

Images courtesy of Mike Denny



## MDI “ROCKS” THE TRUCKING INDUSTRY

WILLIAM HORNER

**M**DI Rock owner Mike Denny always had a fascination with big trucks. But his journey to operating a trucking company would first take him to the far side of the globe and later into a different type of “horsepower.” This roundabout path to becoming the Valley’s largest locally owned landscape rock supply company is an unusual tale.

Denny grew up in Skull Valley, a small town located west of Prescott where his father was a rancher. “I often hitched a ride on big trucks carrying cattle or hay to our ranch,” he recalls. “I own the first truck I ever rode in: a bull-nose Kenworth belonging to Lemons Livestock.”

When Denny was 14, his family moved to Australia, where his mother was from. There, he finished high school and went to college to continue his education in the horse and cattle business. He planned to return to the U.S. to start a career in horse training, but first he took a detour.



**Top:** Mike Denny with his first truck, a 1981 Kenworth, at the Pioneer Landscaping Materials yard, 1988.

**Above:** Mike Denny loading at Madison Granite yard in Phoenix, 1990.

After college, Denny needed to earn some money to come back to the U.S. so he took a job at a large grain farm in what he calls the “semi-outback” of Australia. “I had many assignments, including a 40-mile roundtrip driving a truck hauling grain from the fields to an elevator in a 1970s vintage cab-over Mercedes Benz,” he says.

Denny eventually moved to California, but the horse business wasn’t what he had envisioned. Disenchanted, he moved to

Arizona with the intention of going back to school to study business. First, though, he got a job at Pioneer Landscaping Materials at the Cave Creek and Union Hills yard as a loader operator/yard man. “The owners were very kind to me, and they trained me on their largest trucks, where I became a

substitute driver,” Denny says. “I loved working there.”

But Denny wanted to run his own trucking business. In 1988, the owners of Pioneer sold him a 1981 Kenworth W900 tractor to start him in the industry. His timing, however, couldn’t have been worse. This was during the savings and loan crisis, and construction had all but stopped. “I pulled an end dump and anything else to get some revenue!” he says.

From these humble beginnings, MDI Rock grew and prospered. Their current mixed fleet is different brands, sizes, and configurations, including Peterbilt, Kenworth, Mack, Autocar, Western Star, Ford, and Freightliner. “About the only brand we don’t have is New Trucks,” he says. Denny goes on to cite his fantastic group of mechanics; all repairs are done in-house, including significant rebuilds. “Sometimes, we even have to manufacture our parts on some of the older trucks to keep our fleet safe and efficient,” he says.

This fleet of trucks and locations in north Phoenix and Queen Creek allows MDI Rock to supply natural stone products to contractors and homeowners throughout Arizona. “Our quarry in Dewey, east of Prescott, produces some of the state’s finest decorative stone,” Denny says. The company offers more than 50 colors of groundcover along with riprap, flagstone,



topsoil, sand, gravel, and boulders. “Our accent boulders range from basketball-size rocks all the way up to those as big as a compact car,” he says. “Of course, we have a placement crane to put that boulder in just the right spot.”

With the growth of MDI Rock, Denny works to maintain a positive culture at his business. “I have found that most times you hire for skill and fire for fit,” he says, discussing his management philosophy. “Thus, it’s so important to find people that fit into the culture of our organization even if they may not have the skill set. We can teach that if they embrace our core values.”

When asked what his company’s biggest challenge was, Denny replied, “Trucks LOL!” He went on to say that, “personally, it’s the risk involved knowing



that we have all these big machines out there and mistakes can happen that may hurt my people or those around us. I always have this sense of relief on Saturday afternoon when I know that the fleet is parked for the rest of the weekend,” he added.

Besides trucking and operating an 85-acre rock quarry in Dewey, MDI Rock recently started a Green Waste Recycling Program. They haul lawn trimmings from landscape contractors to Dewey, grind it up, and compost it for resale.

You know you’re in the right business when you unwind from your job—by doing more work. Denny confesses that his form of relaxation is driving one of his trucks. “I love the opportunity to jump in a truck and haul some equipment or run a loader for a bit. There’s also this hobby (or disease!) of collecting old trucks.”

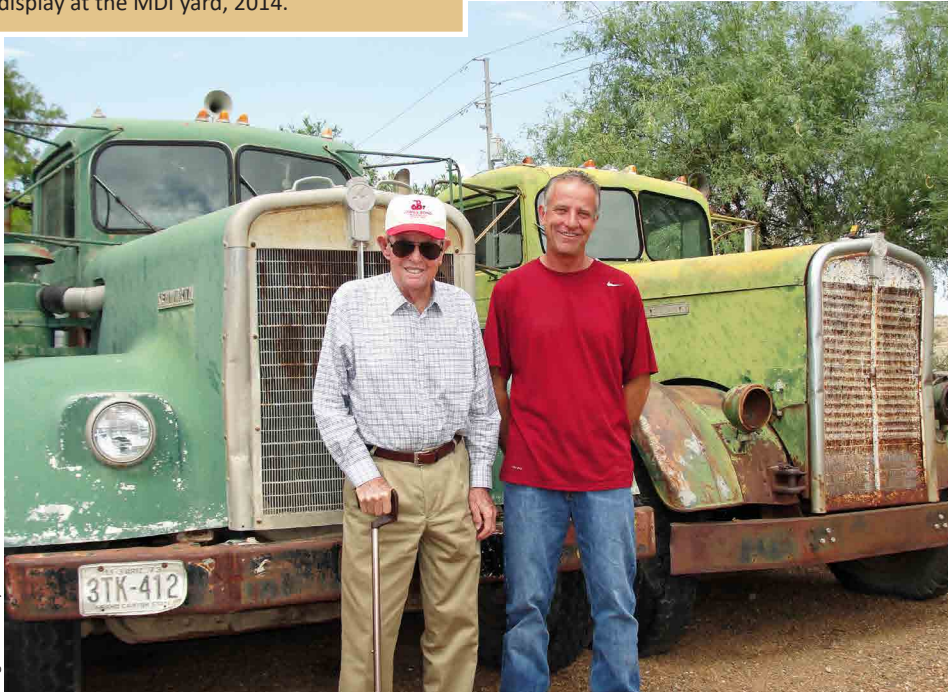
When asked about the future of MDI Rock, Denny said he hopes to continue improving on what the company has built to serve their customers better. This includes potentially opening additional rock yard locations and perhaps another quarry operation.

He adds, “And, yes, we’ll buy more used trucks and fix them up like new!”

**Top:** Mike Denny with driver Larry Wansing (left) by a new Kenworth truck.

**Right:** Mike Denny’s first new transfer truck, a Freightliner XL, 1997.

**Below:** Mike Denny (right) poses with trucking legend James Bond and his vintage trucks, on display at the MDI yard, 2014.



Images courtesy of Author