

Lifetime Achievement Award Honors Innovator John R. Westerberg

By Geoff Williams

In March 2012, the Moving & Storage Institute presented its prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Service to **John R. Westerberg**, third-generation owner of Nelson Westerberg Inc. in Elk Grove Village, Ill., and a member of the Atlas Van Lines network. It's an honor well deserved.

"It's a dramatically different business than it was back then, especially for us," says Westerberg, 74, who grew up watching his father, Richard, run the family business that Oscar Westerberg and business partner Fred Nelson began in 1904. Back then, the company moved coal and ice, but about a dozen years later, it started moving the people who used coal and ice.

When John Westerberg joined the company at 24 in 1962, he told his father the Westerberg contingent needed to buy out "the Nelson half of the business," as Westerberg puts it. He also insisted they leave behind the local household goods market for long-distance business with major corporations.

Westerberg had still more ideas. In those days, Allied Van Lines "literally owned Chicago, as far as the national long-distance market was concerned," Westerberg says. "We had to differentiate ourselves from their business model."

So around 1965, Nelson Westerberg Inc. became known as a moving company that had one moving crew pack up all the goods to be moved, drive to the destination and then unpack everything. It doesn't sound revolutionary today, but in the 1960s, separate crews packed, loaded and drove the truck.

"Everybody wanted a piece of the buy," explains Westerberg. The booking agent, destination agent and local agent on the other end of the move all wanted to help out so that they could charge more.



Photo courtesy of Wayne Whitaker

John Westerberg accepted the Life Achievement Award for Distinguished Service with his wife, Dotti, and his son, Stephen.

"It was somewhat disjointed," Westerberg says. "We decided to offer some true differentiation, and it proved to be extraordinarily successful."

Westerberg's company had become an agent for Atlas Van Lines, and fortunately, Atlas allowed them to market themselves as streamlining the moving industry. Soon, Atlas adopted the model, and other companies soon followed suit.

More changes were to come. In the late 1960s, Westerberg developed a new way of transporting automobiles. It enabled the firm to better service the two-car family and revolutionized the industry. This method decreased claims and was an efficient alternative to other transport.

Westerberg's innovation extends to his management practices. To motivate workers, he established "The Home for Christmas Program." If an owner-operator cannot be home for Christmas, Nelson Westerberg flies that individual home for the holiday.

Westerberg also has been an active leader in the industry at the local,

state and national level, where he has been an AMSA director. He also is a board member of both Atlas Van Lines and Atlas Canada. Additionally, he is a leader in numerous charitable organizations and chambers of commerce.

A testament to the success of a customer-centric organization are the company's Hauling Excellence, Superior Packing and World Class Commitment awards from Atlas Van Lines. Nelson Westerberg also is an 11-time winner of the Atlas Van Lines Milton M. Hill Quality Award, which recognizes outstanding performance ratings in customer satisfaction, estimating, claims, safety and warehouse operations. Implementing quality standards at all levels throughout the company, John Westerberg forces the industry to continuously re-evaluate its practices to remain competitive. ■

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