when other people were having such trouble with them. But I was always of the opinion if something’s wrong, even if it’s some little something, it ain’t going to get better till you have it fixed; it might keep it from developing into something else.

Life: How many miles would you say you’ve driven all together?

Mr. Varnes: I’d say close to seven million miles.

Life: Before they lowered the speed limit, were you able to make better time?

Mr. Varnes: I let my toe be my governor. As long as I’m safe and ain’t a danger to anybody else, I might drive 65 or maybe 70. Don’t let your temper control your foot; that’s when people get into trouble. Every time I go to the mountains, even in West Virginia—you don’t get more mountains than that—if you’re scared of them, you ain’t going to get hurt or hurt somebody. It’s like a motorcycle: when you think you’re the master of it, that’s when it will show you you’re not. I’ve been
on two of them; one of them stayed on me longer than I stayed on it, and the other one I got on behind the driver and mashed all the wind out of him. I like to have wrecked us, but I got off that thing and walked two blocks back to the market in Columbia. In the early days I said to myself, right then, if one hurts me, it will run over me 'cause I sure won't be on it. In my opinion, a three-wheeler and a snowmobile are about the same thing. Once I made a trip to Michigan to get cherries. There was a house on the side of a hill, and I saw something up there. I found out the road turned and twisted and went right in front of that house. However, it was when that snowmobile came off the roof of his house, jumped the highway, and went on down the hill and I went right under him, that I said, "Anybody that'll do that has got to have a soft spot in his head!"

Life: You never got tired of driving a truck?

Mr. Varnes: Oh, you get tired, but you don't know of anything you can do any better. You're gone a lot, but if you've got somebody like my wife you've got all the confidence in the world in, well, you don't have too much to worry about.

Conclusion

We completely enjoyed our interview with W. H. Varnes. After his many years as a truck driver, he is nearing retirement. Unfortunately, Mr. Varnes didn't want to retire, but was being forced to because of his company's insurance policy. Shortly after our interview, he was told that he could continue to drive for Southgate Company as long as he felt comfortable doing so. It is like a new lease on life. His spirits are lifted, and we share in his happiness. We wish him all the best. Keep on trucking!