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Busline Cover Feature

Indian Trails

Providing High-Quality Transportation Service For More Than A Century

Owosso, MI



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Michigan-Based Company Has Been Providing High-Quality Transportation Service For More Than A Century

By Rick Mullen, *Busline Magazine* Associate Editor

Diversification, adapting to changing times and the ability to reinvent itself have been keys to Indian Trails Inc.'s track record of providing high quality transportation services for more than a century. The Owosso, MI-based company, in its third generation of continuous family ownership, is celebrating its 110th year in business in 2020.

"We established decades ago that Indian Trails is one of the highest quality charter and scheduled service carriers in the Midwest. People have come to associate us with quality and consistency," said Indian Trails President Chad Cushman, during a recent interview with *Busline Magazine*. "We have been through some tough times during the past 110 years, including the Great Depression of the 1930s, a couple of world wars, economic downturns, and more recently the Great Recession of the mid-to-late 2000s. We persevered through all of that by reinventing ourselves and adapting to changes in the marketplace.



Above: Indian Trails President Chad Cushman.

At right: Indian Trails owners Mary Ferguson, Harriet "Honey" Biondi, Linda Mackay, Billie Maier and Winalee Zeeb.



“When Indian Trails started operating, it was a scheduled service operator. We started with jitney service between Owosso and the Durand, MI, train station, as well as running trips between Owosso and Flint, MI,” Cushman said. “By the mid-20th century, we started to develop charter service and, from that point until the late '90s to early 2000s, we slowly became predominately a charter operation.”

When Cushman started at Indian Trails in 1999, the company’s operation consisted of about 70 percent charters and 30 percent scheduled service.

“Fast forward to 2020 — we now operate about 30 percent charters, 30 percent scheduled service and about 20 percent shuttle contracts. The other 20 percent is our Michigan Flyer airport service,” Cushman said. “We now operate less on the charter side, but more on the scheduled and contract service side.”

As might be expected with a transportation provider that specializes in offering a high quality rider experience, Indian Trails is not the cheapest ride on the block.

“There are always going to be lower-priced competitors, but those who want high quality, consistency, dependability, newer equipment, 24-hour dispatch and well trained drivers, will pay a higher price for the service,” Cushman said. “Being a higher quality carrier is the niche we have created for ourselves.”

Indian Trails was founded by **Cora and Wayne Taylor** of Owosso. The Taylors did not have children, so they hired their nephew, **Bill Himburg**, in the mid-'40s to steer the company. He worked through the mid-'90s.

Himburg had five daughters, **Mary Ferguson, Harriet “Honey” Biondi, Linda Mackay, Billie Maier, and Winalee Zeeb**. When he died in 2013, each daughter became a 20 percent owner.

“We are an all female owned company, and you couldn’t ask for better owners,” Cushman said. “They are very supportive of our growth initiatives and reinvesting cash and profits back into the company. It is unique situation. There aren’t many transportation companies that are all female owned.”

Cushman also praised Indian Trail’s Chairman of the Board **Gordon Mackay** for his many years of service to the company.

“Gordon started here in 1972 and still serves as the chairman of our board. He has been actively involved in the business that whole time,” Cushman said. “I don’t think you are going to find too many people in the industry who have almost 50 years of service.”



Gordon Mackay, COB

SCHEDULED, CONTRACT SERVICES KEY COGS IN DIVERSIFICATION EFFORTS

As Cushman mentioned, only about 30 percent of Indian Trails’ operation now consists of charter service. The remaining 70 percent is scheduled and contract services.



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— Chad Cushman, president

Examples of contract services include campus and apartment shuttles and service to Detroit Metro Airport.

“Since 2007, we have been operating campus shuttle services at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, MI,” Cushman said. “Called Bronco Transit, the service is basically for students to be able to get around campus.”

As is the case with many of its contract services, the Bronco Transit buses do not display the Indian Trails brand.

“Onlookers would never know the Bronco Transit buses are Indian Trails’, unless they looked very closely at the legal lettering on the corner of the bus,” Cushman said. “They are all branded Bronco Transit. They more or less look like a Western Michigan University bus. It has the school’s brand and the colors, even though we own and maintain the equipment that is operated by our drivers.”

Indian Trails contract services also include apartment complex shuttles for students.

“At Western Michigan University, we operate two different apartment shuttles,” Cushman said. “One is called the Paddock Apartments shuttle and the other is The Wyatt. Those are private shuttles we operate for student residents who live at the apartments to get back and forth to the campus.

“Students who lease apartments at those locations, have free transportation to and from Western Michigan University. The owner of the apartments pays for the shuttles.”

Indian Trails also operates two additional apartment shuttles at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

“Those include The Lodges and Hannah Lofts. Both locations offer upscale apartments for students,” Cushman said. “They also get free transportation service to and from Michigan State University. It is a private shuttle service like the Kalamazoo

apartment shuttles. They are not open to the public. It is just for the residents who live there. In fact, students have to show their key fob or some type of proof that they are residents in order to get on the buses.



Chad Cushman & Diane Moore, office manager, testing new bus tracker app.

“With this service, residents don’t have to worry about parking. Indeed, some students don’t have cars while they are living on campus.”

Another contract service is the Michigan Flyer airport service, which was recently expanded to offer 14 round trips a day to and from the Detroit Metro Airport.

“Launched in 2006, Michigan Flyer is a scheduled airport service that starts in East Lansing, and runs between East Lansing, Brighton, Ann Arbor and on to the Detroit Metro Airport,” Cushman said. “The service started in partnership with a couple named Ody and Rachel Norkin. They owned a travel agency and were interested in starting airport service originating in East Lansing.

“At the time, they knew there were roughly 1,200 people a day driving back and forth between the Lansing Tri-County region and Detroit Metro Airport. They wanted to start the service because there weren’t any cost effective options to get back and forth from the airport.

“They connected with us and, about a year after we were introduced, we started the service. It began with 12 round trips between East Lansing, Jackson and the airport. Eventually it evolved to include East Lansing and Ann Arbor, two major university cities. Just this past October (2019), we added Brighton, which is in Liv-

ingston County off Interstate 96. Then, we added two additional round trips, making a total of 14 daily trips, seven days a week.

“Michigan Flyer is now a pretty significant and growing part of our business. We carried about 260,000 people on that service last year (2019). With Detroit Metro Airport being the largest hub in our state, there was a big need for public transportation service to and from the airport.

“People who drive to and from the airport must to pay to park, and then catch a shuttle bus from the parking lots to their respective terminals. In contrast, we drop passengers off right at the terminals.”

In 2020, Indian Trails is planning to expand the Michigan Flyer service to Toledo, OH, which is about an hour’s drive from Detroit Metro Airport.

“Markets that are around an hour or more away from the airport are ideal for us because Uber, Lyft and any other ride share type services aren’t as cost competitive in those markets,” Cushman said. “The ride share operations are more cost competitive in the markets that are about a half hour away or closer.

“We are doing our best to reduce congestion and get more cars off the road, and that is a reason our Michigan Flyer concept continues to grow. It is going to be a large part of our focus during the next five to 10 years.”

For Michigan Flyer customers, parking is available at various pick up and drop off points. Indian Trails has agreements with entities in East Lansing, Brighton and Ann Arbor to provide space for those traveling to and from Detroit Metro Airport.

“We have an agreement with the city of East Lansing to use a portion of one of its parking ramps. Michigan Flyer riders pay \$2.50 a day to park their cars right next to the bus stop at the Marriott East Lansing hotel,” Cushman said. “When they get back, they can get off the bus, walk over to the parking ramp and get their car.

“In Brighton, we struck an agreement with a Meijer retail store to use a portion of its parking lot, again charging \$2.50 a day to park.

“In Ann Arbor, the Downtown Development Authority has provided parking ramp space for passengers at \$2 a day.”

A significant portion of Indian Trails’ charter business is also contracted services.

“We have contracts with the University of Michigan. Indian Trails is a preferred vendor for that school,” Cushman said. “We also have contracts with Western Michigan University, as well as other colleges and universities.”

The charter business for the universities mostly involves carrying athletic teams. Indian Trails also services professional sport teams.

“We service the majority of professional sports teams that travel in and out of Detroit, including teams that come to play the Detroit Tigers, the Detroit Pistons and the Detroit Lions.

“We pick the teams up at the airport, take them to their hotel,

“I think diversification, innovation and equipment renewal are what have been the keys to us sustaining and growing our business.”

from the hotel to the venue, and then back to the airport after the games.

“We also operate a lot of the traditional charters, such as K through 12 school trips, corporate moves, Chicago shopping runs, trips for high school kids traveling to Washington, D.C., among others. So, we have a lot of travel agents and tour operators who book charters with us. Within our 30 percent charter business, there is a pretty diverse customer base, and, a lot of that is contracted work.”

Indian Trails also operates charter trips to Cedar Point amusement park, located on Lake Erie in Sandusky, OH.

“We now have a different face for our company. It is Michigan Flyer. It is Bronco Transit. It is apartment complex contract shuttles. It is contract university shuttles,” Cushman said. “We have tried to carve out a niche of being a dependable contract shuttle provider in markets that a lot of transportation providers aren’t delving into.

“We don’t mind operating cutaway buses or 30- or 35- or 40-foot coaches in order to satisfy customers’ needs. I think that is another thing that has made us a little more unique in our region.

“I think the key for us is diversification. Up until the early 2000s, we were mainly a charter business, and then the rest of it was scheduled services. We had a number of scheduled routes throughout Michigan that we operated, but by the mid-2000s we started to diversify. With the tightening of university and corporate budgets, we knew we had to diversify to continue growing.”

In addition to diversification, innovation has historically been another area in which Indian Trails has excelled.

“We have always been on the cutting edge of innovation, going back to the late ’80s,” Cushman said. “We were one of the first motorcoach companies to introduce VCRs with color monitors. In addition, in the early to mid-2000s, we were one of the first, at least in Michigan, to introduce Wi-Fi in our charter and schedule service coaches. In 2009, we were one of the first to introduce electronic logging devices with GPS in our buses, which was well before it was a federal mandate.

“A third factor in our quest to be at the forefront of the transportation industry is our equipment renewal program. For decades, we have had a business philosophy of reinvesting profits back into equipment. We typically purchase new equipment every year. I think those three things — diversification, innovation and equipment renewal — are what have been the keys to us sustaining and growing our business.”

OFFERING WELL-MAINTAINED, MODERN MOTORCOACHES

The majority of Indian Trails’ fleet is full-sized motorcoaches. The company operates 79 vehicles, about 55 of which are over-the-road coaches, Cushman said.

Prevost has been their predominant coach manufacturer of choice. During the past 20 years or so, Indian Trails has purchased more than 60 Prevost motorcoaches.

“We just took delivery of three new H3-45s, and between now and May 2020, we are going to be taking delivery of 13 more new Prevost coaches,” Cushman said. “Four of those are going to be H3-45s, and the other nine are going to be the X model coaches for our scheduled service.

“Prevost knows us very well. They know what our expectations are. They are very dependable. They are definitely adaptable to our needs, and Prevost provides consistent quality, as well as service after the sale. We know we can depend on them if we have issues with new coaches after they are delivered, or as we are operating them. They do an excellent job of service after the sale.”



Jeff Hutchinson,
vice president-operations



Dale Allen,
maintenance director

Indian Trails uses Prevost H3-45 motorcoaches for charters and the Michigan Flyer airport service.

“Part of the reason for using H3-45 coaches for both charters and the Michigan Flyer is they have more luggage space underneath,” Cushman said. “The larger luggage space is important for our airport service, because people traveling by air have luggage. More luggage space is also important to the many sports teams, both college and professional, we carry. Furthermore, the larger luggage compartment is also a viable selling point in attracting new business.”

The X model Prevosts are used exclusively on Indian Trails’ scheduled service.

“Currently, we operate 38 scheduled routes throughout Michigan, both in the lower and upper peninsulas,” Cushman said. “We go as far west from the upper peninsula (UP) to Duluth, MN, and from the UP south to Milwaukee. From the lower peninsula, we operate in and out of Chicago, IL, Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint and Kalamazoo, to name a few. We cover all the major cities in Michigan.

“It becomes challenging to cover such a large area, especially in the UP, because we don’t have a garage facility up there. We lease space at the different locations to park the buses and the drivers operate out of those locations.”

Despite challenges, Indian Trails has been able to take advantage of Michigan’s thriving tourism industry.

“Tourism is big in Michigan. As a result, we are able to gen-

erate a lot of charter business, as well as some contract service tied to tourism,” Cushman said. “Another advantage of being located in Michigan is we have large universities — the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Western Michigan University — that generate a lot of business for us.”



Jeff Hutchinson is pictured leading a drivers training class.

One disadvantage of being located in the upper Midwest, as one might imagine, is the weather, as the winters can be snowy, icy and brutally cold.

“Another disadvantage is insurance,” Cushman said. “It is becoming more and more expensive for Michigan operators.”

While most of the charter trip origin points are in the lower half of the Michigan lower peninsula, Indian Trails also travels throughout the United States and Canada, Cushman said.

As for amenities on its motorcoaches, Cushman said Indian Trails’ fleet has many similar amenities as found with other transportation companies throughout the U.S.

“We are positioned as the highest quality, but most expensive operator in Michigan. We are providing the newest fleet. We are really focused on the quality and value aspect of the service. We have to deliver.”

“The interiors of our motorcoaches are deluxe,” Cushman said. “We have premium seating, wood flooring, charging ports at every seat, Wi-Fi, onboard cameras and Saucon ELDs (electronic logging devices) with GPS. Indian Trails also started installing belted seats on its coaches in 2009, and most recently switched to the Amaya-Astron A220 belted seats for more leg room.

“In order to operate scheduled service, motorcoaches must have wheelchair lift equipment. All of our coaches, including charters, scheduled service and Michigan Flyer, are equipped with wheelchair lifts.

“Many of our charter competitors in Michigan, because it is not required to have lift-equipped coaches for charters, rely on

us whenever they have a request from customers for charter coaches that are lift-equipped. A lot of charter operators do not purchase lift-equipped coaches, because they are more expensive than those without.”

Indeed, cooperation among transportation companies is often necessary to do business, despite the fact that they compete in the same markets.

“We have a number of contracts throughout the year we couldn’t fulfill with the number of coaches we operate without that cooperation,” Cushman said.

Cushman gave the example of a large Indian Trails charter customer in Detroit. When the company has a large employee event, they often need more buses than Indian Trails can supply on its own.

“In that case, we have some partner companies we work with regularly to subcontract buses,” Cushman said. “Sometimes we may need upwards of 30 to 40 buses to accommodate that customer’s movements. This type of cooperation works both ways, as many charter operators throughout Michigan will call us when they have a need.”

All of the amenities and deluxe interior adornments on a motorcoach will be trumped if it is dirty and not well-maintained. Most reputable transportation providers take steps to make sure their coaches

are clean and attractive going down the road. This is especially true for Indian Trails, as it strives to protect its reputation as a high-quality provider.

“We have three full-service facilities in Michigan. We have one in Owosso, where our headquarters is located. We also have one in Romulus, which is next to the Detroit Metro Airport, and one in Kalamazoo, which is located on the west side of the state,” Cushman said. “Looking at where the facilities are located on a map in the lower peninsula of Michigan, they sort of create a triangle. So, we pretty much have all the major areas of the lower peninsula covered.

“Within each of those full-service facilities, we employ our own full-time mechanics, washers, cleaners, drivers, supervisors and other staff. We maintain all our own equipment. Our coaches are serviced regularly at each of our terminals.”

SERVICE-ORIENTED DRIVERS

Indian Trails has about 150 full-time and 25 part-time employees, filling such positions as drivers, mechanics, washers, cleaners, dispatchers and administrative staff, including accounting, sales, human resources, managers and supervisors. However, drivers account for the majority of the positions at the company.

“In recruiting drivers, we look for customer service-oriented individuals,” Cushman said. “To be a motorcoach operator, a



person must have a CDL (commercial drivers license) and be able to operate a coach safely. However, when we are recruiting new drivers, we are not necessarily looking for CDL-experienced operators.

“We are really looking more for individuals who can provide excellent customer service, because the big difference between operating a motorcoach and operating a truck is our drivers are dealing with human beings, not cargo. It takes a different type of personality.

“Operators must be able to enjoy working with people of different types. He/she could be transporting a high school group today on a charter, and then tomorrow, he/she might be taking a senior citizens group to a casino.

“Drivers must be able to get along with people, be able to work with people and be patient. Therefore, we focus on recruiting good customer service-oriented individuals.”

Some of the qualifications to be an Indian Trails driver include:

- At least 24 years of age;
- A high school diploma or equivalent (GED);
- Having a CDL or ability to obtain a CDL;
- Clean record (no felonies);
- Fluent in English (writing and speaking);
- Ability to pass a DOT (Department of Transportation) physical exam;
- Ability to pass a drug and alcohol screening; and,
- Good communication skills.

“We conduct all the training for drivers in-house. Trainees are paid while they go through the program,” Cushman said. “If driver trainees don’t have a CDL, we will pay for them to get one, no strings attached, including no requirements that they have to stick around for at least a year.”

Indian Trails’ training program is about five weeks, and consists of both over-the-road driving training, and classroom training. In the classroom, trainees learn what it takes to be an Indian Trails employee, how to process paperwork, how to maintain logs, basic maintenance skills for maintaining coaches while they are on the road, customer service skills, and more. The program is split 50-50 between classroom and over-the-road training.

“We conduct all the training for drivers in-house. Trainees are paid while they go through the program.”

Training for Indian Trails’ operators does not end after the initial five-week program, as all drivers are subject to ongoing training and retraining.

“We typically try to meet with each individual driver at least twice a year,” Cushman said. “It could be just ride checks. We might also meet with a driver as a result of feedback received. Maybe a driver got a complaint from a customer.

“We have a full-time safety and training manager who is focused on our training programs. We have three area managers and an operations manager to help out, as well.

Jeff Hutchinson, our vice president of operations, also gets involved. We have about six people who conduct the training and retraining of drivers. It is a very focused effort.”

With the country’s low unemployment rates, businesses across the board are having a hard time finding qualified employees to fill positions.

“There is a shortage of qualified driver candidates,” Cushman said. “We are continuously trying to recruit new operators to accommodate our growth. We are continuously recruiting new drivers. Currently, we are short-handed. We have been tasked with trying to come up with new ways to recruit drivers. Throughout our industry, it is a big challenge, and we are all having to come up with new and creative ideas.”

As its service and contract shuttle business grows, Indian Trails can offer more predictable schedules for drivers, something it feels is a niche for the company within its market.

“What we have learned during the past several years, is that potential recruits want to work predictable schedules. They want to know that they are going to be home at night, or ideally have weekends off, which is tough to do in our industry,” Cushman said. “We operate some contracts that are just Monday through Friday. Because the majority of our business is now contract trips, when we recruit drivers, we are able to tell them that the majority of our schedules are predictable, as opposed to charters, which are very unpredictable.

“The evolution of our company into a more diversified shuttle and schedule service business is helping with the recruitment of drivers. We also let recruits know Indian Trails is a financially-stable company.”

WORD OF MOUTH EFFECTIVE MARKETING TOOL

Indian Trails relies heavily on word-of-mouth to get the word out about its commitment to excellent customer service, while offering state-of-the-art motorcoaches, highly qualified drivers, 24-hour emergency dispatch system, and other services.

“Our supervisory team likes to say, ‘We are only as good as our last trip.’ If the last trip we provided didn’t go well, that can create negative consequences for the company,” Cushman said. “A dissatisfied customer may tell 10 other people, who may, in turn, tell a few more people. Negative publicity can really hurt our potential for new business.”

As a result, Indian Trails is constantly evaluating its services and practices, to make sure customers have an excellent travel experience when booking with the company.

“There is no magic formula. Nowadays, companies have to provide excellent customer service or they are not going to grow, or may not even remain in business.”

“Whenever a trip goes out, we email a link to customers for a survey,” Cushman said. “We ask them to complete the survey to provide feedback and help us improve our services. We remain laser focused on providing clean coaches and excellent customer service. We tell our drivers that, in many cases, they are the first point of contact for Indian Trails when they pick up a group or individuals. We emphasize the first impression they make could make or break us.

“We must give customers a good first impression and provide them with the service that they would expect, especially when they are paying upwards of \$1,200 to \$1,300 a day for a charter. We ask drivers, ‘If you were spending that kind of money, what would you expect?’

“There is no magic formula. Nowadays, companies have to provide excellent customer service or they are not going to grow, or may not even remain in business.

“We are positioned as the highest quality, but most expensive operator in Michigan. We are providing the newest fleet. We are really focused on the quality and value aspect of the service. We have to deliver or our competition is going to take business away.”

Cushman reiterated that diversity is an important key to Indian Trails’ ongoing success.

“As long as we maintain a diverse customer base, and a diverse type of business, we feel we are going to continue to be successful,” Cushman said. “For example, we recently picked up a shuttle service contract with the University of Michigan. It is a two-year deal that involves operating 40-foot buses as parking lot shuttles. It is sustainable business that will deliver 12 months of the year. This type of business evens out our revenue stream and cash flow, and is part of why we like the diverse contract business.

“Charter business is up and down. It is busier in parts of the spring, summer and fall, but slower during the winter. Charters

also predominately tend to be busier on weekends versus during the week.”

OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE

Indian Trails’ officials are optimistic about the future of their company, and feel that continued diversification is a key to being able to sustain and grow the business, Cushman said.

“We also recognize we are dependent on being able to consistently recruit and retain good quality drivers,” Cushman said. “In addition, being able to provide more favorable schedules for drivers is another key aspect of our future success. Another thing is, we have to be able to continue to adapt to changing markets and reinvent ourselves when needed. If we do that, we feel we are going to be around for another 100-plus years.”

As far as the overall motorcoach transportation industry is concerned, Cushman feels there will always be a need for larger group transportation providers, despite the growing popularity of ride share companies, such as Uber, Lyft, Via, etc.

“Let’s face it, Uber and Lyft can only seat so many people in a vehicle at a time,” Cushman said. “Another reason there will always be a need for motorcoaches is companies like ours are reducing congestion on roadways. When it comes to fuel conservation and traffic congestion reduction, the Uber and Lyfts of the world are not solving those problems. If anything, they are making them worse. So, there is always going to be a need for motorcoaches that can remove up to 50 or more cars from the road at a time. We feel extremely positive about the future of our industry.”

As far as those who may be considering making a career in the transportation industry, Cushman offered some encouragement.

“It is challenging, but I would say if a person is looking to work on something different every day, and would like to be involved in providing solutions for travelers, this is a very exciting industry in which to start a career, whether as a driver, supervisor, dispatcher, etc. I came to Indian Trails 20 years ago from the food service industry. I knew nothing about transportation. I started as a charter sales director and then moved into administration about 12 years ago. Looking back, I would not have changed a thing.”

The logo for Indian Trails, featuring the words "Indian Trails" in a stylized, italicized, purple font with a white outline and a slight shadow effect.

Contact: Indian Trails, Inc.,
109 E. Comstock St., Owosso, MI 48867.
Phone: 800.292.3831.

Email: customerservice@indiantrails.com.
Website: www.indiantrails.com.

Note: *Busline Magazine* Editor Harrell Kerkhoff contributed to this story.