



Episode 8: The Road Ahead

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Debbie Desiderato: [00:00:00] Hey I'm Debbie Desiderato, owner of Walkabout Transport. And I'm just gonna give you a quick heads up that there's a bit of strong language in this one, just a little bit. [quiet, ambient sounds]

“Long Haul” Paul Marhoefer: This past year at the Great American Trucking Show in Dallas, there convened a curious discussion panel.

Paul Schegel: [speaking to a crowd] My name is Paul Schegel...

Paul: You had the square-jawed veteran

Paul S: ...33-year veteran of the trucking industry.

Paul: The lanky computer programmer

Ogden: My name is Ogden and I am only a three-year veteran of trucking

Paul: And the mild-mannered moderator, faced with a delicate task.

Panel Moderator: Alright, we certainly appreciate you all joining us today for this discussion on driverless trucks and the role drivers will play when there are driverless trucks.

Paul: I gotta hand it to these people, I mean it really takes some guts to show up in Dallas – at a convention center filled with hundreds of truck drivers – and talk about the future of driverless trucks.

[montage of panelists discussing self-driving technology, “the self-driving cars, the self-driving trucks...the software can control the braking and the steering... We’ll have multiple tele-op centers where...self-driving technology, today.”] [soft minimal tones come in]

When you watch a tragedy unfold, there’s a little part of you that wants to think: *this isn’t actually going to happen, is it?* Maybe Romeo and Juliet *won’t* commit suicide this time. Maybe the Titanic *won’t* hit that iceberg. Maybe John Denver *won’t* board that experimental plane. [tones fade to silence]

And that’s the way this technology looks to me now: like an encroaching reality that none of us are quite ready to face. [promotional video plays in the background, beginning with orchestral string music]

It seems like every few months there’s another splashy video from one of the scads of companies making a play in this game. [promotional video narrator says, “Plus AI has completed the industry’s first ever all autonomy cross trucking”]

All declaring an end to trucking as we know it. [promotional video narrator continues, “This, is the future waiting for us” and the video fades out]

But I have to give these brave panelists in Dallas some credit. They came prepared with their best possible pitch for an audience of truckers.

Paul S: [on the mic, speaking to a crowd] This is insane. People are being asked to be out on the road, away from their families. We’ve got to find a way to provide a driver a job, where we can take them out of the cab of the truck.

Paul: We’re not going to take your jobs away; we’re going to make your jobs *better*. [theme music comes in]

Paul S: Thank you guys for coming, I appreciate the participation and thank you guys.
[crowd claps]

Paul: Here we are folks, at the end of the run. And in this final episode we're looking out at the road ahead. What will self-driving trucks mean for truckers? Not just for our livelihoods, but for our way of life?

Mike Landis: I honestly believe that our technology is our own worst enemy right now.

Debbie Jacobs: And these autonomous trucks, if they're anything like my GPS, shoot, forget about it!

Paul: Plus, we'll take the opportunity to check back with a few of the drivers we've talked to along the way, to see what the future holds for them.

Kenyette: Hello, hi-dee-ho!

Jared: I only got one more round of this...

Mike: So the initial reaction was a little bit of shock...

Paul: I'm Long Haul Paul. From PRX's Radiotopia and Overdrive Magazine – this is Over The Road. [theme fades out]

Paul: We're talking today about what my job could look like down the road, so what I'd like to do for starters, is tell you exactly what my job looks like today.

[to Denise while on the road] OK, here we go. Let's call and see if this load is ready.

[as narrator] I'm going to tell you how I got to Dallas – me, my wife Denise, and a load of yogurt out of Western Ohio. [phone dial tone] And no, I'm not gonna spare you any of the gritty details. [automated hold menu plays over the phone]

What we're setting out on here is actually the first leg of an Ohio, Texas, Florida triangle. [dial tone continues] I used to run this lane as much as I could, but these days I'm mostly doing short haul milk runs, meaning I'm never more than a day's drive from home. So this trip to Dallas feels like almost a mental retreat, a chance to clear the carbon out of my head.

[over the phone, employee says, "... 1:15 – 1:30 still nothing loaded..."]

That is, just as soon as the load is ready.

[to Denise] [00:05:00] Still no load to Texas. Well this could get interesting, maybe I should restring my guitar.

[as narrator] This is maybe my greatest strength as a truck driver: long delays really don't bother me that much.

[over the phone, employee says, "...call back around 3. I mean I don't know what to tell you, I apologize..." Paul responds, "OK, no big deal, thank you]

I mean, I have my guitar, my books, and at least a thousand Youtube rabbit holes I can crawl inside. I used to wait two days sometimes on a load of produce, and I could occupy myself just fine.

In this case it's only one day. [static-y sounds and muffled voices over CB] But dispatch gives me an option: "Hey Paul" "Yessir" "They said it's gonna be released at 10am today...."]

Do you want to pounce on that load at midnight, or wait 'til the next morning? [Paul responds to dispatcher, "Well...."]

A younger Paul would have slammed a few Mountain Dews and gone to work. [music fades out]

[Paul says to dispatcher, "Would you care if I just left early, early tomorrow? Would that be OK?" Dispatcher responds, "Yeah. That's fine, Paul"]

But I opt to be a solar-powered trucker and wait for daylight. That's a derisive term by the way – *aw, yer just a solar powered trucker* – I used to sling it at my well-slept peers, right up until I became one. [truck door slams]

Anyway, I get to the plant at about 8 a.m.

Paul: [while picking up load] How 'bout the shipping?

[as narrator] This load is what we call a drop and hook, meaning I simply show up with an empty trailer, leave that one, and then go find my loaded trailer. [picking up load, Paul says "Bingo!" in the background]

Once about twenty years ago when I was a hard-running owner operator, I actually hooked onto the wrong trailer at a drop yard like this, and pulled it all the way from North Carolina to Boston. So I always double check the trailer number. Then I take a flashlight underneath to visually inspect the latching mechanism and king-pin, [ambient sound of Paul inspecting truck] check my tires and lights, do a quick tug test to make sure the trailer is secure, and then off we go. [truck door slams] [soft, acoustic guitar music comes in] [quiet chatter between Denise and Paul while they drive]

Denise and I are hoping to get as far as Richland, Missouri, to a mom and pop truck stop that we really like. But after about six hours and two states, fuel is running low.

We stop just shy of the Missouri border, in East St. Louis. [truck engine turns off] I might be showing some bias here, but when you take a large Mid-Western city, and put a direction in front of it – like East Chicago, South St. Paul [truck door closes] – that’s usually a sign you’re in the workin’ side of town. [on the road, Paul says, “Stoppin’ to fuel here.”] And sure enough, the East St. Louis Pilot Travel Center is surrounded by drop lots and non-descript warehouses. Folks, we’re in the cold grey vortex of the industrial Midwest. [ambient sound at gas station, including an announcement over the loudspeaker and music playing]

I buy 113 gallons, which takes about seven minutes to pump and costs a little over \$350. Then we move right along.

[to Denise] [low hum of truck engine while Paul and Denise get back on the road] Back on the road. Can I have some of those nuts?

We cross the mighty Mississippi and into the West. I realize this is largely a symbolic border, but once you cross that river there really does seem to be a little more elbow room for a big truck like mine. [acoustic guitar music comes in]

By evening the fourteen-hour clock is nipping at me, and we’re literally minutes from running out of time when we make it to the Oasis Travel Plaza in Richland. All day I’ve been trying to coax a buddy of mine, who is also running Dallas, to pull off at this very same truck stop so we can have breakfast together. But he still has another couple hours on his clock and is determined to make it as far as Joplin. Back in the day, that buddy of mine might have stopped and let that time go, but tonight he sails on by.

[to Denise] Ah, we’re finally done for the day... [music fades out] [quiet chatter between Paul and Denise] [truck turns off]

Our bags and clothes are all piled in the sleeper, so we move it all onto the front seats for the night.

[to Denise] I'll see if I remembered to bring the pillowcase in my suitcase...

I mean, it's not terrible sharing a single sleeper bunk with your wife of 38 years, but it's tight enough back there that we usually sleep head to foot. And I can't believe I forgot to bring that extra pillowcase...

[to Denise] I probably didn't remember to pack the pillowcase.

Denise only rides along with me like [00:10:00] this a few times a year, and there's just something wonderful about seeing her wake up in the morning in the back of an old 386 Peterbilt, her hair all disheveled and her face still soft with sleep. [soft atmospheric tones come in] I'm reminded again that she is a strikingly beautiful woman.

[to Denise] [truck engine humming] I'm ready when you are, dear

Denise: Paul, how rough do I look?

Paul: You look great, Denise. You're at a truck stop in Missouri. You're gonna be the most attractive woman in there. Let's go. [percussive beat comes in] [truck doors close]

[as narrator] After breakfast, we move all the bags back into the sleeper. [quiet chatter between Paul and Denise] Set up the e-log, tap the tires, check the lights, and then it's off to Texas.

For this second day, the goal is to get as close to Dallas as we can before we shut it down. We do pull off for some barbeque in Big Cabin, Oklahoma, but otherwise, Jackson Browne hurries us right along. [Jackson Browne plays in the background and fades out as simple beat comes in]

We're delivering to a refrigerated warehouse, with probably 150 docks all around the outside. Places like this are a bit of a puzzle to me. Nothing is *made* here; nothing is bought and sold. Truckloads simply come in, and other truckloads go out, so I can only trust there is a reason for it all.

In any case, we get our door assigned pretty quick, drop our trailer, and pull the truck out. [back-up car beeper sounds and truck doors close] Sign some more paperwork,

and the load is done. From there, we're able to walk right across the street for a big plate of huevos rancheros, and then make our way over to the Great American Trucking Show – a little ripe, a little worse for the wear, but otherwise ready for action.

We kind of lingered over this tale longer than we might normally, because I want you to really appreciate what a day's work out on the road entails...for now at least. [beat fades out]

[ambient sounds from Great American Trucking Show, voices chattering]

So here we are, at a massive convention center, kind of like the one where we kicked off this series – full of truck drivers, shiny trucks, and slick salesmen. But there's at least one company here that I've never seen before.

Ethel Ramirez: Hi, I am Ethel Ramirez and I am a safety driver in an autonomous truck, and I love every minute of it.

Paul: Ethel here works for a company called Starsky Robotics, which actually brought one of their trucks right out on the show floor in Dallas. It's kind of like bringing a Model-T to a horse show. [Paul and Ethel get into Ethel's truck, closing doors behind them]

Ethel: OK. This is our pad...

Paul: I'll admit I came over to the Starsky booth expecting to find some slick techno-punk who I could really love to hate. But this kind 60-year-old soul from North Georgia had me eating out of her hand.

Ethel: ...We boot our computer up back here

Paul: [to Ethel] Oh wow, look at that big computer. That's huge. [laughs]

Ethel: We boot our computer up, and then we start the truck on a road where there's lines, and then we engage it with this. And I'll just sit here like this right here. I do not touch that wheel unless it wants to do something out of the ordinary, I do not touch the wheel.

Paul: Ethel is basically there as a back-up, while Starsky works out the bugs in the system.

Ethel: So when the truck's on the road and no-ones in it, it will work perfect.

Paul: [to Ethel] Do you basically trust this system, though? Are you comfortable with this? This automated system that you're using?

Ethel: Yes, I do. I mean, it's just like driving a normal truck. [Paul affirms] Except you're not driving it. I put my hand behind my head. [Paul laughs] You know, just relax, relax and, you know, let it just go down the road, take a double take and I'll just put both hands up. Wave at 'em and smile at 'em. [Paul laughs]

Paul: [as narrator] Driving a truck without touching the wheel: to me that's like pure cognitive dissonance.

Ethel: I mean you've got to have fun when you're driving truck. You know, if you don't find a way to [00:15:00] have a good time out here on the road, then you're not gonna make it.

Paul: [to Ethel] Do you sometimes say, I just want the feeling that you sometimes just wanna feel your hands on that wheel?

Ethel: Well, everybody does. [Paul and Ethel laugh] I am old school, been driving 22 years. And I'm just honored that I'm even a part of this technology stuff. [atmospheric tones come in] I knew it was coming, but I didn't think that I would ever be a part of it.

Paul: This is the reason Starsky is bothering to show up at a truck show at all: because they *do* want truckers to be part of all this technology stuff. What they're working towards is not actually a fully autonomous truck, but more of a hybrid – something they call “tele-op.”

Jeff Runions: So the idea is like doing the tele-op, is most companies can't get off the highway, we can deliver right to the customer.

Paul: They do that by driving the truck remotely, like a drone. So as soon as the roads get too tight or confusing for the automated system, someone like Jeff here ...

Jeff: My name is Jeff Runions.

Paul: ...can simply take over, without having to actually be in the truck.

Jeff: I've been a truck driver for 40 years and I want to try something different I've done everything else. So I did. [Jeff and trucker chat at the trucking show]

Paul: Poor Jeff has been stationed in front of the Starsky truck all day, where he has to field non-stop questions from curious – well, sometimes suspicious – truck drivers. [Jeff continues conversations with truckers at the trucking show]

But he's kind enough to show me how the tele-op works.

Jeff: This is like a prototype. You know, it's got a racing seat from a PlayStation.

Paul: You heard right.

Jeff: Yeah, I got gas, I got brake, everything on my steering wheel. I got where I can click it here and like, right here. You got a steering wheel.

Paul: [as narrator] The controller is surrounded by three flatscreen monitors, showing live feeds from all the truck's cameras.

Jeff: So it's like a game, but it's not, because you got eighty thousand pounds going on a road. A truck is not a game. [truck engine humming]

Paul: This tele-op system has allowed Starsky to do what no other company has done: take a tractor trailer out onto a public road, with nobody in the truck. This is from a video of that test, back in June of 2019. Jeff was running the tele-op, but like I said, no one is in the truck. [upbeat car commercial music comes in]

Jeff: This truck is in South Florida, I'm in Jacksonville, Florida.

Jeff: What I do is I bring it out in the rest area, which is tele-op. Came out into traffic. Then I turned the truck on and it drove itself all the way down by nine miles. Right when we're getting to the toll road to get off, I take it over there right when you see the get off ramp.

Paul: Jeff is here in Dallas to sell this idea of truck drivers, becoming truck *controllers* – basically turning trucking into a desk job.

Jeff: We're gonna have it so the drivers work eight to ten hours a day. And that's it. So everybody is going to be nice and fresh and you're not going to be driving all night long or, you know, working 70 hours a week like truck drivers do nowadays.

Paul: OK, not all of us actually work that much, but Jeff does make some fair points: a tele-op job would mean no more hanging around the East St. Louis Pilot – that's for sure.

Jeff: I mean, most of your life, being a truck driver is sitting somewhere waiting to get loaded or unloaded. How many times you got a place to eat over there? That's why you go to truck stops and eat greasy food because you've been sitting there all day and you're hungry.

Paul: [to Jeff] It's almost like we've created a job that nobody really wants anymore. Nobody with any sense would go do what we did.

Jeff: Exactly. I mean, like these new millennium guys, they really don't want to be on the road. I'm telling you now. Everybody's young we have here, after they've been around a couple of years. They don't want to be out there. [music comes in] We're not taking nobody's job. That's what they don't understand. I'm giving 'em a better job.

Paul: [as narrator] As you can imagine, that idea draws mixed responses in this crowd.

Passerby 1: I don't want to sit in a room and let a truck drive by itself...

Passerby 2: Yeah I'm in wait and see mode...

Passerby 1: I'd go crazy.

Paul: In fact, we meet a family of truckers right there at the Starsky booth that pretty much captures the full range of attitudes.

Clifford Ewing: My name's Clifford Ewing.

Paul: We talk to the dad first.

Clifford: You want my honest opinion; self-driving truck is one of the biggest fucking mistakes they've ever made.

Paul: Well that's one way to look at it. But Clifford and his generation have the luxury of simply dismissing this type of technology.

Clifford: [00:20:00] Well in two years I'll be out of it, so after that they can all go straight to hell.

Paul: But his two sons are also truckers.

Clifford: They can fight with it.

Paul: The older son, Matthew, is 33.

Matthew Ewing: I would be bored.

Paul: And he's pretty skeptical about signing up for a tele-op job.

Matthew: Seeing the Rocky Mountains on a screen, I can do that any time I turn to the nature channel. I'd much rather see the world in person.

Paul: But then we talk to his younger brother Travis.

Travis Ewing: Travis Ewing.

Paul: Who sings a pretty different tune.

Travis: It'd be like playing a video game all day. Get paid to sit in an air-conditioned building and not have to worry about dealing with people. Can't really beat that kind of job.

Paul: And this is what I find so interesting about this company. They expose a kind of invisible fault line in our community: between those of us who see trucking as just another job, and those of us who see it as a way of life. [music fades out]

But before we get too carried away, I want to encourage everyone listening to maintain some healthy degree of skepticism about all of this *technology stuff*, as Ethel put it. Matter of fact – a few months after this interview one of Starksy's main investors pulled out just as they were closing another funding round. Pretty soon, the company laid off all their drivers, and effectively closed up shop as a trucking outfit. So in this case, the hype was just hype, you could say.

But there are others still out there trying to crack the automation nut, and it's just a matter of time before one of these companies gets it right. And then what? [atmospheric tones come in]

What happens to all the truckers who simply want to live life out on the road?

Debbie D: This is gonna be a hell of an unemployment line, I think. You know, when autonomy takes over and puts us all out of work...

Paul: As you can probably imagine, there are a lot of them right here at the Great American Trucking Show.

Debbie D: Well, I'd rather just drive around aimlessly in my truck. [laughs] [Paul performs song at the trucking show, singing and playing acoustic guitar]

Paul: All the way back to the Bible story of Cain, there has been that breed of men and women who have wandered

Debbie J: I don't know nothin' else, I dread retirement, I'm 66 years old.

Paul: – unable to put down roots or work the land.

Daniel Snow: I don't want to do another job in life. We're gonna stay out here every day that God blesses us and let's us do it.

Paul: We're the searchers, the wayfaring strangers – heirs to that great American tradition of mobility.

Phyllis Snow: If you stop, then that's when your life goes away. It's just a style of life.

Paul: And for the truckers of this breed, the thread of hope we hold on to, is the knowledge that there's a lot more to our jobs than just keeping the rig between the white lines. It'll be a few years still before a computer can step into a bullpen and convince a 2000-pound animal to walk onto a trailer or secure a steel coil to a flatbed with chains and binders. Shoot, even the simple rituals of a produce hauler like me – checking tires, switching out trailers, fueling up the reefer unit, interacting with the shippers, brokers and receivers – no tech company is even claiming their truck can do all that on its own...not yet at least. [Paul's performance at the trucking show continues, with the accompaniment of a harmonica]

So we grab our gears, we wait, we watch the new promotional videos, and we shove our worries aside the best we can. We put our energy into more pressing concerns like ELDs and freight rates, the hours of service and the lack of parking. And above all else, we just focus on the next load, then the next one, and then the next one. [Paul's performance fades out]

Hey folks, since we can't get back into the studio right now, I'll be recording the last bit of this one out on the road. Right now I'm parked up at Nick's Barbecue in Carlisle, Arkansas, waiting on [00:25:00] an order of brisket, turnip greens, and fried okra.

Hard to believe, but we've been working on this series for over a year. We first met as a team in early March 2019, and it's May 2020 as I record this. The problem with that is, these stories we're telling aren't standing still – they're out there moving and changing with the rest of us. So before we close up shop, I want to share a few updates from the people we interviewed this past year. Let's kick it off with Jared Sidlo, the bull hauler we met out in Nebraska.

Lacey: [to Jared] So you had a thing for trucks...

Jared Sidlo: Forever.

Paul: Remember that Jared had recently switched to bull-hauling after the ELD mandate went into effect.

Jared: I guess if my names on the truck, I'm not gonna run one.

Paul: But the long hours and time away from home were starting to weigh on him and his young family.

Jared: That's the hardest part, I miss my kids.

Paul: That was over a year ago now. But just a couple months after that first interview, my producer and I were driving down through Kentucky – working on the 'nanner pudding' episode as a matter of fact – when I get this call from Jared.

[over the phone to Jared] Cool, good timing.

Jared happened to be fueling at the Waddy, Kentucky Loves before heading back west.

[over the phone to Jared] Alright. I'll see you in about five.

And we were only a few miles away.

[over the phone] You bet, bye

So we get there and sure enough, there's that red Peterbilt lined up at the diesel pumps, with the big chrome bumper lowered down to within inches of the pavement. [truck engine humming] [Denise, Paul, and Jared greet one another]

Jared was there on one of his usual cattle runs, taking feeders from Kentucky out to Nebraska.

Jared: Got 70 head of steers on, going to a feedlot.

Paul: But then he gave us some news

Jared: I got about one more round in me, and then I'm pulling the plug.

Paul: Jared the bull hauler – is getting out of bull hauling. He found a local tanker gig that'll have him home every night.

Jared: Just miss the kids, and it's just, it's not fun anymore either. Too many regulations, and I'm ready to be done. [music comes in] [truck engine humming]

Paul: By then Jared's truck was topped off, and he did one last check of his cargo to make sure they were all still on their feet.

Jared: Just try and be as good to 'em as you can, they got a pretty crummy life so...

Paul: Then a rainstorm came out of nowhere...

Jared: I got a feeling we're fixin' to get soaked

Paul: We said a hasty goodbye under the fuel island. I talked to Jared again a few months later, and big surprise, he's been picking up some loads of cattle again on the side. Guess it's like he told us out in Nebraska: "You hate it when you're doing it. You miss it when you don't." I wonder if that's what podcasting is like.

[dial tone rings] We recently followed up with the other trucker we met in Nebraska.
[music fades out]

Kenyette: [over the phone] Hello, hi-dee-ho!

Lacy: Kenyette!

Paul: And she also had some big news for us.

Kenyette: Yeah, so I bought a truck in the middle of April.

Paul: This is just classic Kenyette. In the midst of a pandemic, as the world braces for economic collapse – that’s when she makes her move.

Kenyette: So it’s kind of an awkward time, but it’s just, now is the time.

Paul: Quite the contrarian, that Kenyette.

Kenyette: And so if I can make it through the boot camp of the now, then anything after that, once it rebounds, should be a whole lot better. [acoustic guitar music comes in]

Lacy: Does it feel different, driving a truck that you own?

Kenyette: So I liken being a company driver to staying at home at your parent’s house. They may cook your food, buy the food, pay the utilities. But you don’t really get a true sense of living until you get out on your own. And you know, I may completely fall flat on my face, but you got to spread your wings and fly!

Paul: Alright, I’ve got a few quick ones for you. Finn Murphy from Episode 3 is working on his second book, and has, of all things, retired to the life of a country squire, with his own Colorado Cannabis farm.

Meanwhile over on I-75, Genevieve has just released her first album, and Janet – also known as Tammy Wynette – has retired from the [00:30:00] Derby City Truck Stop due to health issues. She now makes beautiful Appalachian quilts. You can find her work on Facebook by searching for “Touché Crochet by Janet.” [music fades out]

Lacy: Hello?

Zane: This is Zane, is this my sister?

Lacy: This is your sister, Lacy.

Paul: So last we heard, brother Zane was still looking for work out in Montana, but pretty determined not to follow in the family tradition of truck driving.

Lacy: So tell me about what you got up to this last summer. What were you doing for work?

Zane: I was a delivery driver to restaurants and retail stores around town in a big, I don't know how long...

Lacy: Like a straight truck.

Zane: Yeah a big long straight truck.

Paul: Now I've gotta stop you right there, because Zane, you should know that I started out driving one of those boxy little straight trucks too – I think it was actually an old U-Haul with a reefer unit stuck on the front. And it was a good gig too, until one day I took my wife out with me on a local delivery run. Three shiny red Peterbilts passed my rig at a high rate of speed, and she turned to me and said: "Hey Paul, you ever wish you drove a real truck?" [upbeat acoustic guitar music comes in]

Lacy: But you're still on team, no over the road driving?

Zane: I mean, yeah. No...

Lacy: Have you been considering it?

Zane: Yeah... Dad got me in touch with a driving school guy he knows and talked to him for a minute. It's not a bad option, you know?

Paul: [as narrator] Just remember one thing, Zane: straight trucks are a gateway drug. One day you're dropping lettuce at the local food co-op, forty years later they're calling you "Four-lane-Zane." So consider yourself warned.

Zane: Well, let me know if you need anything

Lacy: K, love you

Zane: Love you too

Lacy: Bye

Zane: Bye

Paul: Meanwhile, remember how Binda out in California got into trucking because of a couple misdemeanor DUIs he had?

Binda: At that time, it seemed like the best way for me to provide for my family, to where I was bringing in a good amount of money.

Paul: Well, while we were working on the series, those dropped off his record, and he started applying for jobs as a corrections officer.

Binda: I've already applied with the state, and I've also applied with the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Paul: He might even go back and finish off that law degree at some point, but for Binda, the ELD fight is all over.

Binda: The ten - twelve people of us who were all like gung-ho front line, one of us already got out, he got a job. And there's like two three of us that are in the process. So we're all just trying to get out of trucking.

Paul: About a month before we published, Binda wrote to say he got that corrections job after all, and he's all done with trucking for now. [upbeat music intensifies]

I want to end with Binda's fellow activist, and our old friend Mike Landis, because the big update here is also news for all truckers. [music fades out] [atmospheric tones come in]

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) Representative: [addressing crowd] Okay, I want to thank everyone here that participated in person...

Paul: Just ahead of the truck show in Dallas – where we kicked off this episode – the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration actually proposed new rules that would give truckers more flexibility with our driving hours.

FMCSA Representative: [addressing crowd] Important stage here, this is not a final rule...

Mike: I'll give you my take; there's a lot of speculation right now.

Paul: The details are complicated, but the basic gist is that we would be able to stop and start that 14-hour clock at some point during our workday.

Mike: It's a lot better than what we have to work with now.

Paul: Just a few weeks ago, those rules were finally confirmed by the FMCSA. But that doesn't mean Mike is ready to hang it up as an activist.

Mike: It's a good step in the right direction. They're moving in the right direction, and hopefully we can keep 'em going in that direction.

Paul: In fact, you can still spot him sometimes out on the national mall with his old '99 Peterbilt, [truck engine humming] talking to passersby about hours of service, ELDs and the future of trucking. I have to salute the hold-outs like Mike, but for most of us there's no going back to the old ways. As I record this, there are more computers in my truck than there are in my home, and no doubt they're here to stay. [music fades out]

[00:35:00] So yeah, I'm still out here. Though my last rig was sold off long ago. After my big wreck – the one that nearly claimed my life, along with that canary yellow Western Star and a regrettable quantity of cheese – I never quite found my footing again as an owner-operator. So I just drive for the other guy now, and truth be told, these days I'm trying to do a little more stuff like singing, writing and podcasting, and a little less trucking.

Seems like if you've been around this business long enough, you begin to devise some sort of exit strategy. If you're lucky, you get to be like Finn or Binda, and leave on your own terms. Some, like Janet and Big Jim, get out because the time comes, and they have no other choice. But then you do have your lifers like Idella the pistol-packin' money hauler, who couldn't be anything *but* a trucker, and your hardcore cowboys like Fast Freddie, who pretty much died with his boots on.

I used to think that would be the way to go, out there in some deep dark desert, running with the helm in your hand 'til the day you die, consumed by the oneness of that thing that was here in some form before you were, and which will be here when you are long gone – with no second act, no soliloquy – just rocked to sleep on the shoulder of that long legged lover: the road.

After doing this podcast, though, eh I'm not so sure. I'm thinkin' there might just be more to life than the next load – even for a recovering produce hauler like me. [loud sound of truck starting up]

Anyway, this is the kind of stuff you think about when you've got 600 miles of I-20 to cover before sundown.

After the Great American Trucking Show is over on Sunday afternoon, Denise and I head up to a dock north of Dallas and reset our reefer to 20 below, so we can pick up a load of frozen food. [short exchange between Paul and someone over CB]

That night we make it as far as Terrel, Texas, to the TA truck stop there, where I find one of my favorite waitresses, Maxie, who is in her 80s now. The next day we cross Louisiana, Mississippi, and a little sliver of Alabama, then head down into the Florida panhandle. We finally unload in a place called Kissimmee. [sound of truck being unloaded] [theme music comes in]

The next morning, we hike the reefer up to 32 degrees for our load of orange juice, and head north on I-75. We haul through Atlanta and K-Town – where my personal watermelons got pureed in that fender bender. Then up and over the Cumberland Plateau; past the 49er Fuel Center, past the Derby City and the 76; then up through Cincinnati and into the verdant fields of Western Ohio. I can't quite recall where that orange juice ended up. I have a hard time remembering loads. After a while, they really do all become a blur.

[Paul's sings theme song]

Our Over The Road pit crew includes producer and sound designer Ian Coss, and contributing producer Lacy Roberts at Transmitter Media. Our editor from Overdrive Magazine is Todd Dills. Our digital producer is Erin Wade, our project manager, the [00:40:00] wonderful lady who holds everything together, is Audrey Mardavich.

One last hero: Collaborative storytelling can be a highly fraught process. For a grizzled old trucker like me, in essence a practitioner of a solitary trade for almost forty years now, I reached a point when this whole 'team' thing just proved to be more than I thought I could handle. So one July night at around eleven o'clock, I actually wound up resigning from this project. The best explanation I can muster for doing something so rash and self-sabotaging, is that when you're paid by the mile to run, running just kind of becomes your default solution for anything that overwhelms you. But the person who skillfully talked me off of that ledge the following day at a picnic table outside of the PRX Podcast Garage was a rare and beautiful soul who also happens to be our Executive Producer, Julie Shapiro. Thanks for helping me turn that corner, and for giving ol' LHP a second chance. Truth be told I'm a better person for having worked with you.

All the music on the show is by Ian Coss and myself, featuring performances by Travis "The Snakeman" Wammack, Terry "Two Socks" Richardson, Tishomingo Jim Whitehead, Jan Grant Gullet, The Late Great Roger Clark, and Mr. Andrew Marshall. Additional engineering by Donnie Gullet down in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

Special shout-out to Overdrive's own Jason Cannon, who moderated the panel you heard at the top of the show. Thanks also to the truckers you heard throughout this episode: Debbie Desiderato, Daniel and Phyllis Snow, Debbie Jacobs, Jametrius Heeron, Michelle Catch and Chris Bradley.

And thanks again to all the folks who have helped make this show happen: Gretta Cohn at Transmitter Media, Max Heine at Overdrive Magazine, and the whole marketing team at PRX – Charlotte Cooper, David Cotrone and Mariel Cariker. Very special thanks also to Jeff Templeton at Milkhouse Studios in Richmond, Indiana, who is recording this right now. He's the one solely responsible for remembering to tell me to quit tapping my foot while I speak. And of course, a very special thanks to my beautiful wife Denise – who over the course of our production and the course of the last 38 years, has held things together for me in ways that no one will ever know. [soft acoustic guitar music comes in]

Over The Road is made possible by support from the folks I've worked for, for a really long time - Moeller Trucking: now celebrating over 30 years of safe and reliable transportation for the food industry. Oh, and by the way, turns out right now, they've got a couple open trucks. So, for more information, check out MoellerTrucking.com. And, one favor: be sure to tell them Long Haul Paul sent ya.

Over The Road is a collaboration between Overdrive Magazine and PRX's Radiotopia – a collection of the best independent podcasts found. Look for Overdrive Magazine at Overdriveonline.com, where you can read Todd's Channel 19 blog, hear the Overdrive Radio podcast, and explore news, business and lifestyle reporting about trucking.

You can find Over The Road online at overtheroad.fm. You can see some of my videos on YouTube by looking for "Long Haul Paul Music." Thanks for listening, and hanging in 'til the very end of the run. [music fades out]

Thank you, Ian. It's been a pleasure and I'm sure – you know, the thing about podcasts, once you have a podcast, it's forever. So this will not be our last discussion. I'm sure.

[00:44:40] **END OF EPISODE.**