

# History of Beach Transportation

*Excerpts from the book*

*"Second to None" The story of Beach Transportation and its buses*

*by Steve Smith*

In 1941, the Missoula County High School decided to start their first school bus route, transporting kids from the Missoula-Ravalli County line to Missoula. Ray Beach submitted a bid and was initially unsuccessful. He continued to ranch near Florence as well as drive his grain truck between Missoula and Spokane, Washington for Misco Mills, a division of the Missoula Mercantile Company. However, before school started in the fall, the low bidder was unable to fulfill the contract so Ray was contacted to see if he was still interested. Ray said yes, bought his first school bus, a Novelty Jack manufactured in Spokane, and began transporting students from three miles north of Florence to Missoula County High School (now Hellgate High School). Ray's neighbor was his first driver, who worked in Missoula so was able to pick up the students, take them to school in the morning then go to his regular job in town and at the end of the day, drive the kids back home.

Ray Beach worked hard and earned a reputation as a safe, reliable bus operator. Chairman of the School Board, Mr. John Schroder was quoted as saying "he was a very reliable man. He was honest. He was careful with the children and got along with them well." Superintendent C. S. Porter was also quoted as saying, "I had great admiration for Ray. He was particularly careful about the safety of his passengers and always was willing to go out of his way to provide what was needed, as well as extra services." Safety and quality service are two principles that the Beach family still hold dear.

Bob Beach was the second of born of Ray's three children. Growing up in Florence on the ranch, Bob was driven and hard working from the start and did chores on the family ranch as well for nearby neighbor. Eventually, the family moved to Missoula and on weekends and in the summertime, Bob worked as a box boy, stacking and stocking 100 lb. bags of sugar at age 14. He also had a love for big rigs and would drive school buses and the grain truck around the yard to wash them.

As Missoula and surrounding areas grew, so did the need for more bus routes and Ray expanded the bus service. In 1949, Ray hired Harold Keyser (Harley), not aware at the time what an important roll he would play in the future of the company. Harley worked at the Missoula Mercantile grocery store until Ray

approached him to be a bus driver. Harley later said “I was sort of surprised in a way, because I wasn’t expecting it. I’ve never driven a bus before, and he said, well you can learn, can’t you?” Harley took over the Bonner run and also ran a football shuttle. He called school bus driving an “instant love.” Bob Beach later referred to Harley as the “Magician” for his great ability as a dispatcher to juggle schedules, people and buses.

When Ray Beach moved to town in the late 40’s, he first operated his fleet of four buses out of a small rental space on West Spruce with an office that was just big enough for Ray’s chair and a small bench for the drivers. In 1950, he bought some pasture land located at the 800 block of Mount Avenue--which at the time was on the western outskirts of Missoula. He erected a 120 by 40 ft. surplus Air Force building that he deconstructed and brought over from Spokane. Today, the company still uses the facility as its shop.

In 1950, Bob Beach received a track and field scholarship from the University of Montana (then called Montana State University). During college, he also drove bus and spent many weekends and summers working at the bus garage; repairing and servicing vehicles. He graduated from the University with a degree in secondary education and had initially planned on being a teacher and coach. He then enlisted in the Air Force to fulfill his service obligation. Returning home in 1956, he was offered a teaching and coaching position with Missoula County High School. His dad also offered him a job at the fledgling bus company. It was a tough decision, but he finally decided to work with his father at the family business.

Bob initially drove the Clinton route and like Harley, he loved kids and knew every student by their first name. When they weren’t driving, Bob and Harley were learning other phases of the bus business. “When Harley and I first started, we knew every bolt and nut underneath those buses, I did work underneath and Harley did the work on top. We knew the personalities of each of them. Each bus has its own pick-up power and what it can do on the road.” Ray continued to teach them other aspects of the business and in 1958, Ray decided to retire.

As Missoula grew, so did Beach Transportation. Bob built a second bus storage and washing facility at the Mount Avenue location which also included a small office that is still in use today. With Harold as his right-hand man, Bob continued building the company. Harley was later quoted saying “We became closer than brothers. In all the years we worked together, we seemed to be on the same track and looked forward to each other’s company every day.”

In the 1950's student travel started to increase. By the mid to late 60's Beach Transportation was carrying MCHS athletic teams as far as Butte and Helena for competitions. For longer trips, MCHS used more comfortable charter buses from Greyhound. In 1969, the athletic director approached Bob and encouraged him to add a motor coach to his fleet. After very careful consideration Bob purchased the very first motor coach. "It cost me around \$48,000," Bob said "I thought that's three times more money than what I paid for my house."

Harley became the regular driver of the first "Beachliner" and Helen Beach, Bob's wife, designed the first Beachliner logo on the side of the bus. Today the company's fleet of Beachliners has taken a myriad of customers including students, sports teams and senior citizen groups all over the United States and Canada, including trips to the Rose Parade in Pasadena, Disneyworld in Florida, Cotton Bowl in Dallas, New York City and Washington D. C.

As growth continued so did the number of buses and the number of staff members needed to run the company. Two small rooms in the wash bay just weren't big enough anymore so Bob built an office building and driver facility in 1984, which remains the current headquarters.

Bob and his wife Helen had three children Greg, Diana, and Scott. Greg and Scott worked throughout their grade school and high school years-- sometimes after-school, but mostly during the summertime, at the bus garage. They were involved with maintenance, washing buses, fueling, and any other duties Bob had for them. Both boys have now worked full time for over 40 years for the company and Diana has also stepped in help over the years, both as a driver and attendant.

Harley's son Mike also joined the Beach work family as a young man and has many fond memories of his numerous trips. After 46 years of transporting groups all over the country, he decided to retire from fulltime work last year, but still is employed at Beach Transportation as an attendant and a driver evaluator.

In 2000, Bob Beach retired and passed the reins over to his two sons. Today you will not only see Greg, Scott, and Diana out on the road driving bus, you will also see their wives and kids and even a son-in-law behind the wheel.

Bob Beach used his business as an avenue of service to others and his passion and zest for life touched all who knew him. He made a difference in the lives of many and was a strong supporter of Missoula schools and believed that education was the key to bettering society and protecting individual freedoms. Over the years, he garnered many professional and community-service awards. Among them, Bob and Beach Transportation were three-time recipients of "The Golden Merit

Award,” given to the top 10 school bus operators in the nation. He was also the recipient of the Montana Pupil Transportation Association’s “Montana Transportation Person of the Year.” Further honors include the Ray Rocene “Sportsman of the Year Award” for outstanding community volunteerism and service to Missoula area youth, and UM’s “Community Service Award” given to Bob and Helen for excellence in service to the residents of Missoula, the citizens of the state of Montana and to The University of Montana.

Today, Beach Transportation operates a fleet of 120 buses that travel over 1,000,000 miles annually, employs more than 180 people and provides school bus transportation services to more than 3,500 Missoula-area school children as well as charter bus services for athletic teams and other customers from throughout the U.S. and Canada. For eighty years, three generations of the Beach family, along with hundreds of dedicated and loyal team members, have strived to do their best to serve kids and their community. It’s never been easy, but with hard work and dedication, the business, starting as a one-bus operation by Ray Beach, grew under the leadership of his son Bob Beach and now continues under the management and steadfast commitment of brothers Scott and Greg Beach and their team.