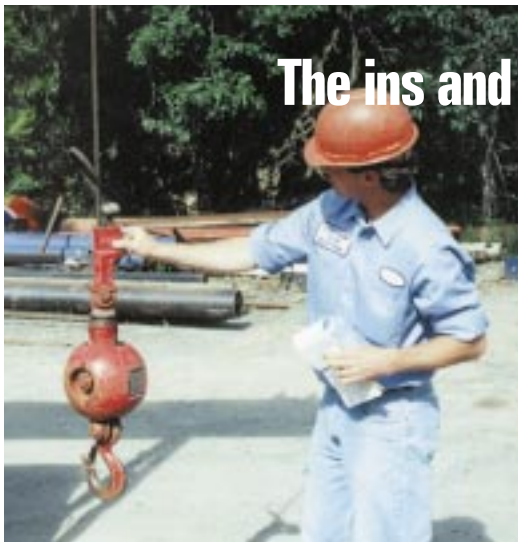


Buying the Big Rigs



Photography by Jerry Mathiel

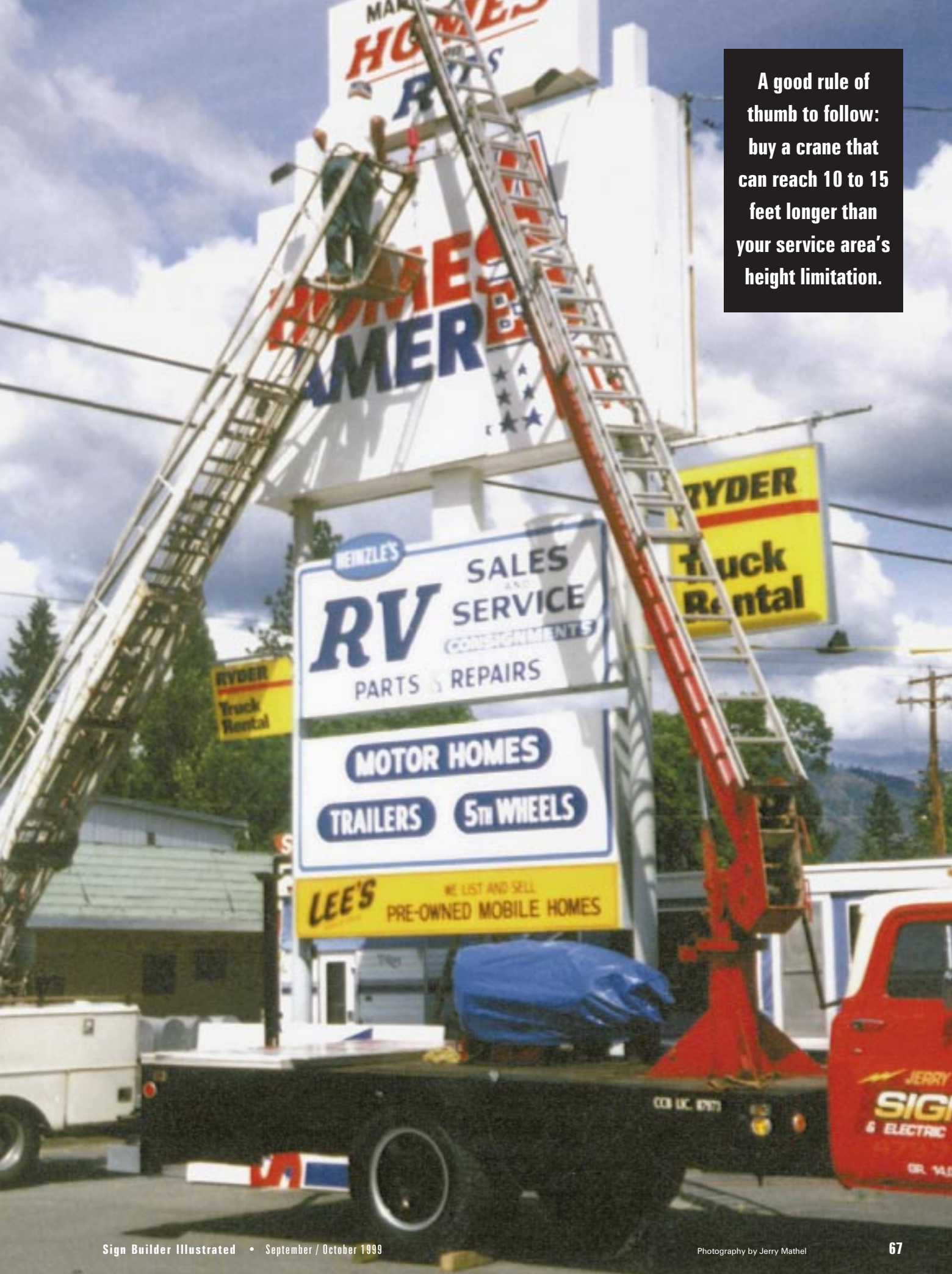
Bruce Scott of Western Sign Systems in Grants Pass, Oregon, checks his equipment before starting his day.

The ins and outs of purchasing boom trucks

Bernard Heitz remembers the day when, shortly after returning from World War II to run his own sign shop in Madison, Indiana, he faced the problem of how to get a cross-shaped sign he'd built to the top of a church. At the time, his installation equipment consisted of an old GI truck with a winch mounted on the front. "I did it the hard way," he laughs. "I rigged a pulley on a boom that was already up in the church, stuck it out a small win-

dow near the top of the building, and then, using a cable connected from that to the winch, literally pulled the sign up." Not long after that experience, Heitz decided to purchase his first official boom truck, "an old used junker," he says. It came equipped with a Memco crane. "The Memco had a spring on it, and you had to do all the leveraging yourself by elevating it up and down with a jack screw," he recalls. Still, it was a vast improvement over the GI winch affair.

Today, Heitz Sign Company, a mid-sized manufacturer, with ten employees and installer of signs servicing south-



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Major installations
require two trucks.



Photography by Jerry Mathel

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ern Indiana and north central Kentucky, owns three boom trucks with reaches of 35 feet, 65 feet, and 100 feet. They install an average of one sign a day. Pat Heitz, who bought the company upon his father's retirement a few years ago, says he is currently looking to purchase another large truck, one equipped with a basket, to replace a fourth vehicle that was wrecked. While Pat Heitz knows exactly what he wants from his next boom truck purchase, those who are just entering the sign installation arena often don't have a clue.

The aerial and crane equipment industry has come a long way since its Memco days. There are literally dozens of truck and crane models and a myriad of options from which to choose. Considering that a new rig can cost anywhere from \$60,000 to \$400,000, it is no wonder that many novice boom-truck purchasers go glassy-eyed with confusion. Regaining clear vision, however, is a simple matter of turning to the experts for help. If you already know everything there is to know about sign industry vehicles, then the following information will

give you a good review of the facts. For anyone else, the following information should help as a good primer for the maze of purchasing vehicles for your sign business.

What You Need

Jim Glazer is vice-president of sales and marketing at Elliott Equipment Co., in Omaha, which manufactures Elliott Hi-Reach truck-mounted aerial equipment. He says that, in the first step toward any boom truck purchase, carefully analyze your company's needs.

Focus on what you want to do with the vehicle. Consider the uses. Will it be for maintenance, or installation too? Try to estimate how high you will be working. This will determine the height of boom you need. Think about where you will park the truck while you work. That has a bearing on what sort of side reach you'll require, which also helps determine the height and crane capacity you want. Think about the load weights your boom accommodate. Know how many workers you plan to send out on a job. That will determine the size platform the vehicle will need.

Thomas Bradley, president of Radocy Incorporated, Rossford, Ohio, maker of Mighty Lift, Comet, and Saturn cranes, also has some wise advice for boom-truck buyers. He says the most important thing to consider in your pre-purchase analysis is any sign restrictions in the market region you intend to service. "If most signs you'll work on are in an area with a 35-foot height restriction, you probably don't need a 100-foot crane," he advises. "Instead, you'd be better off buying a machine capable of doing 85 to 90 percent of the work in that market. If you do get a couple of projects that need a 100-foot crane, you can rent the proper truck for these jobs or hire them out to someone else." Down the road, if you find you're getting a lot of calls for higher projects, that's the time to consider adding a larger truck to your fleet.

A good rule of thumb to follow: buy a crane that can reach 10 to 15 feet longer than your service area's height limitation. "If that's 35 feet, a 45-foot to 50-foot machine will work nicely. The extra length lets you park out a little from the sign pole and still reach out over

things such as bushes planted around it," Bradley says.

Take it a step further and determine whether or not you will want a crane-and-platform combo truck. In the last ten years, these have become very popular. "The combo truck gives anyone just getting into the business the best of both worlds," Bradley notes. When you consider that a dual-function truck costs only about 5 percent more than a single-function one, it's also a cost-effective choice, according to Elliott. "And it really beats running two different trucks—one equipped for maintenance and one for installation, which probably doubles your costs or more," he adds. Consider other features such as winches and outriggers and safety features such as an insulated platform and crane and, of course, the truck chassis itself. This is mainly a matter of preference. Radocy prefers Fords, but both Bradley and Glazer say their companies can mount their equipment on whatever manufacturer's chassis you like best. Some of the other things to consider here include,

says Bradley, whether or not the size of truck you want to buy requires the driver to have a CDL license.

"Trucks that have a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 26,000 pounds or more can only be driven by someone who holds a CDL," he says. "Personally, though, I would require the CDL for all of my drivers. You're putting an expensive piece of equipment in this guy's hands and the CDL training just helps him be more responsible." And, don't forget to anticipate future needs when planning both your truck size and how you'll outfit it, Glazer adds. "It might be better for you to step up to a bigger engine in the beginning, for instance, than to try and save money with a small one, only to find you've worn your truck out because you carried bigger loads than you'd figured on," he says.

Know What You Want

Today's technical wizards have teamed up to present boom-truck buyers with a staggering selection of gizmos. For example, you

have a choice of hydraulic or planetary winches, and you can think about adding a jib winch. If you carry tools to a job site, you will probably want storage compartments. In your experience with these vehicles, you might have decided you should have a manlift that rotates. If so, do you want an electric, manual, or

Think about a computerized sensing device to monitor boom angle, crane operations, load, and extension.

hydraulic rotation system operated by a single joystick or a standard three-stick control? Think about a computerized sensing device to monitor boom angle, crane operations, load, and extension. These are just a few of the many options found on boom trucks today. If you don't see a feature you think you'll need on the truck model you're considering, then just ask. More than likely, it is available.

Consider How Much It Will Cost

The difference in a new, low-end boom truck and those residing among the boom-truck aristocracy can amount to more than \$300,000, which should give you cause to plan your purchase



Photography by Jerry Matthei



Photo courtesy of Vanladder

(above) Bruce Scott of Western Sign Systems in Grants Pass, Oregon, checks his equipment before starting his day.

(left) Lightweight service ladders can be mounted on a pickup or van.

well. Elliott's trucks start at about \$65,000 for a 36-foot, two-section boom mounted on a 15,000 pound GVWR chassis. "It's like a super-duty pickup," Glazer explains; it's capable of lifting up to 2,000 pounds. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the company's \$400,000 model. "Here you'd be looking at a five-axle, 60,000-pound GVWR truck that would have this mammoth five-section boom that could lift 7 tons, equipped with a computerized operating envelope and 22 foot-wide outriggers."

Financing your boom truck is similar to financing any vehicle.

Radocy's units range from about \$70,000 for a 45-foot boom to \$160,000 for those with a 130-foot reach. Bradley says you can save some money by buying used. Most manufacturers' cranes last up to thirty years and, therefore, can be remounted two or even three times. "This can get you into a piece of equipment for less money," he says. "Have it looked over by someone capable and use some caution—and ask if the seller will put a warranty on it." Just as with the automotive industry, used boom-truck prices are determined by a variety of factors. Research the type of equipment and truck for reliability, the repair records, warranty work, recurring types of repairs, vehicle age, and overall appearance and condition. Glazer adds that there should be some good used trucks available. He says the current industry trend is towards owners trading in their units after five or seven years, so they don't incur the maintenance expenses an older truck chassis normally requires.

Financing your boom truck is similar to financing any vehicle. For an outright purchase, be prepared to put down anywhere from 5 to 20 percent of the purchase price, depending on your credit, with payments typically running a 60-month period. Remember that you should be getting a depreciation tax

credit on the vehicle as well. That will help reduce the purchase and operating costs, and this 60-month timeframe is the generally allowed length the government permits for a useable depreciation expense. If getting your hands on the downpayment proves tough, you might consider leasing. "There are all kinds of lease programs out there," Glazer says. "Some even allow you to adjust your payments so you can skip making them in months when your business is slow. Let's say you live in North Dakota and you can't work for weeks at a time during the winter because of the weather. One leasing program lets you make more payments during the summer, when your cash flow is stronger, and skip them during the winter when it's down." Bradley adds that leasing might be a better option, even if you can afford to purchase a unit, because of the tax breaks it typically offers. "Check with your business advisor to see if this works for you," he says.

The cost of operating one of these vehicles should be your first thought when budgeting for your unit, Glazer notes. This part is something many people overlook. "They get hung up on the purchase price and don't necessarily think of the whole ownership cost, from maintenance to how much it's going to cost to run it and what you'll get out of the unit resale-wise. You'll be making a fairly large investment, but you just have to value it," he adds. "You have to know how much you're spending now to have someone else install your signs for you, how much you could do it for hour-wise, how many jobs you can expect, and how much buying and running a truck will cost you. It's a real business decision, like anything else."

By being innovative, Heitz Sign Co. also takes on jobs such as replacing lamps in parking-lot lights and moving trusses for building contractors, as well as installing signs for other manufacturers. There are chances that you can make a boom truck a cost-effective and convenient part of your sign operation. "I don't know how Dad used to do it," Pat Heitz says. "I couldn't operate without my trucks today." ❏