“Luck, guts, hard work, and being in the right place at the right time.” That’s what Jules “Toots” Armellini attributes his success to. While his name is well known within the industry as the founder of Armellini Industries, in Miami, the largest flower shipper in the United States, few may realize his role in helping modernize refrigerated trucking.

The mark he has made on the industry is not lost on the Society of American Florists, which on Sept. 28 inducted Armellini into SAF’s Floriculture Hall of Fame, during SAF Naples 2006, held in Naples, Fla.

The Early Years

So how did he do it? In addition to luck, guts, and hard work, it might have something to do with an old Chevy 10-wheeler, a couple of lawn-mower engines, and a pencil.

His brothers, William and Henry Mazzoni, both flower growers, gave him the Chevy after he got out of the U.S. Navy in 1945. He had grown up working for them, and then enlisted as a Navy “Seabee.” He trained as a mechanic, and was stationed all over the world. The post-war flower industry was booming, and Armellini took advantage of it as a way to “put food on the table.” With his brothers’ truck, he started Armellini Express Lines, out of Vineland, N.J., with his wife Sarah. He downplays any special foresight this career move shows, saying “I don’t think I had a vision … I just went along and did what I thought was good.”

The lawn-mower engines were part of his first refrigeration system, to keep the flowers he was shipping fresher for a longer period of time. In the early ’50s, when Armellini began to expand his lines into Florida, refrigeration “was kind of new, you didn’t see much of it. The mechanical refrigeration did not exist,” he says.

Refrigeration used then was called the “bunker-and-blower” system: bunker being the ice stored in the nose of the trailer, and blower being the fan. Powered by a lawn-mower engine or “putt-putt,” it blew cold air over the ice and circulated it throughout the rest of the truck.

It was during these early years that Armellini’s fondness for innovation became apparent. Most people used one “putt-putt” to refrigerate their truck. Armellini, however, used two. “People thought I was crazy,” says Armellini. But it made perfect sense to him. “Two does a better job than one,” he says simply.

Armellini’s trademark pragmatism and mechanical know-how came in handy when one of his drivers got caught in a hailstorm during the middle...
of the night, and one of the “putt-puts” quit. The driver couldn’t get it restarted, but Armellini had a simple solution. He told the driver to take some lead from a pencil, and rub it between the two points of the spark plug. “It was crazy,” says Armellini, “but it worked.”

**Good-Bye ‘Putt-Putts’**

By the late 1950s, Armellini Express Lines continued to expand throughout Florida, and the lawn-mower engines were no longer going to suffice.

Armellini bought refrigeration systems from True Cool and then from Thermo King. He quickly pinpointed a problem with the system that needed to change: the refrigeration engine switched from high speed to low speed, slowing down the fan and creating inconsistent airflow. He talked to the engineers at Thermo King, and several years later, constant airflow, one of Armellini’s most notable contributions to the industry, was implemented and made standard in Thermo King systems.

“Toots had this saying … ‘Air, air, give me air, man!’” says Marion Sizemore, who was Armellini’s Thermo King dealer, and also acted as a middleman between Armellini and the Thermo King corporate honchos.

Armellini also prompted Thermo King’s development of modulation, which was implemented in the 1980s to help foliage stay hydrated in trailers, and OptiSet, implemented in the 1990s to allow for tighter temperature control so flowers didn’t freeze. “Toots didn’t wait for the factory to say ‘Hey look, we have something new,’” says Sizemore. “A lot of things you see in transport refrigeration today came from Armellini.”

**‘Improve, Improve, Improve’**

Refrigeration, however, is not Armellini’s only area of innovation. He was one of the first in the industry to use satellite tracking for trucks, in the early ’90s, so customers could track the
exact location of their shipments. Also, very early on, he developed wooden decking in the trailer, creating a two-level stacking system for the flowers, to relieve pressure and provide increased air circulation. His company is the first and only one in the industry to use this decking, and he relies on it to this day. “The decking worked perfect, and it still does,” he says.

When flowers were first imported through Miami International Airport in the’70s, they were treated like non-perishable cargo. Armellini worked to educate U.S. Customs, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and product handlers on the importance of moving flowers quickly through the system. Thanks to his efforts, U.S. Customs and USDA in Miami became one of the only points of entry in the United States that now works on an around-the-clock basis.

His drive to improve extended to the steady expansion of his company over the years. In December 2004, it became Armellini Industries, Inc., a holding company that owns the original Armellini Express Lines, J.A. Flower Service, Inc., Fresco Service, Inc., NorthStar Transportation, Inc., and Armellini AirExpress. NorthStar Transportation is a truck brokerage that helps meet the demands for quality transportation during the holidays. Fresno is the largest refrigerated warehouse in the Miami airport area, J.A. Flower Service is a customs clearance facility and AirExpress, an air freight reservation service.

Keeping the Chain Gang

Toots Armellini has spent the last 61 years on a crusade to advance shipping technology. And he doesn’t plan on quitting anytime soon. “I’m going to retire when I die,” he says. “I just like to work.”

Box standardization is his latest pet project. Shippers today must work with hundreds of different sizes of flower boxes, which makes it difficult to load a truck, use space efficiently, and keep the flowers intact. Armellini is working with the Wholesale Florist & Florist Supplier Association, the California Cut Flower Commission, as well as with other trucking companies, wholesalers, and airlines to develop standard box sizes that the industry would adopt. “… it’s not easy to get there, but we’re gonna get there,” he says.

Despite the challenges the industry faces today, Armellini stays positive. “It’s easy to say ‘The other guys are doing a bad job,’ but everybody’s got to change,” he says. “We gotta forget the bad things, and get the good things going.” And luckily for the flower shipping industry, getting things going is Armellini’s specialty.

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