

Three 50-Year Drivers Share Their Front-Seat View of the Meijer Fleet's Evolution

During their 50-year careers with Meijer, Steve Fankhauser, Jim Stoutjesdyk and Doug Zoller have had a driver's-seat view of the technological advances of the company's fleet.

Most of their decades have been spent on the road making deliveries. Along the way, they watched some spectacular sunrises and made many friends as they collectively traversed millions of miles across Midwest roads.

This triple play of a half-century milestone is so rare that Steve, Jim and Doug were invited to speak recently at the Meijer Heritage Center about their perspective on the fleet's history.

Leaps in Technology

When they first climbed into the driver's seat, Meijer trucks lacked power steering and air conditioning.

"When we started, the trucks were warm in the summer and cold in the winter," Doug said with a chuckle. "You sat over the motor, and they were noisy. That wasn't as much fun as with the new equipment we have today. Meijer always puts a priority on having the best equipment. They keep upgrading all the time."

Jim remembers when the truck AM/FM radios were bolted to the dash, looking a bit like a tomato juice can with a dial on the front. Before electronic logs and dispatch, drivers were given hardcopy little tickets for each run. He appreciates no longer having to stop to find a pay phone to call ahead to give a store a heads-up that he would soon be rolling in with deliveries.

"Since I've been driving the last 36 years, they've made improvements with the suspension, and it's a lot smoother ride in the cab because of the way they mount the cab to the frame," Steve said.

But change wasn't easy, Steve adds. Initially, he didn't like the idea of switching from a manual to an automatic transmission, but he has come to appreciate the benefit. Another big shift for the department came when Meijer started moving away from cab-overs, where the cab sat over the engine.

"It was a huge improvement all the way around," Steve said. "The automatic shift or transmission was a huge improvement. I didn't really like it at the very first, but as time went on, it was evident that it was a good change."

Improved Safety, Efficiency

Advances in design and technology have made the logistics team more efficient. Routes are now set up so the trucks can pick up products from local manufacturers to bring back to the warehouses.

"That's called backhauling product," Jim explained, noting that the strategy saves from paying an outside freight company to make the delivery, keeping costs down.

The latest technology gives drivers improved vision and awareness, especially when monitoring vehicles with which they are sharing the road.

"It's amazing what they do," Doug said. "They keep your distance from the person in front of you. They tell you when somebody is on the left. If somebody's braking, it flashes on your dash. It tells you a lot about what's going on besides your visual."

While the three sound like gearheads gushing over the high-tech bells and whistles at their fingertips, they all say the best part of the job has been the people they interact with on their daily routes.

"I like a good laugh with a bunch of people I've worked with," Doug said.

Even though the job packs a lot of fun, driving for Meijer is a career that requires discipline. They are used to rising around 2 a.m. to make sure they are at work before 4 a.m. A perk of the schedule is seeing the sunrise through the wide windows of their trucks.

Where It All Started

Working their way to the driver's seat required getting their foot in the door at Meijer first.

Jim joined Meijer in 1973 when he was hired to work in the warehouse at 19 years old. Three years later, he became a driver. He's grateful to his father-in-law, who at the time was the grocery foreman and dispatcher, for persuading him to leave a good school custodian job to join Meijer. Driving was also in Jim's DNA. His grandfather was an over-the-road truck driver, and Jim often spent his summer as a child riding along in his cab.

Doug, who has the longest tenure of the three with 53 years, began working for Meijer in 1970, a year after graduating from high school. He became a driver in 1987 after also working in the warehouse.

"I never looked back," said Doug, who likes the changing scenery during his workday. "My office has a big picture window."

Steve retired on July 13, his 68th birthday. He drove for nearly 36 of his 50 years with Meijer. He joined the company after graduating from high school, working in the warehouse for a little over 14 years, then moving to logistics.

"I always liked to drive, and I enjoyed working with heavy equipment in the service, so it just seemed like a natural fit," Steve said.

During his early years with Meijer, he took a military leave to serve in the U.S. Army for 2 years, spending more than half his tour of duty in Korea. He brought that commitment to service back with him.

"In outbound logistics, we service the stores, and our main objective is to get the product to the store if they need something done. We're there to help the stores out," Steve said. "I've always tried to put my best foot forward when it comes to my job. When we are out on the road, we're pulling a 53-foot billboard."

For over five decades, Steve, Jim and Doug have been an integral part of Meijer, embodying the true spirit of passion for their work. They've played an instrumental role in shaping our success, leading by example, and inspiring generations of professionals along the way. From their humble beginnings to now embarking on this well-deserved chapter of their lives, we thank Steve, Jim and Doug and wish them a fulfilling retirement.

Additional assets available online: [Photos](#)⁽⁴⁾

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