



# Company rises from 'Chop Suey'

The Harrisons built an empire with a Model T and a plan

By CHRISSY KADLECK

**S**crappy ingenuity and a booming trash collection business propelled E.J. Harrison to harness his inventor's mind – and available pieces parts – to create "Chop Suey."

The year was 1932 and the country was being strangled by the Great Depression. Harrison, 23, saw opportunity in the piles of rotting trash throughout Ventura, Calif. His business plan was simple: He'd charge 75 cents a load to haul away garbage to the local dump. The venture would be fueled by his Model T, a trailer and a responsibility to provide for his young wife, Myra, and growing family.

Even though taking trash to the dump was not required by residents, his collection business was a veritable success from the first route. His customer list expanded and he outgrew his makeshift pickup vehicle. So he invested \$5 in a 1925 Nash, which he retrofitted by removing the back and installing a large pickup box.

Being so busy was a good problem to have, but soon he was out pounding the pavement for another vehicle solution. Harrison, orphaned at 12, had resourcefulness and the vision to see how to make the most of materials readily available.

According to the company's record books, Harrison sourced a truck differential from a friend and a front end of a car with a four-cycle Star engine. All the components were bolted to the truck frame. An old cab was used to carry the "payload." Wood salvaged from a fire was the glue that held it all together.

In all its glory, the patchwork truck was assembled using a Dodge radiator, an Essex cab, the Star motor, a Chevrolet transmission, instruments from Buick, Nash, Flint and Essex, headlights from a Ford and the hood of a Studebaker, according to a published article on the company's website.

Chop Suey was a workhorse vehicle that Harrison liked to say was really "nine cars in one." The truck was in continuous operation for years and carried four times what other trucks could. Plus it was economical to operate. The success of Chop Suey is largely associated with what would come to be known as Harrison Industries.

Flash forward 80 years later and the business



Myra and E.J. Harrison worked together to build Harrison Industries from the ground up.

is headed by E.J. Harrison's three sons – Ralph, president; Jim, vice president of operations; and Myron, chief financial officer. E. J. Harrison passed away in 1981 at 82. His wife and company co-founder, Myra, is 97 and was recently honored for being a trailblazer for her time. The family-run company is one of the oldest and largest privately owned trash collection businesses in the United States.

### Chop Suey to 'Swampers'

Harrison's right hand man – well, really, lady – was always his wife, Myra, who handled all the billing, bookkeeping and business letters for the business, originally called Harrison Transfer Co. She managed the financials of the business with a seventh-grade education. She later earned a college degree.

The company survived intense competition for customers in the late 1930s and was able to invest in a better truck and then a second truck

bought and used the first hydraulic arm-lift truck in Ventura.

Right around that time, the Harrisons' three grown sons joined the company. They had always worked around the business. In fact, they began as teenagers, each taking his turn behind the wheel of the trash trucks as "swampers." E.J. and Myra believed that if their sons wanted to work for the company, they would start the way everyone else did, including their dad, by driving the routes and hauling and dumping the trash.

"We all were born and raised on the trash truck basically," said Myron Harrison, the youngest of the family. "We all went to work with my dad when we were three and four years old. I actually believed that I was found in Montgomery Ward's up until I was 25. My parents always told me that they found me in the trash bin and decided to keep me, 'cause I worked pretty good."

Jim Harrison said his father recognized the growth potential with the housing boom in the county and asked all of his children – the three sons and his daughter, Janet – if they wanted to form a partnership. Janet declined but her brothers seized the opportunity. E.J. Harrison & Sons was formed.

"I know that Jim and I took big cuts in pay to start out," said Ralph Harrison, the eldest brother. "It was a strange thing; we'd get a paycheck and we'd have to kick back some money to buy containers and things like that."

Jim Harrison said when the brothers officially joined the company, it was generating less than \$60,000 a year gross. "It was small and Dad never promised anything," he said. "He said if we worked hard maybe we could make it a success."

And work hard they did for many years, slowly growing the business and expanding.

"He didn't believe in giving anybody anything," Myron Harrison said. "He expected you to be willing to work 24-7 to get it and basically that's just what we did. We went to work and we worked every hour that we needed to work, which was almost every hour that there was in the day."

Now, the four-generation conglomerate – with about 20 family members in leadership roles and positions throughout the company – serves 90,000 residential and commercial customers in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties with a fleet of 125 state-of-the-art trucks.

"We've always believed in controlling our own destiny and that's why we own our own transfer station and recycling company," said Myron Harrison. "We don't have to rely on the big boys to help us; instead we help them." ■

Courtesy, Whisenhunt Communications



E.J. Harrison stands next to a trash bin with his company logo on the side in 1981.

that enabled them to expand their routes to service 300 customers. In 1950, Harrison provided his customers in Ventura with green 55-gallon barrels with handles and wheels. Prior to that time, residents had placed trash alongside the curbs in boxes and baskets. In 1955, he

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