

Q&A with **Raymon J. Land III**



The industry's youngest sole proprietor discusses his company's tribulations and triumphs

Raymon J. Land III, most likely the youngest owner-operator in the motorcoach industry, established his Florida-based charter company Fabulous Coach Lines at age 17. Today, at age 20 Land operates a fleet of eight vehicles in a professional, quality-minded manner that belies his youth. Of course it was his age that precipitated our visit, but it took only a few minutes for BUSRide to sense a competent operator who is hitting all his marks and proceeding cautiously.

BUSRide: Are you in fact the industry's youngest coach owner-operator?

Raymon J. Land III: We'll see. I have never met anyone younger. I am constantly looking for somebody to relate to even within five years of my age.

BR: How and when did this venture begin for you?

Land: Branford is a small rural town in north central Florida. When I was in 8th grade, my school won \$5,500 for the only "A" ranking in its district on the statewide standardized F-CAT. We voted to spend it on a trip to Universal Studios and as class president, I was in charge. I bought the tickets, arranged for substitute teachers and decided to charter a couple of motorcoaches.

Come the day of the trip, the coaches showed up two hours late and they were wrecks. I fixed a hole in the floor with duct tape and we somehow muddled through.

It didn't turn out as nice as I had planned but after that my class loved going on coach trips. I was class president all through high school and I put together trips at the beginning and end of each year, and a few for the Future Farmers of America (FFA).

BR: Did you charge any sort of fee?

Land: By my junior year kids were calling my ventures a 'Ray Land Production' and I decided I should be making a little money for my effort. I charged The First Baptist Church \$100 to arrange a retreat but the trip did not go well. The A/C broke down and everyone was upset and I had to offer a refund. The first time I ask for money and I end up \$300 in the hole. By then I had a Web site for trip planning and still received quite a few calls, but I actually gave it up for awhile during my junior year.

BR: Not for long. You have an interesting story about how you bought your first motorcoach.

Land: I spotted this 1990 Van Hool on the Internet. I couldn't afford it but I took it on a test drive. I had a good chunk of money in my savings, but I was only 17 with absolutely no credit. I called my mom to say, "I am going to need your help here. I just put a down payment on a Van Hool." She said, "Well, okay, but what exactly is a Van Hool?"

BR: Your folks went along with your plan to get into the bus business?

Land: It took a couple of weeks to talk them into my plan. They really wanted me to follow in the agriculture business, but said they would sign the loan if this was what I wanted. It is very important at this point to say while my parents are 100 percent behind my motorcoach business, they have never made a payment on any of my vehicles.

BR: How did it feel to become a motorcoach owner operator?

Land: Pretty frustrating at first. This Van Hool came with problems. I had to call my best friend from school and FFA, Laura Fowler, for help. She and I were up on the roof day and night trying to work on the A/C, making calls and worrying the socks off the tech support people. They had to wonder what two kids were doing working on one of their coaches. After a couple of days of that we just sat down and cried.

BR: But you managed to get the Van Hool up and running?

Land: We got it going and I started my senior year running the football season. Laura stayed on and I hired a gentleman who drove a farm tractor for my dad to drive my coach on

weekends. After his first charter trip he never got back on the tractor.

BR: How did you get Fabulous Coach Lines into shape?

Land: First we needed the perfect name. Ray Land Productions just wasn't cutting it. People thought we were an entertainment company. Since Laura's favorite expression is always, "That's fabulous," it just came to me to call our company Fabulous Coach Lines. I ran it by Laura, and of course she said, "That's fabulous!"

BR: How did you grow your fleet?

Land: I bought my first 56-passenger Prevost H3-45 in February of my senior year. It could handle the long trips we really wanted to do. Then I acquired our third newer and more expensive 2000 H3-45. That year I had my CDL and could finally drive.

But live and learn. Along the way, I also bought two silver-side Prevost LeMirages that never did work out for all sorts of reasons.

I don't know about the rest of the country, but based on my experience, people in Florida do not go for the classic look. Never mind the silversides, they want modern looking

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motorcoaches. I took to numbering each after the birthday of a friend or family member. I can tell you these LeMirages did not earn a number. I traded them off and stuck with the H3-45s.

We just took possession of our new 2007 model and now run a fleet of five H3-45 Prevosts, the Van Hool, as well as an ABC M1000 and a MetroTrans bus.

BR: All this time have any other motorcoach operators been helping you learn the business?

Land: I have mostly learned from hard knocks and my own mistakes. But I always try to look at what other coach companies are doing right — particularly the larger ones that have grown stably. It would be my goal to operate a sizeable company that I can manage at a high-quality level. Getting out to shows and talking to owners in other parts of the country has certainly opened my eyes and given me a better perspective.

BR: Does your age get in the way of what you want to

accomplish?

Land: Not really. It is certainly who I am right now and I enjoy telling people my age, but never do I want it to be an issue. My employees sometimes have trouble working for a fellow who is probably younger than their children, but we work it out.

When I pull up in one our big Prevosts, customers invariably say they thought Mr. Land would be driving. I love the look on their faces when I tell them I am Mr. Land. I keep them smiling and have them at ease after only a few minutes into the trip.

BR: What is a young man's view of this business?

Land: I have certainly gone through a period of mixed feelings. When I started, the operators around me didn't seem as healthy or as happy as they could be, and I didn't want to be involved in anything I would not be happy doing when I am older. At that point I was driving all day, coaches were breaking down, Laura was up at night talking to drivers, customers were mad, and I was really wondering if this is what I wanted.

Since then things have really changed. We have newer equipment, better drivers and everything is running more efficiently. I think there is a way to be happy in the motorcoach business.

BR: How do you stand on pricing?

Land: Thank you for asking that question. We aren't the most expensive, but we're close. Anyone more expensive is coming from a long way for the service. We don't cut corners. We are willing

to spend more to add luxury to the coaches and offer special services that account for our higher rates.

BR: Was there ever a point you might have given up?

Land: About a year ago I was wondering if I should continue in the business or go on to college. I want to grow, make money and enjoy a nice life. The thought has entered my mind to go back to school, study business and finance and then later start a coach company the right way from the start.

BR: While you are thinking, what is next for Fabulous Coach Lines?

Land: This summer we are beginning a casino run and we are about to offer motorcoach trips to favorite destinations through — what else? — Fabulous Tours. I'm excited to have Laura heading up this new venture and I've got good faith what's meant to happen will. Above all, each and every day we're just trying to be a little more fabulous. **BR**