



SUCCESS

for Over a Century



Written by Nate Hendley

Founded over a century ago, Dorsey Trailer of Elba, Alabama designs, manufactures, and fabricates trailers that haul goods on roads and highways. Its trailers have been used by NASCAR, country music bands, and even the makers of hit TV shows. Plenty of other clients, big and small, also favor the firm's wares.

"We supply trailers to Lowe's, Home Depot, Ryder, U-Haul, and major steel companies," President Trey Gary states with pride.

Dorsey's specialties include aluminum trailers, steel trailers, and combination trailers, chip vans, tagalongs, and lowboys. Chip vans are durable but lightweight enclosed trailers commonly used for commodity hauling or to transport wood chips in forestry operations. Dorsey's chip vans are up to 53 feet long and come in open top, closed top, and walking floor formats. Tagalongs are built to accommodate an extra piece of equipment, while lowboy trailers ride low to the ground, have two separate drops in deck height, and are well-suited for transporting big construction equipment, cars, and other heavy loads.

Dorsey sells its trailers through a vast dealer network that stretches across the United States. Companies in the over-the-road sector, which entails long-distance hauls that can last for weeks, make up about 80 percent of its end users. Other customers include businesses in the oil field, brick, road and bridge work, and construction markets.

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Durability, price, customization, quality, company response time, and customer service are the main advantages Dorsey offers over competitors, says Gary. But the biggest selling point is “the people here at Dorsey,” he adds.

“We’re a bit different as a company in how we treat dealers,” explains Assistant Vice President Joseph Scott. “Everybody treats their dealers really well—all manufacturers do—but we’re very personable with our dealers. We see them a lot; we go on the road with them.”

In addition to the head office, the company's facilities in Elba include production lines for platform trailers, chip trailers, and all-aluminum platform trailers. About a fifth of the company's work is outsourced while the rest is performed in-house. “There are some places around town that do some components for us. Then, some places in Birmingham do a little bit,” says Scott. Dorsey also maintains a parts shop.

Given its status today as one of the top trailer manufacturers in North America, Dorsey's roots are exceedingly humble. The company was founded as a machine shop in 1911 by Henry and Pete Dorsey. From its base in a converted livery stable, the firm initially repaired trucks, power saws, and other equipment for clients in the timber trade. Very soon, the company



expanded its focus, moved into bigger accommodations, and began designing and building its own products. Within two decades, company engineers had created its first commercial freight trailers, and Dorsey began to establish a nationwide reputation as a premier trailer manufacturer.

“They built refrigerated trailers, dry van trailers, and furniture trailers or high-capacity van trailers. They also built some dump trailers, but all along, they built flatbeds,” recalls Gary of the company's early years.

Flatbed trailers have an open deck and no walls or roofs. Refrigerated or ‘reefer’ trailers, by contrast, are enclosed and contain a refrigeration system to keep frozen foods and other goods cold. Dry vans are also enclosed but designed to keep cargo dry, not frigid. Dump trailers (not to be confused with dump trucks) are typically used to transport aggregates such as sand, soil, and gravel at landscaping or construction sites. A lift mechanism is used to raise the trailer deck and dump the load. A furniture trailer, as the name implies, is used to transport couches, tables, chairs, and other household items. ▶▶



▶ During World War II, Dorsey was converted to wartime production. “We’ve done a lot of trailers for the military. We have machinery in our fab shop that has war stamp commissions on it,” shares Scott. After hostilities ended, the company continued using its expertise to produce military-related products, including electronic vans for missile programs and transporters for rockets.

Approximately 15 years ago, Dorsey began phasing out production of reefer trailers and vans to focus primarily on flatbed trailers. Ownership of the company has also changed over the decades; it is now owned by Propst Companies, a diversified investment firm based in Huntsville, Alabama.

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During its long history, Dorsey Trailer has survived economic upheavals and natural disasters alike. The latter includes a series of catastrophic floods as the area in which the company is based is known for flooding. Some storms have produced floodwaters rising to 18 feet, Scott remembers.

Not only did Dorsey withstand these travails, but the company stayed open during the COVID pandemic, which began in early 2020. The virus had an effect on business and made it difficult at times to maintain a full workforce. Yet, for all the challenges brought about by COVID, the company flourished and enjoyed strong sales. ▶▶

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► Business has slowed down a bit lately, for several reasons. High interest rates have pushed up costs, and 2024 is a presidential election year, so there is uncertainty about the economic policies that will be pursued by the occupant of the White House over the next four years. There were “some record years after COVID where a lot of trailers were sold and manufactured. It’s just come down a little bit,” says Scott.



These challenges the company faces are industry-wide; finding skilled workers, for example, can sometimes be difficult, since insufficient numbers of young people are entering the skilled trades to replace existing retirees. No doubt, Dorsey will endure and continue to boost its market presence.

“Great employees, quality product, and a great dealer network. That would be our three key ingredients.”



Unsurprisingly for a company that has been around so long, it boasts a roster of very high-profile clients. Dorsey has made hauler vans for NASCAR and trailers for country music band, Alabama. The company also built a black, enclosed 45-foot van trailer for the hit 1980s TV show ***Knight Rider***. This van trailer, which was used on the show to transport the super-customized, futuristic Pontiac Firebird Trans Am that star David Hasselhoff used on crime-fighting missions, can be viewed on Dorsey’s Facebook page.

Asked if there is a secret to the company's longevity, Gary says, "great employees, quality product, and a great dealer network. That would be our three key ingredients."

The company currently has 350 personnel and prefers to hire people who are willing to make a long-term commitment. "We want somebody who wants to build a career at Dorsey. We don't just want an employee," states Scott.

"We don't want you here for just a year or two years. We work hard to keep our [staff]. We want their first day and their last day [to be spent] working here," adds Gary. The company offers a 401(k) program and other financial incentives to support and retain its workers.

Above all else, the company values quality work. Dorsey has an internal quality control team who are "out there monitoring trailers all day long," says Gary. It has also hired consultants to implement lean manufacturing practices to maximize efficiency and minimize waste. Safety is also addressed in a comprehensive, well-organized fashion, with paid safety staff, a dedicated committee, and a commitment to safe working conditions and practices in general.

Much promotion is handled via participation in trade groups. Dorsey belongs to the National Trailer Dealers Association, Alabama Trucking Association, Alabama Forestry Association, and the Truck Trailer Manufacturers Association. The company takes part in charitable events as well, including initiatives to raise funds and awareness for breast cancer and men's health. The company made a financial contribution in conjunction with the Elba Public Library to support the Dolly Parton Imagination Library of Coffee County.

"We invest heavily in our community. Anything to do with schools, any sport here in Elba [or surrounding areas], we're there," says Scott.



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Even though Dorsey Trailer's heritage dates back over a century, management is not sitting on its laurels. The company is hard at work developing new products, such as a series of fully galvanized trailers, and offering updates and enhancements of its existing trailers.

Moving forward, the plan is to keep on the same path that has led this company to such long-lived success. This includes "expanding into new markets, new designs, and listening to the customer," says Gary. "What are they hauling? And what can we do to make their job easier?" ■

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