



From a one-man shop founded in 1951 to a company that earned more than \$14 million last year, the Madison, Wisconsin, company will celebrate its 50th anniversary next year with a lot of pride and a little nostalgia.

by Hope Katz Gibbs

For 12 years, Arthur Dunham was the only employee of Dunham Mail Delivery, a courier company he founded in 1951. With his station wagon, he'd pick up mail and small packages for a few firms in his hometown of Madison, Wisconsin.

By 1963, his fledgling business began to grow, and for the first time in his career, Dunham hired a few employees to help him. Still, the company stayed small, operating from a room in his home that Dunham converted into an office. Any cars or pickup trucks the tiny company used were parked at a nearby service station in the evenings.

When the prosperous 1980s arrived, though, Dunham Mail Delivery began growing at a good clip. Dunham, who liked to keep things small and contained, took a bold step and rented commercial space to house the company. By now, he had seven drivers and a dispatcher working for him. His vehicle fleet was composed of four cars.

The business had grown big enough that it attracted the attention of local businessman Jon DiPiazza, who on Oct. 1, 1983, bought the company from Dunham. Although he had no knowledge of the industry, he did have experience in sales and customer service, and was game for an adventure.

"I didn't know what I was doing, exactly, but my background was enough to give me a leg up on growing this company," DiPiazza recalls.

The Start of an Era

Employees say DiPiazza's knack for saying yes — and, perhaps, more important — for charming his customers, gave people the confidence to use his services. Soon after buying the firm, DiPiazza changed the name of the company to Dunham Express. With that, there also came a change in philosophy.



Teamwork comes easily to owners Mark McDonald (left), Jon DiPiazza (on cart) and Mark Helmke (right).

"We placed a strong emphasis on service and responsiveness," DiPiazza reports, adding that other high standards were also established, including an employee dress code. And all vehicles got the spit and polish treatment, too.

Several banks in Madison noticed the changes and decided to give DiPiazza's company a try. Five new employees were added to handle the extra work, and Isuzu pickup trucks, which are now the company's trademark vehicle, were purchased.

In fact, business was growing at such a fast pace that the company moved to bigger offices in 1984. Sales increased 40 percent that year, and 50 percent more in each of the two years that followed.

Daily, new customers called and soon became regulars, and additional staff and vehicles were added to accommodate the growth. In 1989, a garage and drive-through were added, and a vehicle lift was installed. Sales hit a high of \$1.5 million, and DiPiazza expanded company hours from a 40-hour work week to a shop that was open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In the 1990s, DiPiazza began expanding to new markets. First, he added a Milwaukee office in late 1991, then an

Appleton office in 1992. Sales topped \$3 million that year — and DiPiazza decided it was time to move the company to a larger headquarters in Madison, and to add even more satellite offices. In 1993, new hubs were opened in Eau Claire, Wausau and Niagara. By 1995, company sales had more than doubled — to \$8 million — and Dunham Express' fleet included 250 vehicles. There was great excitement about the future of the company.

The Next Generation Comes on Board

DiPiazza's ability to build the firm from a tiny mail delivery business to a multi-million dollar professional courier company in just 12 years proved very interesting to two young businessmen: Mark Helmke and Mark McDonald, who had been watching Dunham grow for a few years, approached DiPiazza and told him they liked what they saw in his company.

Helmke, in fact, had been working in the delivery business since 1987 when he began his career at the Courier Dispatch Group, Inc. (Minneapolis, MN) as a customer service representative and salesman. He also managed a sales territory for a few years, but wanted ultimately to run a courier business of his own. His friend and fellow co-worker at Courier Dispatch, Mark McDonald, felt similarly. In October 1997, they both joined Jon DiPiazza as partners.

The top priority for the three men now was to make their company the biggest and most successful courier firm in the midwest. And that's exactly what they have done.

In May 1998, as sales grew to \$11.5 million, Dunham Express opened its seventh office in La Crosse, and a new corporate headquarters on Madison's Lexington Avenue.

Corporate America Takes Note of Dunham Express

Dunham was big enough to draw the attention of Boise Cascade Office Products, a 35-year-old national firm based in Illinois, which last year had sales of \$60 million in the state of Wisconsin alone.

Daily, Boise Cascade now calls on Dunham's drivers to make hundreds of deliveries of office supplies ranging from paper and pencils to printers and computer desks. The stops are in places where it isn't cost effective to send their own drivers, notes Scot Dressander, distribution manager for Boise Cascade.

"We chose to work with Dunham Express because the company has so many distribution centers that it can help us service the entire state of Wisconsin," notes Dressander. "They have a terrific management team in place, and everyone there is easy to work with. We can always rely on them to be responsive to our needs. But most important, we both agree the customer always comes first."

It is because the customer takes top priority at Dunham Express, Helmke says, that he and his partners have recently upgraded their technology to make it easier to do business with many of their large clients.

"We knew that if we wanted to make the transition from a mom-and-pop shop to a very professionally run firm, we needed to put new systems in place," comments Helmke, now the vice president of business development. "We strive to maintain our mom-and-pop attitude, though. After all, it is service that we're selling and we want Dunham to keep its small company feel. However, to generate the amount of revenue we aspire to, we need to have all the systems in place as would a large corporation."

Dunham Express Goes High Tech

This summer, the company installed a state-of-the-art Palm Pilot delivery system (scheduled for implementation this fall).

Using the device and Datatrac's distribution and bar coding modules, Dunham's couriers can download and upload orders, capture signatures upon delivery — and make far fewer mistakes because the high-tech tools cut down on human error, Helmke says.

"The old process of shipping paper manifests — along with skids of materials, sorting out paperwork, and collecting signatures on manifests — has gone out the door," Helmke explains. "The new process is sleek, efficient, and universal." [See sidebar for more details on the Palm Pilot program.]

And, he adds, going high-tech gives Dunham Express a competitive edge. Scott Mooney, distribution center manager for a multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical firm agrees.

In fact, Mooney reports his company was one of several that insisted Dunham upgrade its tracking system.

"We hire Dunham Express to pick up about \$2.5 million in freight per day," says Mooney. "With them doing so much work for us, we encouraged them to use Palm Pilots because they work in tandem with our computer system. The ability to connect digitally will enable us to drive all the paperwork out of our system. Everything will flow faster and be easier to track."

Mooney, who has been working with Dunham Express for six years, is quite pleased with the service he gets and has no plans to take his business anywhere else.

"Working with Dunham is great," he adds. "Sometimes, we really make them go through hoops to help us out."

For instance, Mooney's firm ended its relationship with a courier company in Iowa and asked Dunham if it would pick up the business. Within hours, Dunham had dispatched three trucks and three drivers to the distribution center in La Crosse, prepared to move a large shipment to Iowa.

"It was pretty impressive," notes Mooney. "Actually, it was incredibly impressive. But, that's the kind of service you get from Dunham. They never cease to amaze me."



Dunham owners strive to maintain a mom-an-pop attitude.

Dunham's Palm Pilot Project

Using a Palm Pilot device from a company called Symbol, and distribution and bar coding module technology from Datatrac, Dunham has redesigned the process of how its couriers handle packages. Here's how it works:

- First, a customer sends a file that contains shipping information for the day to Dunham Express via e-mail, file transfer protocol or on a disk. This file is imported into Dunham's computer system, and the computer automatically prints out a list of the day's deliveries — complete with bar codes and destination details.
- Each driver carries a Symbol Palm Pilot, a rugged device that can withstand a good amount of abuse. The driver uses the Palm Pilot to scan all items he collects at each delivery he makes. The device also electronically captures signatures from customers to establish proof of delivery. In the event the courier attempts to deliver a package to the wrong address, or to drop off too few packages by mistake, the device alerts him to the problem.
- When a day of deliveries is complete, the information recorded throughout the shift is downloaded from the Palm Pilot into Dunham's computer system. The file is saved and transferred back to the customer for confirmation. It contains updated accounts of all merchandise collected and delivered, as well as the actual signatures of the person who received the delivery.

"This entire process is intended to streamline our delivery process, reduce time for delivery of packages, and simplify the paperwork and proof of delivery requirements for both Dunham Express and our customers," Helmke notes. "There has been a bit of a learning period, but everyone is catching on. Our customers couldn't be more pleased."

"Our mission is to profitably create solutions for our customers' transportation needs, and to set new standards in our industry by using creative ideas from committed people."



Changing of the Guard

Providing superior service is the ultimate goal of Dunham Express, according to Helmke.

"This is an industry not always known for its professionalism," he says. "We'll do anything we possibly can for our customers."

Helmke and his partners' approach to business seems to be working to make the company a success. Currently, Dunham Express has a staff of close to 500 employees, and sales for 1999 totaled just under \$15 million.

Projections for the year 2000 include sales totaling more than \$17 million. After that, the sky is the limit.

"Our mission is to profitably create solutions for our customers' transportation needs, and to set new standards in our industry by using creative ideas from committed people," Helmke reports. "That is exactly what we plan to do."

With each new chapter, though, comes change. Later this year, partner Jon DiPiazza plans to officially retire. This summer, he sold his part of the company to Helmke and McDonald.

"After hearing about other business owners who retire late in their years and not being able to enjoy the rewards, I decided it was time to make this move," remarks DiPiazza. "It will be difficult to leave, but I know Mark and Mark have the same love for this company that I have had for the last 17 years. I know Dunham Express will be in good hands."

Chronology of Dunham Express

- **1951** — Arthur Dunham founds Dunham Mail Delivery. He is its only employee until 1963, when he hires three or four drivers to assist him.
- **1970** — Several banks in Madison become Dunham's customers. Still, the company's base of operations remains in Arthur Dunham's home. His "fleet" of cars is parked each evening at a nearby service station.
- **1981** — The company rents its first office space on Commercial Avenue in Madison. The staff now includes seven drivers and one manager/dispatcher. The company owns four vehicles.
- **October 1, 1983** — Jon DiPiazza purchases the company and changed its name to Dunham Express. The staff grows to 12 employees, and several Isuzu pickups are purchased bringing the total number of vehicles in the company's fleet to seven.
- **1984** — The company moves into a new facility to house the growing number of staff members, which total 20. The fleet of vehicles is up to 14.
- **1985 to 1987** — Sales grow an average of 40 percent to 50 percent annually. An on-call division is created, and the company sponsors its first health insurance plan for employees.
- **1988** — Dunham Express hits \$1 million in sales. The staff totals 50, and disability insurance is added for employees. As business continues to expand, a garage and drive-through are built to make it easier for drivers to load and unload cargo.
- **1989** — Sales hit a record \$1.5 million and the company expands its hours to 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The first vehicle lift is installed, and the garage is heated with waste motor oil from the growing fleet.
- **1990** — Computerized dispatching begins, as does the company's first HMO health care plan. The staff exceeds 100 employees, and offices are opened in Milwaukee and Appleton. Sales top \$3 million.
- **1993** — More offices are added, first in Eau Claire and then in Wausau and Niagara. Sales total \$5.2 million.
- **1995** — Sales hit \$6.89 million in 1995 and \$8 million in 1996. The fleet size increases to 250 vehicles, and the expansion into the Eau Claire market alarms the competition.
- **October 1997** — Mark Helmke and Mark McDonald join Jon DiPiazza as partners.
- **May 1998** — The company opens its seventh office, this one in La Crosse. Corporate headquarters in Madison moves to 3633 Lexington Avenue. Sales jump to \$11.5 million.
- **April 1999** — Dunham installs a sophisticated Palm Pilot delivery software system. The company now has more than 280 vehicles and nearly 500 employees. Sales for this year total \$14.9 million, and projected sales for 2000 top \$17 million.
- **2000** — Long time owner Jon DiPiazza retires, turning the reigns over to his partners Mark Helmke and Mark McDonald.
- **2001** — Dunham will celebrate its 50th anniversary.