

## Innovative Operators

**RICHFIELD BUS CO./ROCHESTER CITY LINES/HEARTLAND TOURS AND TRAVEL - BLOOMINGTON AND ROCHESTER, MINN.**

### **INTEGRITY OF SERVICE KEEPS MINNESOTA COACH OPERATIONS ROBUST**

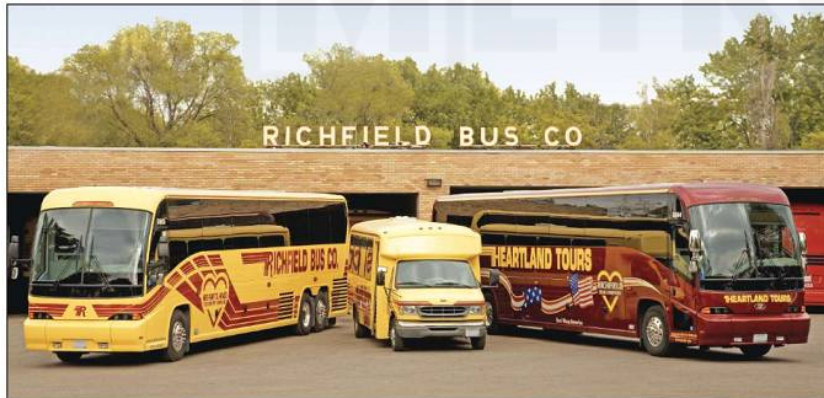
Starting in the Twin Cities before eventually expanding to Rochester, Minn., George and Marilyn Holter's motorcoach operation, launched in 1959, consists now of three separate operations — Richfield Bus Co., Rochester City Lines, and Heartland Tours and Travel — and is run by their sons Stan Holter (Richfield) and Dan Holter (Rochester and Heartland), as well as Dan's wife Clavonne (Heartland).

With their parents launching the company when Dan was three and Stan was six months, the bus business is all the Holters have ever known.

"It's not something we were forced into...we are here on our own accord," says Dan as he reflects. "A family business has some high demands, but there are a lot of accolades for the work and service we provide, which feels good."

In 1966, the Holters expanded their business to Rochester, where there was no bus service at the time after the provider ceased operations, according to Dan. Today, the Rochester operation has a host of services, including an expansive commuter service program that serves 40 communities and key businesses, such as the Mayo Clinic, and provides approximately 3,000 rides a day. The fleet has also grown over the years to 33 motorcoaches.

The commuter service pays for itself by charging riders fares that range



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in price based on the distance they are traveling. Mayo and other businesses in the area also offer employees subsidies for choosing to ride the bus.

"There are no tax dollars supporting the commuter service in any way," says Dan Holter. "We are of the mindset that things should pay for themselves. We don't have empty buses running around."

Completing the cycle, the Holters opened Heartland Express in 1990, when it saw a need from tour groups in the area. The family, though, isn't quite finished expanding and is always open to new business ideas.

"We're both in this for the long run, and even though the economic times are tough, we're holding steady and looking forward to the future in many ways," says Stan Holter.

To that end, the brothers also have a private vintage bus collection and have been working with the St. Paul, Minn.-based Minnesota Transportation Museum (MTM). The Holters donated their first bus to the museum approximately 10 years ago, and Stan Holter currently serves as superintendent of MTM. In that capacity, Richfield Bus Co. works on the vehicles and helps rent the vintage buses out for events, including weddings.

"We hope the classic bus division

will become another niche that we will expand into that will help the company thrive," Stan Holter says. "It will probably be a very small part, but every part is integral."

Although Marilyn Holter recently passed away, George Holter is still actively involved in the operations, as are Dan and Clavonne's two children. With 52 years and counting in the business, the family maintains a certain pride in tempering the good times with the bad.

"There are many family businesses that thrive, but overall the percentage of those companies that make it to 25 or 50 years? I don't even know what that percentage is, but I imagine that number wouldn't be too high," Stan Holter says. "It's very gratifying."

When asked what business values they learned from their parents before them that have helped them thrive, Dan Holter says it's simple: "Dependability and service."

Adds Stan Holter: "When people come to us and ask us why they should choose one of our companies, number one is the integrity of our service. Also, we are always here, day or night, for customers, the community, or even, other bus companies that reach out and need our help."

— Alex Roman

#### **AT A GLANCE**

**Motorcoaches:** 59 (combined), plus 47 minibuses, transit and vintage vehicles  
**Fleet mix:** MCI, Gillig  
**Employees:** 171 (combined)  
**Drivers:** 165 (combined)  
**Service area:** 49 states and Canada  
**Services offered:** Charter, tour, commuter, transit  
**Year Started:** 1959  
**Owner:** George Holter