

nies operate nationwide — or are as big as the van lines.

Locally owned and operated companies may consist of nothing more than the owner, his truck and a telephone number; others have a fleet of trucks and an office.

In the Midlands, Two Men and a Truck has claimed more than half of the local moves, its owners say.

Much of their success is credited to a no-surprise price plan. The customer pays a flat hourly rate for a crew of two (\$63) or three men (\$75) and a 24-foot truck.

"We basically feel we can move someone for a good price," said Roger Boyer, who owns the Midlands franchise with his wife, Tara.

Since the local franchise opened in November 1993, Two Men and a Truck has notched more than 4,500 moves, Boyer said.

Two Men and a Truck, a member of the Better Business Bureau, operates in Columbia and 10 surrounding counties.

The local company is one of 40 franchises in the United States. Two Men and a Truck was launched in 1989 by Mary Ellen Sheets, who's also responsible for coming up with the business' eye-catching logo of two stick figures in a truck.

Her two sons, students at Northern Michigan University, came up with the idea as a way to earn college money in the summer. They had a pickup and hauled anything.

After they left home, the calls kept coming — and Sheets figured there was a market for a no-frills local mover.

Two Men and a Truck will pack goods, but it doesn't have a warehouse.

The Boyers said their employees are professionals, some of whom have been with the company since its start, and training is heavily emphasized.

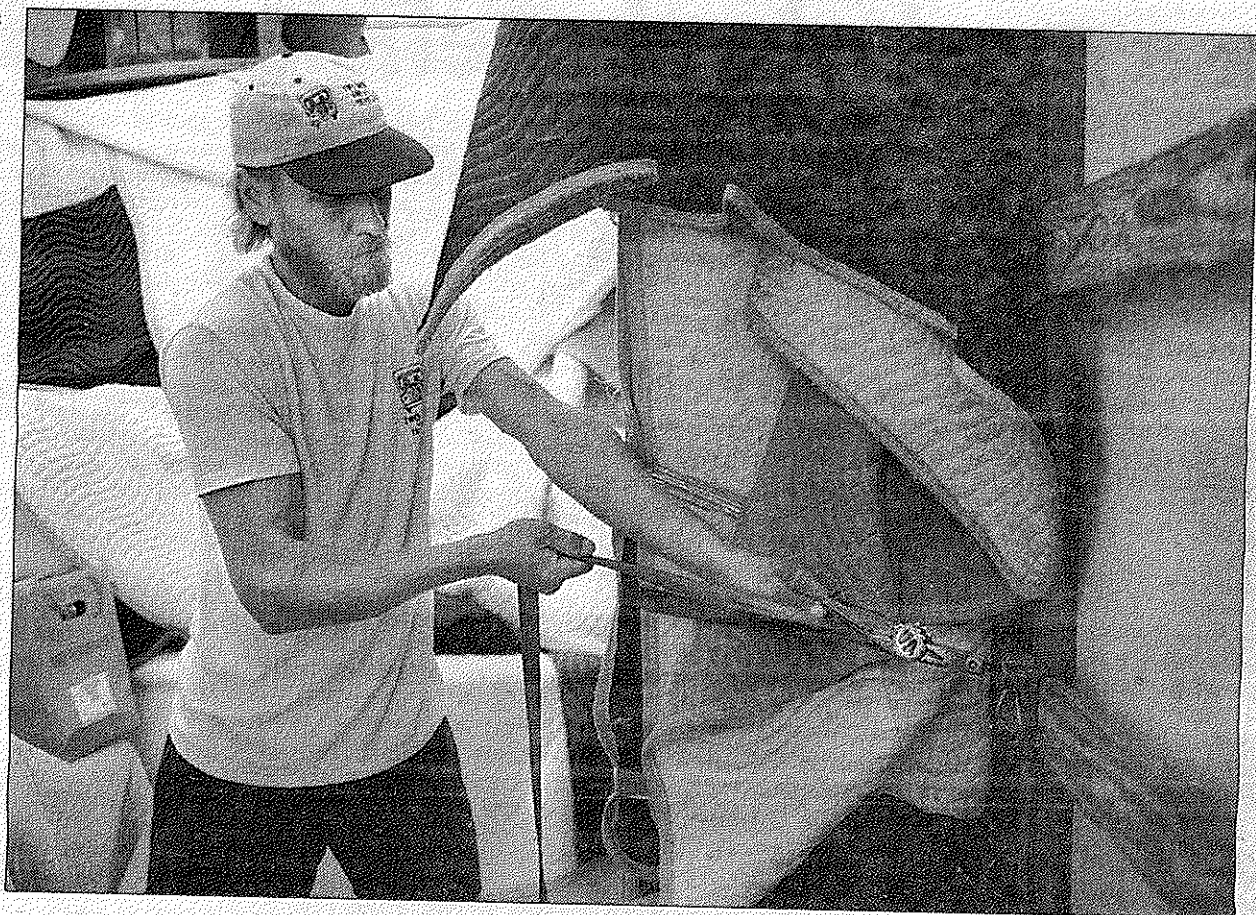
A mover's character is important, they said.

"You can't pay or teach people to care," Tara Boyles said.

The local helper. Some companies that can help you with a local move don't have trucks at all. Extra Help, which opened in the Columbia area only a couple of years ago, offers the consumer an interesting compromise in cutting costs.

Its crews do the heavy lifting but leave the driving to you.

Bruce Carter, the company's owner, said



Jim Covert of Two Men and a Truck is responsible for loading the truck properly. Here he straps down a large cabinet so it won't shift during the move.

he got the idea when he worked for a national van lines in Jacksonville, Fla.

"Sometimes people would tell us they would have done the move themselves if only they had help in loading and unloading the truck," Carter said.

To test the theory, Carter and some of his fellow movers tried hawking business at the local U-Haul Center. "We'd run up to trucks as they pulled out and asked them if they needed help," Carter said.

The idea showed promise, and in 1992 Carter and some of his friends quit their jobs and formed a new company, Rent-A-Crew, which provided crews of movers.

When Carter moved to South Carolina to take a job at Mack Truck in Winnsboro, he held onto the Rent-A-Crew idea and later started his own moving business.

"It gets in your blood," Carter said.

So far, the idea is working in the Midlands to the tune of about 40 moves a

month, Carter said.

Extra Help has four crews, composed mostly of van lines employees working on their days off. The crews show up in a van loaded with pads and dollies and load furniture on a truck the customer has rented.

Once the truck is loaded, the customer drives it to his new home and the crew follows in the van so they can unload the truck.

Carter emphasizes that his people won't and can't drive the truck because of PSC regulations. One crew member did so, and Carter got slapped with a \$1,000 fine and \$800 in court costs.

Extra Help charges \$38 an hour for a two-man crew. Extra Help books moves seven days a week, and there's no extra charge for Sundays.

Other options. Another money saver is to hire your own help. Sometimes a truck rental company can recommend an indepen-

dent contractor, or you can find them in the classifieds.

The going rate is about \$30 to \$35 an hour for a crew of two, and there's always room for negotiations.

Consumers should be sure to check references and meet the mover.

The final choice is to do it yourself. Two-thirds of Americans do their own moves by sweet-talking friends and relatives into helping.

The pay could be as little as a thank-you and a pizza.

The drawback, of course, could be broken china and a broken back.

In the past 20 years, Chuck Crumbo has lived in four states and moved more than a dozen times. He got the idea for this article while shopping for a mover to haul his household from Irmo to St. Andrews.

Moving tips

Finding the best price and right mover takes some leg work. Here are some ideas offered by movers and experienced consumers:

Before you begin

■ Start calling as soon as you know you'll be moving — at least two months before the moving day — to get estimates from at least three companies. Keep in mind that two-thirds of a mover's business is between May 15 and Sept. 30, and some are already booked through June.

■ Ask to see the company's annual performance report that states the number of shipments the company handled, delays, insurance claims over \$100 and average number of days it took to settle them.

■ Call the Better Business Bureau (254-2525) to determine if complaints have been filed against the company. Also check with the state Public Service Commission (737-5133) for any infractions of the law.

■ Make sure the mover is bonded, insured and licensed to do business.

Preparing for a move

■ Make a to-do list. There are many things to remember, such as notifying the postal service of a change of address and getting utilities switched. Check off each task as it is accomplished.

■ Decide how much, if anything, you want to pack and how much you want the movers to pack. Packing costs are based on the price of boxes and labor (based on size of the box).

■ Start sorting items early to eliminate as much as you can. Hold a yard sale for items you don't want to move or donate them to charity.

■ Begin collecting boxes as early as possible. Check liquor and record stores for when they get shipments; their boxes are the sturdiest.

■ Label boxes on the side, not the top, so their contents will be evident if the boxes are stacked. Be specific in noting contents — not just "miscellaneous."

■ Disassemble beds, tables and other pieces of furniture. This will save the movers time and you money.

On moving day

■ Be nice to the movers. Keep in mind the job is hard, or else you would've done it yourself.

■ Offer cold drinks and food. A few niceties could help in persuad-



ing the movers that the baby grand really needs to be moved to another room.

■ Always have a couple of boxes marked to be opened immediately. These boxes might contain just the coffeemaker and dinnerware. It's important for the family and your psyche to feel settled as soon as possible.