



L-R: Cameron, Hayden and Gordon Simpson

FUELED FOR LIFE

Words and photographs by Emily Weekes

Just two hours north of Melbourne, en route to Victoria's ski fields sits the town of Alexandra, a close-knit community of around 2600 residents. Here, the Simpson family began a transport business in 1953, flanked by forests, farmland, waterways and mountains. It's still going strong.

In the early days, the Simpson's family business carted goods from the railway to the shops before moving into delivering general freight and fuel in the late 1970s. When Gordon Simpson took over the family business from his father, he chose to focus on fuel and today, that's the business' strength.

Simpsons Fuel Distributor is today, run by Gordon and his wife, Janene along with their children, Cameron, Hayden and Sarah. They deliver fuel across a 100km radius out of Alexandra carting into forests and mines, farms and towns, traversing mountainous highways in belting sun and snow.

Each of the Simpson children ventured away from the family business for a time - establishing careers of their own before returning to the fold. Cameron and Hayden

worked in Western Australian in the mines; Sarah was Head of Catering at a leading outdoor education company in the region. This third generation business is a family one through and through.

"We don't work our trucks seven days a week and we don't do night shift," says Gordon. "We prefer all our drivers to be home with their families and kids. Our drivers are local and have been here a long time. We don't want them driving trucks on the highway day and night. That's just what we're about."

Each day, Simpsons sends two 20-metre truck and dog and semi tankers to Caltex's Newport terminal. Here they collect five kinds of diesel, as well as unleaded and 98-octane fuel. Each tanker has four compartments in each barrel so different

products can be transported at the same time. There's a catch though. Each product has a different weight meaning there's considerable work in making sure each load is calibrated correctly.

Three years ago, Simpsons collaborated with tanker manufacturer Tieman to build a 57 and a half tonne A-double tanker with BPW axles underneath. It was the first of its kind to run on the new PBS and today these tankers are an industry standard.

"Tippers had been carting 57 and a half tonnes for ages, but no one had done it with fuel. It took us a while to get that through but now it's the norm," says Gordon. "The first one is always the hardest. We specified that we wanted BPW axles on the truck and dogs because our previous trailer did."

"When you see the logging contractors and mining trucks using BPW products, well, if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for us," he says. His son, Cameron agrees: "We haven't touched anything on that trailer in the three years we've had it. It's been inspected and that's that."

For Gordon, choosing BPW is also about customer service. "Whenever we drive into Laverton for a service we're treated like lifelong friends," he laughs. "If we have time they'll show us their work. They're passionate. It makes it easy for us because we know that they care about their customers."

When the tanker was built and first put on the road three years ago, it took some time to get the different specifications to 'talk' to each other. "We had to make sure it was as good as it could be, especially with the new PBS," says Cameron. "That was the hardest bit."

This modest fleet of tankers traverses diverse and difficult terrain in Victoria's High Country while driving daily on freeways into Melbourne. Simpsons navigate tight mountain roads in icy conditions and snow, as well as through extreme heat that can bring on bushfires during summer months.

As a trained mechanic, Cameron tinkered until he found the optimal way to handle the

new tanker. "Our truck gear ratios have been modified to rev way out of the fuel economy range on the highway," says Cameron, chuckling. "Everyone freaks out when I explain what we're doing."

"But when they come for a drive, they tell us we've spec'ed it perfectly. By revving higher, the tanker pulls harder on the road and there are far less gear changes in the hills, so it really does even out," he says. Last year, Cameron was named the most fuel-efficient Volvo driver in Victoria. It's perhaps not surprising.

He'd been using Volvo's Dynafleet Telematics app to calculate his average braking speed, fuel consumption and driving efficiency and enjoying the challenge that comes with tweaking your performance on the road and seeing real-time data results online.

What Cameron didn't realise is that Volvo was watching too.

"We got the app mostly for its tracking ability so we could see where our trucks were at all times," says Cameron. "But last year Volvo decided to go through the app and watch everyone's driving for a month to choose the best drivers to compete in the annual Volvo Driver Fuel Challenge."

After being chosen as the most fuel-efficient Volvo driver in Victoria, Cameron was flown to Queensland to compete with another 30 or so drivers for the Australian off-road Volvo Driver Fuel Challenge title. He won the nationals and came second in the world championships in Sweden.

"In Queensland, they had an ambulance on standby because they thought someone might get hurt," says Cameron. "But Hayden and I had raced 4WDs when we lived in Western Australia, so we've always been pretty relaxed about racing off road."

"I was driving a tipper for the competition," he says. "We don't do a lot of off road driving in Victoria, but I guess we drive in snow up at Mt Buller and supply several logging companies in the region - so I probably had more practice than most!"

"No one knew we were being watched on that app so it made the competition more even," says Cameron. If an app can encourage better fuel usage, safer driving and more even wear on our roads, then businesses like the Simpsons' will surely be around for many more generations to come.

"What I like about BPW is that they're always trying to be better," he says. "They're leaders." The same could be said of the Simpson family.



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