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Cyr Bus Line Celebrates 110 Years

by Dave Millhouser
Photos courtesy of Cyr Bus Line

Cyr Bus Line, one of the oldest and most respected bus operations in the United States, celebrates 110 years of operation in 2022. Founded in 1912 by John T. Cyr, this family-owned company is headquartered in Old Town and operates both school buses and coaches. Shown here is a Volvo 9700 carrying attractive external graphics promoting Old Town.

During the summer of 1975, as a newly minted bus parts salesman, the apogee of my sales swing through New England was Cyr Bus Line, just north of Bangor, in Old Town Maine. As luck would have it, Joe Cyr, then owner and president of the company, was available and showed me around the facility. Technically, the official name of the company is "John T. Cyr and Sons." John T was Joe's grandfather. The first thing he wanted me to see was a pristine 1959 General Motors PD 4104 motorcoach.

Back in the day many companies ran "experienced" equipment, but two things about this coach hinted at how unique Cyr was. First, it looked like it had just come off the assembly line – a tribute to caring maintenance in a part of the world that is tough on equipment. Even more significant was the fact that, though the lot was full of newer buses, Joe chose to show his oldest first.

For those unfortunates unfamiliar with Maine, once you get north of Augusta the

scenery is beautiful, but the population thins out. Cyr serves a large area, but there is not a ton of people. As a result, there is not a lot of competition. Over the years, Cyr has treated customers as if they had many transportation choices, even when they did not – a formula that has been successful for more than 110 years.

The company was founded in 1912 by 53-year-old John T. Cyr and his oldest son Joseph (Joseph is current day Joe Cyr's uncle and namesake) as a freight and livery business in the French Island section of Old Town. The fledgling company suffered an early setback when their newly acquired horse died unexpectedly in its stall. Apparently horses do not come with a warranty.

During those early years, a major part of Cyr's business was transporting lumber and raw materials to the Old Town Canoe Company and moving completed canoes to the rail station for shipment. One hundred ten years later, both companies are thriving, and now next door neighbors. Cyr's current,

modern facility is between Old town Canoe and a large bakery.

By 1922 it was clear that the new century belonged to the internal combustion engine, and Cyr bought their first motor vehicle, a Studebaker, operated as a "public car" in taxi service. Joseph, with the help of his brothers Harvey and Albert, had developed into a key player, and by 1930 John had retired. The company was now operating three gasoline-powered automobiles to transport school children in addition to 32 horses used for livery and hauling freight, out of their building on Old Town's "French Island."

Student transportation was a niche market for Cyr, but in 1930 it was reported that "the passenger automobile formerly used was too small to carry them comfortably. For this reason arrangements were made with Joseph Cyr to secure a combination truck and bus body large enough to meet the need." Cyr was in the bus business.



The Cyr diversified fleet of eight buses was housed in this building on French Island. The garage and the entire fleet of eight buses was destroyed in a fire in the early 1950s.



After the fire, the company struggled to obtain buses to restore school service. A bus dealer in nearby Bangor helped. They were successful and only a single day of school was lost.

Sadly, in 1934 the company lost both of its founders, when John (74, retired and in failing health) passed away in May, and then in August Joseph died suddenly at 49, thrusting younger brothers Albert, Arthur and Harvey into leadership of the growing company. During the 1930s in addition to trucking, Cyr was running scheduled bus service to local towns, operating taxis and limousines (and a hearse), as well as provid-

ing school transportation. They ran "specialty trips" like excursions to Hancock Point, Maine to dig clams, and chartered their buses to groups. It would be difficult to imagine anything "wheeled" the Cyrs did not do.

This was accomplished by a diverse and colorful fleet of passenger vehicles including (but not limited to) Yellow Coaches, Fords,

Fitzjohns and Studebakers. Most were purchased used, but in 1941 they picked up a new 20-passenger Chevrolet-powered Fitzjohn.

When WWII erupted, it became almost impossible to acquire newer equipment, Cyr's flair for maintenance and creativity served them well as they extended the useful life of their existing fleet. The war effort

One of the more popular activities during the 1930s was the Cyr bus trips to Hancock Point, Maine to dig clams. Some of the people in this group brought along bags to carry their catch back home. Cyr Bus Line also chartered buses to groups and operated school bus service.



clearly altered the mix of business, but created one unique new service – transporting German prisoners of war to and, at wars end, from POW camps that were established in the remote wilderness areas of Aroostook, Penobscot and Piscataquis counties.

The trips to the camps were likely grim, but those from the camps at war's end were more cheerful, as happy young German soldiers headed home to their families. Perhaps this was similar to modern school bus runs, where the kids are grumpy on their way to school, versus happy when heading home, but on a grander scale.

In the early 1950s Cyr's building on French Island, along with its entire fleet of eight buses, was destroyed by a fire. Scrambling, they managed to get enough equipment from Bean and Conquest, a Bangor dealer, to quickly restore school service. Miraculously (except perhaps from the viewpoint of the school kids), only a single day of school was lost.

Two other milestones were passed in the early 1950s – one major and the other unheralded at the time. Harvey Cyr had, by 1951, bought out his family members and was now sole owner. His son Joe was (starting as a 10-year-old) began working part-time for his dad. Named after his Uncle Joseph, co-founder of John T. Cyr and Sons, Joe worked at the company during his school years and while attending college, until 1962 when he joined the company full-time. Initially a mechanic, Joe gradually transitioned to management responsibilities. When Harvey died in 1967, he bought the company from his mother and became president of an operation that had grown to 10 buses and 15 employees.

After a rough start (a fire took out another garage and a bus) Cyr began a steady climb. In order to capitalize on their strength in relationships with the people in the area, Joe eased out of the trucking business and concentrated on school and motorcoach transportation. By 1980 the company had grown from 10 buses to 40. Between expansion and the city's desire to redevelop the French Island neighborhood, after 68 years, John T Cyr and Sons moved to a new, larger, facility on Gilman Falls Avenue in Old Town.

In 1984, the Bangor and Aroostook Railroad Highway Division dropped its passenger service, and Cyr picked up their route from Bangor to Caribou. Though now partially subsidized, this is less of a profit center than an expression of Cyr's long held commitment to balancing good business with serving their community.

One bus industry observer noted that the Maine tourist industry had benefited immensely from the company's reputation



In spite of its 110-year history, Cyr Bus Line (technically John T. Cyr and Son) has only had four generations in top management. Sue and Joe Cyr are second and third from the left. Their son Michael and daughter Becky Cyr Whitmore have been running the company in recent years. In the front row are the grandkids who could be the next generation in the business.

for helping other companies. "It became pretty well known among coach operators that if you had bus problems in Maine, Cyr was able and willing to help." Operating charter and tour buses in the rugged Maine countryside in the years following WWII could be a risky business. Knowing that help was available made operators anxious to add Maine to their itineraries. It would be difficult to over-estimate how much Cyr's generosity of spirit boosted the bus tour industry in the region. The opposite was true too. Any time a Cyr bus encountered difficulties, their reputation made local operators anxious to help.

Starting in the mid-1990s Cyr expanded dramatically, adding 95 school buses, and beginning service in four additional counties and a number of new districts including the schools in Pittsfield, Farmingdale, Hampden and Gardiner. They managed all this in a market with seasonally tough weather and a population less dense than many parts of the country. Fast forward, and under Joe and his wife Sue's, management, the company has grown to a multifaceted transportation operation with a fleet of 20 modern motorcoaches and 225 school buses. The largest in Maine, Cyr is one of the top carriers in New England.

The original Kässbohrer Setra office was located in Gray, Maine, not far from the Cyr operation in Old Town. Cyr Bus Line started putting Setras in their fleet at an early date and have operated a substantial fleet at times. This Setra received a special paint scheme for the company's 100th anniversary in 2012.





Cyr Bus Line has also operated a number of MCI Coaches over the years. Most of their coaches have an attractive paint scheme that is popular with passengers. The bright colors contrast with the snow that is occasionally seen in Maine.

In the current era of specialization, very few companies attempt as diverse an operation as Cyr, who provides school transportation, scheduled motorcoach service, and charter buses. In 1990 they added to that mix by purchasing a local tour company, and now Cyr Northstar Tours offers travel packages throughout the country. These are a refined version of the 1930s “specialty trips,” but rather than digging clams, their customers enjoy attractions all over the U.S.

Cyr is unique in another way. One hundred ten years old, in an era where many family business’s stumble on the second or third generation, this company is now owned and operated by a fourth generation and continuing to thrive. Joe and Sue’s son Michael, and daughter Becky Cyr Whitmore, had been working in Cyr management for a long time and Joe decided it was time to turn over leadership. Joe pointed out it was time to relax and that, actually, “Mike and Becky have been running the company for a couple of years and doing a very good job.”

Doing the math, over 110 years, Cyr has really only had four changes in top management. That unusual stability seems to stem from the balance of sticking to core values that have served well as they transitioned from horses all the way to modern battery-powered school buses, coupled with a flexibility that allows them to spot and serve emerging needs and trends. Their ability to identify opportunities to serve has been sharpened over the years by the Cyr’s deep involvement in the community.

The company, and members of the Cyr family, have received too many awards to cite here, recognizing an extraordinary com-

bination of business acumen, community involvement and charity.

If you are traveling on the Eastern Seaboard and spot a modern bus with spectacular graphics, it is likely a Cyr. Long known for creative paint jobs, the Cyr Fleet is a bit of a metaphor for the company. They

run modern luxury motorcoaches, hundreds of school buses including a new battery-powered bus, and – they still have that 1959 GM.

For a bit more insight and a fun video view <https://johnncyrandsons.com/about-us/>. □

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