

If you ask Joe Cyr what to call people from Maine, he responds "Maniacs." Business people from Maine tend to be practical and hard working but it also takes a sense of humor to deal with those harsh Maine winters. Joe qualifies on all counts. In addition, he is well known and well liked in the bus industry. He and his wife Suzanne, along with their children Mike and Becky, run a family-owned bus company that is now celebrating its 100th anniversary.

Joe's grandfather, John Thomas Cyr, came from Caribou in northern Maine, within walking distance of New Brunswick and one of the most northern points in the continental 48 states. He moved south to Old Town, Maine, a little north of Bangor, in about 1903. Here, he worked for Jordan Lumber Company and eventually founded a livery stable. His initial success as an entrepreneur was obvious when that livery stable in Old Town grew to include 32 horses.

The Early Years

The company branched out into providing vehicle services when the Old Town City Council approved their truck license on May 21, 1912. John Thomas Cyr was 52 years old at this time and his oldest son Joseph, who joined him in the business, was about 25 years old. This was the beginning of John T. Cyr & Sons. Another son, Albert, was about 19 at the time the company was founded. He continued to be employed as a weaver in the woolen mill until he joined the company later in the 1920s.

Two younger sons, Arthur and Harvey, were eight and four years old at that time. Both later joined the company as they grew up. By the time he was 18, Harvey was already driving Cyr's taxi service but went on to a career in education before returning to the family business. The company soon expanded into a delivery and taxi service with the Cyr horse-drawn carriages transporting mail, providing transportation and even serving as hearses.

It was in 1922 that the little company decided to expand into two areas. The company received a contract to transport Old Town schoolchildren. They purchased their first cars, Studebakers, to provide this service. That same year the company also began to offer freight service. Their first major customer was the still-famous Old Town Canoe Company. John T. Cyr and Sons transported supplies from the rail yard and lumber from the woods to the canoe factory and then brought the completed canoes out. In 1930 and 1931, the company was paid \$20 a week to transport students from Gilman Falls and Stillwater to the Old Town school. This required the company to purchase vehicles larger than the automobiles.

The small company apparently had several locations during the early days. It was

founded on South Water Street behind Jordan Lumber Company, near the railroad



John T. Cyr & Sons Celebrates 100th Anniversary



Article by Larry Plachno
Photos courtesy of John T. Cyr & Sons Inc.
unless noted

John T. Cyr & Sons Inc. celebrates its 100th Anniversary in March of 2012. Known to many as Cyr Bus Line, the company was founded in Old Town, Maine and continues to be headquartered there. Originally founded as a family business, the company still remains very much a family business run by Joe and Sue Cyr and their children. Shown here is one of seven MCI J4500 coaches delivered to John T. Cyr & Sons in 2007.

track and the Penobscot River in a building that had been used as a livery for several years. In later years, the downtown location was moved to 125 Main Street in Old Town, not far from today's bandstand. However, records indicate that the Cyr family also had a stable near the family home on Bosworth Street located on French Island in the river. The history of French Island includes mention by several families of renting a horse and buggy from the Cyrs. Between 1926 and 1980, the French Island address was the primary location of the company.

New Management and Public Bus Service

John managed the business until his retirement by age 70 in 1930. Joseph was already

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While the company got started in buses by transporting students, it eventually expanded into charters and scheduled service. This photo shows a line-up of Cyr buses in earlier years.



Originally founded on French Island, the company remained headquartered there until 1980. The signs offer chartered buses, trucking, taxi service and fuel from the gas pump in front.

very active in the company and took over management at this time. Although managing to survive the early years of the Depression, the company faced a major family tragedy in 1934 when John died in May and his son Joseph, then only 46, died in August. John received a fitting tribute in the local newspaper proclaiming him as a long time resident of Old Town, a friend to many, a devoted husband and father and a local businessman. This left Albert, Joseph's younger brother, in charge of the company. Brother Harvey at this time was a teacher and the principal at Grand Isle, Maine. Harvey gave up his career in education to join and help out the family business. In 1937, Harvey was living at the family residence at 15 Bosworth Street on French Island and the company offered a variety of services including trucking, taxi, gas and storage.

Meeting the needs of local residents, John T. Cyr & Sons ventured into public bus ser-

vice for the first time in 1939. The initial route was local and connected Old Town with nearby Milford, Bradley and Great Works along the Penobscot River. Due to the wartime need for transportation, the route was soon expanded south to serve Eddington, North Brewer and Bangor. A waiting room for passengers was located at 33 N. Main Street in downtown Old Town.

About this same time John T. Cyr & Sons began offering trips for local residents in its buses. The cost per passenger was usually one dollar and passengers would board the buses at the garage. One popular trip went southeast of Bangor to Green Lake so passengers could sit in the sun or go swimming at Jenkins Beach. Some trips went a little further southeast to Trenton where passengers could dig clams at Hancock Point. These trips returned to Old Town with washtubs full of clams in the aisle of the bus. The company

continued these excursion trips into the 1940s. Many residents fondly remember these trips.

In addition to providing local transportation along the river, John T. Cyr & Sons also had a military contract during World War II. The company transported German prisoners of war to detention camps in remote areas of northern Maine including Aroostook, Penobscot and Piscataquis counties. After hostilities ended, the bus company brought these prisoners back south so that they could return home.

Harvey's son Joseph was born in 1940 and was named after Harvey's older brother. By age 10 he was already working in the bus company. By age 15, Joe was driving school buses. This was legal and not unusual at that time since about half of the school bus drivers were high school students. In 1949, Albert served as president of the company with Harvey as treasurer. Arthur was still involved at this time. Harvey proved to have the most interest in the company and began to buy out his brothers over the course of several years. By 1951, Harvey became the sole owner. Albert passed away in 1952 and by that time Harvey was already running the bus company. While Harvey continued to operate the taxi and scheduled bus service, he began to focus more on the school bus side of the business.

Like many bus owners, in addition to managing the company Harvey could frequently be found driving one of his buses. The history of French Island has a chapter on John T. Cyr & Sons. Several of the school children riding the school bus from French Island to St. Joseph's School remember Harvey as a driver on that run.

What may have been the worst disaster the company ever faced happened on October 1, 1951. Because of dropping winter temperatures, the fleet was parked in the garage overnight to make them easier to start in the morning. This included seven full size school buses plus a stretched 15-passenger Chevrolet that the staff called the "hot dog." The garage caught fire that night and the com-

The note on this photo reads "Going clamming in Lubec in the 1940s." In these years, the company operated several trips for local residents to go swimming or digging clams. One might question the smell in the bus with baskets of clams in the aisle on the way home.



pany lost everything. It was thought that the fire started from short circuit on a bus being worked on. The following morning there were no school buses to drive the students to school. However, the local Chevrolet dealer found four new buses overnight and a few used Internationals so that school bus service did resume the following day.

Like his father, Joe joined the family business to fill in after a death in the family. Joe graduated from Old Town High School in 1959 and went on to college at Farmington Teacher's College and then at Husson College. Joe left college in 1962 to help out in the family business when the company bookkeeper, Harvey's cousin, died unexpectedly. Initially, he worked as a mechanic, bookkeeper, secretary and payroll clerk.

Harvey passed away in 1967, leaving Joe in charge of the company. By that time Joe was already running the company by himself with the help of a couple of key staff members. At that point the company had grown to include 13 buses, two dump trucks and 14 employees. Two of Joe's first major decisions were to discontinue the public bus service to Bangor, which was now a money-losing proposition. He also discontinued the trucking business in order to concentrate on bus operations.

Joe's three brothers and three sisters failed to take an interest in the bus company. As a result, Joe's mother offered him the opportunity to buy the business. Joe gave his mother weekly payments for five years and then owned the company himself. A minor setback came in the summer of 1970 when the garage burned down and a school bus as well as the apartment over the garage was lost in the fire. A neighboring house, only 14 inches away, was spared.

Expansion in School Buses and Coaches

The energy crisis and fuel shortage of the 1970s prompted Joe to try to reestablish the



One of the worst disasters John T. Cyr & Sons has had to face was the garage fire of October 1, 1951. When the flames were put out, the company had lost seven full-sized school buses plus a 15-passenger stretched Chevrolet. While the company missed one day of school bus service, they were back in business the following day with a new fleet of buses.

local bus line from Old Town to Bangor, but the support was not there. A shuttle service at the University of Maine in Orono was successful for a time. Real expansion for John T. Cyr & Sons started in 1976 when it purchased the company transporting school children in nearby Brewer and took over that contract. This was the company's first major account outside of the Old Town area.

In 1978, the large school bus contract for Bangor came up for bid. Joe agonized over whether to bid on the contract. Winning it would necessitate purchasing 25 or 30 new school buses, increasing the company debt and expanding the size of the staff. Losing it would allow another company to gain a major foothold nearby. Joe elected to bid on

the contract and took over in 1978. In spite of the fact that the price of fuel went up drastically, the company did well in Bangor and is still there transporting students. Since then they have also acquired a number of other contracts elsewhere.

At about that same time Joe expanded into coach operations when he purchased a 1959 GMC PD4104 coach for \$15,000 in 1975. Joe learned to drive the coach the hard way by driving it home to Old Town after purchasing it. That first coach is still in the fleet today. Original plans to use the coach for senior citizen tours fell through when the seniors encountered funding problems. However, the new coach business did well and Joe purchased the com-

The company moved into coach operations in 1975 with the purchase of a used 1959 PD4104 GM coach. It was given fleet number 28 and is still on the property today. PAUL LEGER.



As coach operations expanded, the company moved up to buying new coaches. This MCI MC-9 was one of several new coaches added to the John T. Cyr & Sons fleet in the 1980s.





In 1980, the company moved from French Island to a new and modern facility in the industrial park. The new location offered more space as well as more modern facilities.



School buses have long been a major part of Cyr operations. Taken in the 1980s, this scene early on a snowy morning shows the school buses ready to leave on their routes.

pany's first new coach in 1983. The University of Maine was one of their first coach customers. Joe and his wife Suzanne acquired Northstar Tours and began to offer their own tour packages to keep the coaches busy. This developed into Cyr Northstar Tours that became a division of John T. Cyr & Sons in 1990.

Meanwhile, the company was forced to seek a new home after spending 68 years on French Island. Urban development grants to reduce congestion on the island made it necessary for the company to find a new garage and office location. The new location selected was on Gillman Falls Avenue in the industrial park northwest of downtown Old Town. The official move came on October 29, 1980 when a long line of vehicles drove from French Island and down Gillman Falls Avenue. This undoubtedly turned out for

the best since the new location was not only more modern but also had room for future expansion.

The company finally got back into the scheduled route business, but it was with coaches and not a local transit service. The nearby Bangor and Aroostook Railroad had operated bus service since 1936 and when passenger train service ended in 1961 it was replaced with B&A buses. Their route between Bangor and northern Maine had Greyhound connections to New York City's Port Authority Bus Terminal. When the B&A gave up the route in 1984, John T. Cyr & Sons stepped in to take over the service north of Bangor to Aroostook. Later, the company applied for a state subsidy to continue the route and it was granted. Today, John T. Cyr & Sons continues to operate year-round bus service between

Bangor and Aroostook with connections to Boston and New York City.

The Maine Society of Entrepreneurs named Joe and Suzanne Cyr "Entrepreneurs of the Year" in 1991. Former Senator Margaret Chase presented the award to the Cyrs at her library in Skowhegan. At that time the company operated 120 buses and 25 vans with a staff of 150. John T. Cyr & Sons was considered the largest school bus company in Maine. The company also owned 14 full-size coaches that could operate throughout the United States and Canada. A total of 50 different tours were offered, including one to Alaska.

John T. Cyr & Sons celebrated 70 years of transporting Old Town schoolchildren in 1992. In spite of paying more than \$54,700 in excise taxes for vehicle registrations the previous

Like many bus company owners and managers, Joe Cyr has done every job in the place at one time or another. He still gets behind the wheel for special movements.



Joe still gets involved in many things. He is shown here installing lettering on the front of a coach.





John T. Cyr & Sons Inc. took delivery of seven new MCI J4500 coaches in 2007. Some had this interesting paint scheme with a bright red exterior and imitation silversiding below the windows.



This X3-45 Prevost was photographed adjacent to the Penobscot River. The paint scheme is a dark blue with white trim and black lettering. Cyr operates many makes and models of buses.

year, the company lost the three-year school bus contract to a lower bidder. It is noteworthy that Cyr won the contract back three years later and has retained it every since.

Since it was founded, John T. Cyr & Sons has always been a family business. Joe's wife Suzanne started doing payroll from home in the mid-1970s when the children were in school. In 1983, when the Cyr children were older, she came to work in the office. Along with Tom St. Louis she founded the tour department. One of their first long trips was to Alaska, with the planning being done by ruler and map in those pre-computer days. This involved a trip of 12,000 miles with two drivers and a new MC-9.

Fate repeated itself again in 1990 with a third generation Cyr. Both Harvey and his son Joe were drawn into the business from schools because of a staff shortage. Tom St. Louis passed away in 1990, leaving the company shorthanded. Joe's son Mike left the University of Maine to join the company on a full-time basis. Mike soon taught himself about the computers, radios, cameras and similar equipment. He also manages the coach side of the business.

Later, when bookkeeper Richie King decided to retire after 23 years with the company, Mike offered to train his sister Becky so she could get involved with the company. Today, Becky works several hours each day in the office and sometimes brings her children Ruby and Ian when there is no babysitter.

Joe's brother Jerry worked for the company for a while. He managed the Bangor school bus operation and then became a coach driver and mechanic at the Old Town garage. Joe and Sue's second son Chris is the office manager for Freightliner of Maine in Westbrook. Oldest daughter Julie and her husband have three daughters and live in Sudbury, Massachusetts.

The Coach Fleet

The company has operated many different makes and models of buses and coaches over the years but has essentially concentrated on MCI and Setra coaches in recent decades. Setra coaches from Germany were first introduced in the United States in late 1984. In 1986, they were first purchased for the Cyr fleet. One advantage

was that the U.S. headquarters for the company was located in Maine. Another advantage is that the new coaches had a fully paintable exterior.

Joe Cyr took advantage of this with a combination of different paint schemes and different colors on different Cyr coaches. This created a positive reaction with passengers, many of whom were impressed by the designs and multiple colors. Some customers even asked for specific coaches. The colorful coaches were also popular within the industry and several appeared on magazine pages and covers.

At least briefly, John T. Cyr and Sons expanded coach operations with another garage in Portland. Brunswick Transportation Co. in South Portland had an excellent reputation. It operated as The Maine Line and was owned by the Ouellette family. Peter Pan Bus Lines in Springfield, Massachusetts had acquired Main Line Tours as part of an acquisition involving several companies but decided not to keep the company because it did not fit in with their scheduled routes. It was sold to John T. Cyr & Sons in December of 2003.

Shown here is a new Volvo 9700 in the Cyr fleet. One of these is currently operating on the scheduled route to test its durability.



Back in 2003, John T. Cyr & Sons took delivery of several Setra coaches. They were painted in different color schemes.



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This gave Cyr a much larger population base and increased the company size to become the largest charter and tour operator in Maine. A year later, *Metro Magazine* named Cyr Bus the Operator of the Year in 2004. By 2007, Joe and his son Mike decided that they would rather concentrate on operating out of the Old Town area. When another bus operator from Portland offered to sell out to the Cyrs, Joe and Mike sold their South Portland operation to him instead.

Recent interesting additions to the fleet included a 12-passenger Dodge Sprinter in 2006. It had a large outward-opening side door and was used to transport the staff of Bangor-based Eastern Maine Medical Center between hospital buildings. After selling the Portland, Maine operation in 2007, Cyr Bus Line expanded its Old Town coach fleet with the addition of seven new brightly painted MCI J4500 coaches. The J4500 model has been the most popular tour and charter coach in the United States for several years. In 2009, Cyr Bus Line was the first operator in the Northeast to take delivery of a Volvo 9700 model built in Mexico.

The Cyr family has always been active in the local community. Joe has been particularly active with the Old Town-Orono YMCA. He strongly supported the new field house and got involved with a group of volunteers that worked to keep costs down by finishing construction themselves. The new Cyr Family Field House opened in 2001. Joe has also served the community by serving on the boards of the Merrill Merchants Bank and St. Joseph's Hospital.

Joe Cyr is also active in industry events. He frequently attends national bus trade shows where he can network with other bus



After 100 years of operation, Sue and Joe Cyr continue to run John T. Cyr & Sons as a family business. In addition to Joe's brother Peter who handles body work in the shop, Joe and Sue have two children, Mike and Becky, who are now also active in the business and represent a fourth generation. Grandchildren may well become a fifth generation keeping the company a family business.

operators and see firsthand the latest industry developments. John T. Cyr & Sons has twice served as the host company for Bus Bash events held in the Bangor-Old Town area. The first took place in 1991 and the second in 1997.

Cyr Bus Today

Today, John T. Cyr & Sons continues to operate school bus service, coach charters and the route north from Bangor to northern Maine. Cyr Northstar Tours offers a wide

range of tours originating from the local area. The total fleet includes 251 vehicles with 215 school buses, 22 coaches, plus 14 vans and smaller vehicles. The company provides school bus service in 22 communities serving 11 school districts. Larger coach charter customers include the University of Maine, Husson University and Colby College. The Cyr bus fleet travels about three million miles annually, mainly in Maine but also in much of the United States and even in Canada. John T. Cyr & Son has come a long way from those early horse-drawn wagons in 1912.

Now celebrating 100 years on May 21, 2012, John T. Cyr & Sons is still very much a family business in a relatively small community. In addition to Joe and Sue, Joe's brother Peter handles bodywork in the shop. Joe and Sue now have two children active in the business, representing the fourth generation. Son Mike not only manages the coach division but also serves as the company IT expert. Daughter Becky Whitmore serves as the company bookkeeper. Joe says that there are two grandchildren who might get involved with the company as the fifth generation. Becky's son Ian is only about a year old while Mike has a 12-year old son appropriately named John T. Cyr.

Joe comments: "I have been lucky enough to find some very good people to work with and have some great partners that have helped me along the way. With any luck, John T. Cyr & Sons, Inc. will prosper for a long time to come." Whatever happens in the future, it appears likely that the company will still be a family business based in Old Town, Maine. □

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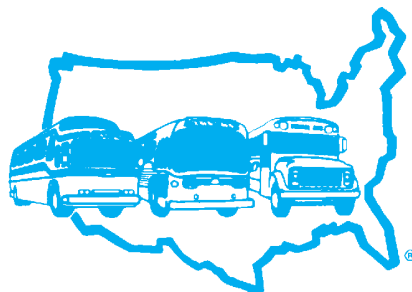
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