



McCormick brothers (from left) Will, Ry and Eli are keeping the trucking and logistics company current by investing in technology and alternative fuel.

# Bestway Express

## KEEPS TRUCKIN' ALONG

**Address:** 2242 Old Decker Road, Vincennes  
**Telephone:** (812) 882-6448  
**Web site:** bestwayexpress.com  
**Management:** Shepard Dunn, president and CEO; Eli McCormick, COO  
**Employees:** Approximately 300

By Charlee Beasor

### 'Humble beginnings'

Bestway Express began rather modestly, according to Shepard Dunn. The Vincennes-based trucking and logistics company hauls primarily automotive components, but initially was transporting just about anything.

"The real story is they would go out and book loads and hang the phones up and pick the loads up themselves and get back on the phone and try to get some more," Dunn explains. "A plant manager figured out that minimal loads were getting delivered. Truly a humble beginning like that and things just grew and they hauled everything from manufactured batteries to trash. They finally got into the automotive component world where they were hauling for automotive manufacturers, and we've been doing that ever since."



Mac McCormick was honored as the Indiana Chamber's 2006 Business Leader of the Year.

The "they" Dunn refers to includes former president and CEO C.J. McCormick III – or Mac, as everyone knew him – who was tragically killed in a plane crash in October 2006 when he was just 55 years old.

Dunn (married to McCormick's cousin and president at the time) had been with the company about 10 years and was transitioning to take over for McCormick as he began to be more involved with organizations such as the American Trucking Association and Truckload Carriers Association.

"He had this great vision to get me in line so when he was gone and two years leading up to that, when he was gone as chairman, he didn't want to have to worry about his business," Dunn recalls. "He'd picked me and the best thing that could happen, and this is difficult to say, from the accident was that we were already in a position where we didn't miss a lick; we kept on kicking."

Mac's three sons, Will (age 35), Ry (33) and Eli (31), became large shareholders of the company and active members of the senior leadership. They named Dunn CEO after their father passed away.

Today, Will is director of maintenance, Ry is director of HR and safety, and Eli is chief operating officer and in charge of day-to-day operations.

### Back-to-back tragedies

Eli had only been working at Bestway Express for about six months before the accident and didn't get to learn from his father the way they'd planned. But, he says he picked up the business from working with the company's senior management and "rolling up my sleeves and getting dirty."

"It was certainly stressful. You've got three young men that just became owners overnight basically and dad died at 55 years old. He wasn't planning on dying at 55, let's be honest," Eli emphasizes.

The company was left to deal with a large tax liability, on top of getting its new management organized and everyone on board with the fact that the company was not planning on closing its doors.

"Long story short, we basically made the commitment and were able to pay all of that (tax liability) off in five years, through the recession. What we gave up was we didn't purchase any new equipment. We're still bouncing back from renewing our fleet. It was a commitment from a corporate level," Eli recollects.

There were concerns from employees (over 500 at the time) that the company wouldn't survive.

"What really helped was having Shepard at the helm. I was there for six months prior to dad passing – I was right there on the ground floor. Will was back for about a year on the equipment and maintenance side. It was kind of a growing session for pretty much everybody," he adds.

Just a few years later, however, tragedy struck in another form: a major recession that left much of the automotive industry around the country in shambles. Bad news for a company that hauls mainly automotive components.

Dunn remembers how everything "came to a screeching halt."

"People rallied (after Mac's passing) and we really were tested during the recession, which was about three years later," he says. "We would shut down, work for three days and try to hang on to employees, and it was a tough time.

"We had to find a way through it. It was truly a blessing (Mac) had a vision to get the house in order, so to speak, so he could be gone. It was for a different reason, but it just worked out very well."

### Company upgrades

Technology updates, such as being an

early adopter of electronic logs (instead of having drivers manually enter information after the fact) and some communications improvements (software upgrades moved the company from driver check-in calls to satellite communications) have been a major boon for Bestway Express.

"One thing we have done a lot since dad's passing is we've really, really taken on technology. That's been a changing of the guard. We had always been behind the ball on that," Eli asserts. "We would kind of let the other guys figure it out and we would jump in. A perfect example is natural gas."

The company began moving toward compressed natural gas (CNG) about two years ago and Dunn notes that it's "the wave of the future," and has been hotly pursued by Will, the director of maintenance.

Eli explains that the main hindrance to fully embracing the CNG technology was the lack of infrastructure. The company decided to fill its own need and opened a CNG filling station in late 2013.

"We built our own station through some partners and were able to outfit 26 CNG dual-fuel units and one that is all CNG. It's putting some serious savings to the bottom line. That's not really like us to jump in that hot and heavy, but the return on investment made sense," he notes.

Electronic logs were mandated in July 2014, but Bestway Express had already been using the technology about three and a half years. Eli credits Dunn's knowledge of truck carriers for being ahead of the game in many respects.

### Serious driver shortage

Technology upgrades, of course, are a moot point if there aren't enough truck drivers. Both Eli and Dunn point to a driver shortage as the industry's most pressing challenge.

"In order for us to stay in the game, we're going to have to figure out the driver problem. We have a huge driver shortage. It dictates what we can and can't do," Eli asserts.

"Freight is not the issue right now; it's fixing the driver issue."

Perception of the job might be a major issue, Eli explains. Also, no one under 21 is able to earn a Class A commercial driver's license, which means potential drivers out of high school often opt for other trades, such as construction and manufacturing.

But the company tries to work around the perception issue by offering regional roundtrips.

"Our motto basically is come work for us – we're a roundtrip carrier that's regional. You're going to see your family," he says. "We have an appreciation for what these guys do. They're angels. I have no idea how they do it, but I appreciate what they do."

### Part of the community

Being a long-standing and significant employer in Knox County has its set of responsibilities that Bestway Express embraces.

"We've got a sizable hospital here that's growing, Vincennes University is here and between those two, the largest employers in the area, we work very closely together in helping each other. We're very proud to be

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Filling the company's need for compressed natural gas (CNG) infrastructure, Bestway Express built a CNG fueling station in Vincennes.

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part of this community,” Dunn offers.

He continues, “The quality of life in Knox County and what this company has allowed us to enjoy has been fabulous. We’re feeding a lot of mouths around here and want to continue to do that. We have a responsibility to our employees to keep that going.”

Dunn mentions that the company recently opened a health clinic with another employer in the community and they are looking to get others involved.

Eli notes that senior management is involved in various community boards and organizations.

“We were raised that way, to give back. There are more ways than just giving money to give back. We’re giving time to these organizations. My father was the same way. Community impact, I think that’s where we have the most impact,” he says.

It all comes back to supporting employees, Eli offers.

“Caring – I think that’s what really separates us. We do have a lot of employees and we still are able, I feel, to keep it to a family level. We’re family-owned and operated. We understand things happen. Human beings have things going on. Just everybody from the top down is cognizant of that,” he explains.