

# MOVING IN MID-SIZE MARKETS

*Bart McCorquodale made a business of handling antiques. Now, with multiple locations, McCorquodale Transfer Inc. has a fleet of 30 trucks and two airplanes specializing in high-end home furnishing moving.*

BY RUSSELL RICHEY



Bart McCorquodale

What if someone's job tasks often included clinging desperately to the roof of an elevator ascending the floors of an exclusive

residential high-rise, or being hired by reclusive millionaires to discretely and securely move rare, expensive paintings cross-country? Or perhaps having to scale the outside of an office tower, and while dangling hundreds of feet above the pavement, successfully remove a massive glass window in order to gain access to a high-powered corporate attorney's office?

You might guess these scenarios are the occupational part-and-parcel of a secret agent or international master-thief. But these exotic-sounding operations are actually just what Bart McCorquodale is prepared to handle as owner and CEO of Birmingham-based moving company, McCorquodale Transfer Inc.

Launched in 1996, McCorquodale Transfer has grown from a one-truck start-up to become a nationally respected white-glove moving business with a fleet of 30 trucks, two airplanes and a market presence spanning the Southeastern U.S. and beyond.

*Business Alabama* recently spent some time with McCorquodale, who offered insights into his company's uniquely focused business model and explained why McCorquodale Transfer's growth strategy will always

thumb its nose at the big, mega-metropolitan markets.

## Give us an overview of McCorquodale Transfer.

We were originally an Internet company's delivery solution. Pottery Barn, Restoration Hardware, William Sonoma Co., Crate and Barrel — we started delivering their furniture right when the Internet began to take off, and we still have those contracts. While delivering these Internet orders, we found ourselves on routes to various out-of-the-way locations, so we started marketing ourselves to the general public. My father was in the antiques and interior design business for years before I started doing this, so I was familiar with how to handle antique furniture, so say, if you have a chest that was your great aunt's that might have lived in Mobile, and you are currently living in Huntsville, we could also pick those items up and transport them.

## How do you keep your customers happy?

We show up every time when we are supposed to. I cannot remember any time over the past 10 years where we would have had an appointment time and not honored it. Also our employees are very well trained and highly educated.

## What's happening now that's exciting for McCorquodale Transfer?

We're growing. In 1998, we started our second location in Destin, Fla. In 1999, we added Mobile. In 2002, we added a location in Charleston, S.C. We opened in Greenville, S.C. in 2005, and we are looking to open offices this year in Savannah, Ga. and Jackson, Miss.

## Those are all mid-size markets.

We are very, very focused on mid-market cities. We have our niche and our market and we don't want to go into markets like New York, Washington, Miami or Atlanta, because our business model does not

operate with the most efficiency in a larger city.

The reason: Traffic! We want to keep our appointments and we do not like to be late. If you are in New York City, Atlanta or Chicago, you have this major factor of traffic and I don't care to put my dog in that fight. I like to cater to my customer and if I tell the customer I'll be there at one-o'clock, I'm going to be there at one-o'clock. In these mid-market cities, you are always able to make your appointments.

## What are some of McCorquodale Transfer's goals?

Long-term we would like to develop our network among moderate-sized cities in the Southeast and expand into the Northeast and Midwest. Our goal is always developing a larger network that maximizes efficiency for our company, and also brings the customer better prices as we streamline our costs.

## What are some of the challenges you face when bringing your business into new markets?

The largest problem that we've had, our biggest obstacle, is that our industry is regulated by the Public Service Commissions of the states that we do business in. You have to have a Public Service Commission certificate in order to do business in Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina as a household-goods mover. And in 2000, we did not have that certificate, and we had to go through a lot of legislative lobbying and many trips to Montgomery in order receive our authority, and that's been our largest hurdle in Alabama and especially in the state of South Carolina.

Word gets out when you do a good job — our competition definitely knows who we are on a more national scale, and when we were applying to do business in South Carolina, we had companies out of North Carolina and New York come and contest us to make sure that we didn't get our license there. We won our authority on our third try. It sounds really petty from the outside looking in, but it's such a racket — it's unbelievable.

## What are some of the biggest trends in your industry?

Right now, you are probably aware that the price of real estate is sort of topping out and houses are not selling at the rapid pace that they were, and the good thing we have is diversification. We have the household goods division, and we have all of this furniture delivery servicing that we still do, and I won't say that it's recession-proof, but it's good to have that segment of business when you are trying to hedge yourself against a slowdown in the housing market.

## What's the most interesting piece of furniture or item that you have been hired to move?

We've moved a lot of Hopper paintings, Renoirs and Picassos, especially in south Florida. We moved a \$30 million piece of art for one of our customers. That always is very interesting to do, and it's sometimes better if you don't know what you are moving until after the fact.

## What's a moving project that has been the most challenging for you in terms of problem-solving the logistics of the move?

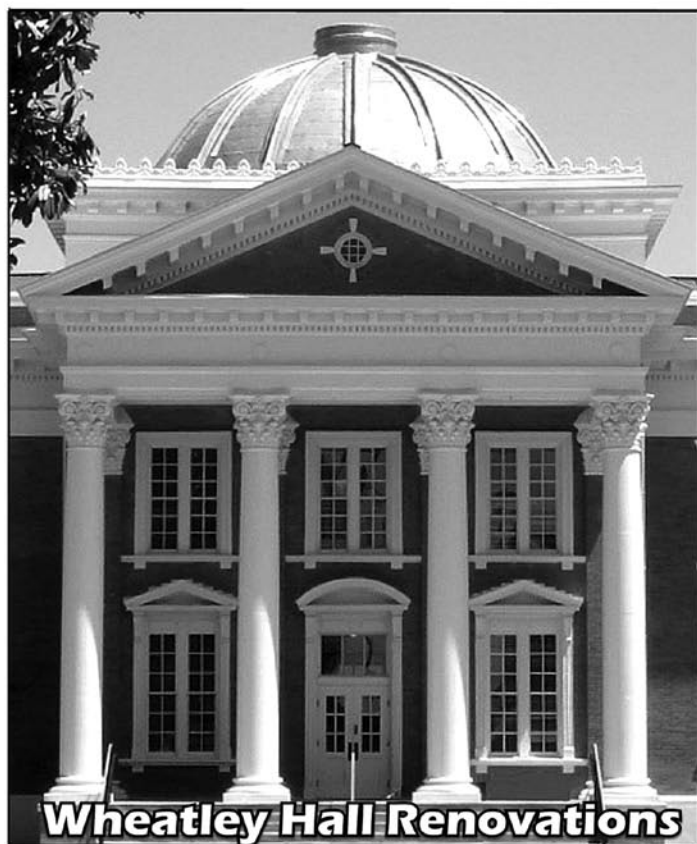
To this day, I still ride on top of elevator cars in some of the buildings in Birmingham so people can get the furniture they ordered, but wouldn't fit in certain buildings. We've also gone up the side of a skyscraper and taken a window out in order to deliver an antique mirror an attorney in town had bought. She paid a lot of money for the mirror, wanted it in her office, but it just wouldn't go in the elevator. So, we got a window-washing company and rigged up their hoist and took it up the side of the building.

**When you think about a moving business, you immediately think of the reliance on equipment and human capital. Where does technology fit into your business model and making your concept go?**

Technology is a very important part of our business — as far as having software that helps you manage things logistically is great, but the bottom line is there is no replacement for nuts-and-bolts hard work. When I say develop networks, it's basically to prevent empty trucks from going back-and-forth between cities, but with every hub that we would have in our network of these midsize markets would service that market in it's entirety. So, we would say that 80 percent of that revenue, if we opened up a hub, would come from that immediate 30-mile radius.

By creating a network of routes, that essentially helped us make more revenue by not having empty trucks coming back. And originally our business was about 80 percent from Internet order delivery, but now that's only about 8 percent percent of our revenue. •

*Russell Richey is a regular contributor to Business Alabama. He works for EBSCO Subsidiary Web Services, and can be reached at rrichey@ebSCO.com.*



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