



## Vehicle Caregivers Miller & O'Brien There for Pacificans since Pacifica's first days

By Jean Bartlett  
(A business biography)

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Pacifica Tribune photo, 1990

Left to right, business founders Fred Petersen and Warren Miller, with Ron O'Brien of the newly named business Miller & O'Brien.



Jean Bartlett photo, 2013

Miller & O'Brien current owner, Jeff Brammer.

Not long before nine small coastal communities—Fairmont, Westview, Pacific Manor, Sharp Park, Fairway Park, Vallemar, Rockaway Beach, Linda Mar and Pedro Point—incorporated to become the City of Pacifica in 1957, San Francisco native Fred Petersen and his wife Shirley moved to the Linda Mar neighborhood of Pacifica. The couple, who would raise their five kids in Pacifica, bought a house on Toledo Court, which is now just a few blocks from the Park Mall Center. Back then, Fred's friend Warren Miller noted in a recent interview, Fred and Shirley's home was one of very few in a lightly-populated area.

Born in 1929, and also a San Francisco native, Warren has lived in Pacifica since 1960. He is two years older than the 1931-born Fred. The two men did not know each other until after high school. Fred went to Lincoln High School and Warren is a graduate of Balboa High School (he also attended San Miguel Elementary School and James Denman Middle School). Fred's wife and Warren's first wife were friends and that is how Fred and Warren's friendship began. Warren was the best man at Fred and Shirley's 1951 wedding, which made the papers in San Francisco. It was a double wedding at Notre Dame Des Victoires Catholic Church. Fred married his childhood sweetheart Shirley, and Shirley's sister Joy married Fred's first cousin Russell Boehm.

"Freddie was a born mechanic," Warren said. "He had a sense of what was going on with an automobile just by listening to it. I am a book learner, so I had to learn from books and by doing. So he taught me

some and I taught him some. I knew business and he really knew cars. When we went into business together, it was a good business match." (Fred Petersen—who moved with his wife Shirley to the community of Forestville, California in 2001—passed in August of 2013.)

It was in 1956 that the two friends formed a business together.



"Fred had just finished up an apprenticeship at the Southern Pacific yards," Warren recalled. "And he had a job at a service station at 22nd and Noriega in San Francisco. On his way to work one day, he noticed a new gas station was being built at Reina del Mar Avenue and the Pacific Coast Highway.

"At that time I was working as an assistant manager first in San Rafael at Wissman's United Markets, and then back at their San Francisco store. A promotion I was expecting did not happen and I was disheartened and ready to do something new. I approached Freddie about going into business together and along comes this Richfield gas station on the coast."

←Warren Miller at home in Pacifica, January 31, 2023. (Jean Bartlett photo.)

"I drive to Vallemar to take a look at the space and what did I see?" Warren laughed.

"There was a grocery store across the street from where the station was being built, where the Sun Valley Market is now, and I see horses and a wooden sidewalk. I said to Freddie, 'Are you out of your mind?'"

But the station was almost finished and Warren decided this was a good business decision and he approached Fred.

"I came down from San Francisco to Freddie's house and we talked for about a week about what we each wanted. At the end of the week, we shook hands and away we went."

They started Fred & Warren's Richfield with \$2,500. Warren put up \$1,500 and Fred put up \$1,000.

"Richfield gave us a loan of tires, batteries, unit accessories and gasoline and that's how we began. With Richfield, it was strictly cash basis. When we bought a load of gas, you had to have money right there, in a lockbox, for Richfield. The only bad part was they told us we had to be open from 6 in the morning to 12 midnight, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

"How did we do that with just Fred and me? We alternated. Fred opened at 6 in the morning, and I would come in at noon. He would go home at 6 at night, and I went home at midnight. We worked 12 hours a day, for a year and a half without a day off. But we were young.

"After a year and a half, we were making a little money and we hired our first employee, Haskell Sills. He lived on Linda Mar Blvd. He was a Post Office employee and he worked for us on Saturdays. So I had a Saturday off, and Freddie would have the next Saturday off.

"We were doing car repairs. We really wanted a garage but we didn't have the capital, so we took a service station to start. That came with oil changes, tire repair, lubes, windshield cleaning and filling the gas tank. Atlantic Richfield knew we were going to do repairs. They just looked the other way. After a year or two we said to Richfield, 'Don't bother to check on us come Christmas, because we won't be open.' And Richfield didn't check on us, and we started taking a few holidays a year."

Warren hadn't planned to work with autos. His goal was to go to college. But his dad died when he was 9 years old, and when he was in his last few years of high school, helping his family out with work was his first priority. He didn't mind. He started working when he was 11, mowing lawns. He always worked. When he was in high school, he went to work at a service station. Along with college prep courses in his senior year, he also took auto shop, and discovered he liked working with automobiles and he had a good mind for business.

"My mom was Margaret (McCarthy) Miller and her family was from County Cork, Ireland. When my father died, she went to work in a laundry. She was a wonderful woman and she was very, very smart, street smart, but she didn't have the education for a good-paying job. Her father owned a bar in San Francisco and when she was in third grade, they took her out of school to cook the 'free lunch.' In those days, when you bought a 5 cent beer, you got a free lunch.

"What was fortunate was my father was in the American Legion. He was a Commander in San Francisco's District 26. I don't know if he was a part of passing this law, but the Legion passed a law that if you passed away, they would pay off your mortgage. My parents were in our house for about a year and a half when my dad died so the house was paid for, we had a roof over our heads."

Warren's mom didn't drive and his sister didn't drive. When it came time to buy a car, he wanted a used car but his mom told him, emphatically, no!

"She told me, 'Your dad bought used cars and I was always paying repair bills!'"

Warren went to Gateway Chevrolet on Mission Street.

"I walked in and said, 'I would like to buy a car.' And the salesman said, 'Do you have a trade-in?' And I said, 'No.' So they couldn't sell me a car because they didn't have any cars. Our neighbor told me, 'I just talked to a guy and he has an extra car coming in.' So my neighbor and I went to Half Moon Bay and I got the car.

"It was a 1949 Chevrolet, a 6-cylinder stick. I paid \$2,095 for it. This was at Shaw Chevrolet in Half Moon Bay. Not till years later did I find out that my mother signed for the car, but she didn't have any credit, so our neighbor also signed for it at Bank of America, Half Moon Bay.

"My mom was always supportive. When Freddie and I bought the gas station, she would drive from San Francisco to Pacifica to buy her gas. As it turns out, the first time she drove to Vallemar she realized that when she was a kid, her family used to head down to Vallemar for picnics – from County Cork, to San Francisco, to Vallemar!"

Richfield leased the "gas station" land from the Thoreid family.

"Marian Thoreid grew up in Vallemar and owned all this land and she liked us. She knew Freddie and I were hustlers. We did whatever it took to make a buck. For instance, one of the times my mom came down from San Francisco to buy gas, she asked me, 'What's Freddie doing in the lube bay?' 'Well,' I told her. 'He is making a branding iron.' Whatever you tossed at us, we did. People would tell us we were going to go a long way. Marian built that building that is now Tom's Auto Body & Paint for us. But I'm getting a little ahead.

"It's 1957, and Pacifica has incorporated. Then they get a police force and the police force has a tow service in Pacific Manor, at the corner, across the street from where Mazzetti's is now. It was a service station, Jimmy Washington Service Station. They had the Triple A contract—(American Automobile Association, AAA, commonly called Triple A or 3-A)—and a National towing contract. But when the freeway extension came along, eminent domain knocked them out. There were additionally two fellows who ran G&R Towing. They were at the foot of Sharp Park Road, the old Sharp Park Road, before it was widened. They had a garage but the Pacifica Police Department liked us better and kept talking to us. By then we had made a service truck, from a little pickup truck, with gas cans and jacks for people on the highway. Well, the police talked us into going into the towing business.

"We had a farmer that was a customer, and you know, farmers can generally build just about anything when it comes to equipment, because they are always having to repair their equipment and they know how to weld. So we had this 3/4-ton GMC truck and this farmer helped us turn it into a tow truck. It was a homemade job! We had to put dual rear wheels and this and that on it. We put a mining winch on our first tow truck.

"In order to have a 3-A contract, you had to have a garage and storage."

The two business partners then took all their repair business out of their gas station and put it in their garage. They kept their gas station, strictly as a gas station.

"We still owned the gas station and we milked the repair business. We had an employe, Joe Spruitenburg, and Joe was the manager of the service station. Joe was a roofer when he came to work for us. Joe was also a hustler, a hard worker, and he did what it took to get the job done. He worked for us for 18 years." (Joe would go off on his own to own and operate Joe's Auto Body, in this same space where his son Tom's Auto Body & Paint shop is now.)

In 1960, Warren moved to Pacifica.

"When we started the towing business, I was still living in San Francisco and I had to tell Freddie, 'I can't get down here for a tow.' I lived at 26th and Bryant. I said, 'Fred, we go this towing route, you gotta handle it.' He did the towing for an entire year, with no day off. He had a phone in his house. He was on call 24/7. By the third year, I saw our business was going to go hard enough and I said, 'Okay, I'm going to buy a house in Pacifica.' And I did, on Standish Rd.

"There was another reason as well. Highway 1 was bad back then. I almost died on it. I was on the main road coming out of Westlake, where the stables are now, and you went straight ahead and it came out where McDonald's is now in Pacific Manor. I went home one night from Pacifica at midnight, and it was raining cats and dogs, I still lived in San Francisco and there was mud on the road – and there was a big scraper trying to scrape the road off. I saw him and then I flinched because I was caught in the mud. At that moment, I looked out the window and there was the cliff, and I was going over. I wouldn't be able to get out of the car on time so I cranked the car, as hard as I could, and spun around and stopped in the middle of the road. The guy with the scraper said, 'Are you alright?' And I said, 'You close this fricking

road. It's dangerous!" I crept back up and when I was almost to Westlake, this guy is coming at me, his car is spinning around. I made it home but I told my wife, I am never going down that road again. And I never did. From then on, I came down Sharp Park, and of course eventually moved to Pacifica."

Not yet mentioned is that when Marian Thoreid was building the garage for Fred and Warren, "this guy comes by and says, 'Gee, I see you have a GMC tow truck. You don't see too many of those.'"

"So this guy offers us a GMC (General Motors Company) truck franchise," Warren laughed. "Of course we said, 'Yes!' It was a single-sales agreement. We would sell a truck. We would send him a certified check and then they would ship us the truck. I had to get a dealer's license, which I did and it was hard. They didn't want to give me a dealer's license because it was a service station. So we had about two or three trucks out front on the lot for display, and right at that time, Marian was going to build our garage and this went hand-in-hand with that. We had to have a showroom, so that was added to the original plans.

"We took on everything that was given to us. When we were in our service station, we had, at that time, bought a drum lathe. Brakes in the front have a drum, and you had to machine them down because they got grooves in them. So this guy from this company called Alemite, which sold lubrication systems and other equipment, pulls up and says, 'We have a new thing, a portable wheel alignment.' And we said, 'Well, we don't know nothing about wheel alignments!' But that didn't stop us. Freddie says, 'I'll handle the brakes and you've got to learn wheel alignments.' So I got a book and learned how to do wheel alignments. We made a lot of money putting in ball joints. We stocked ball joints. We were the first service station on the cover of a magazine doing a wheel alignment."

Fred and Warren were in their new garage/GMC showroom for maybe a year when a Chrysler-Plymouth representative "prances up to the door" and tells them he would like to do a dealership.

"He said, 'You have to buy \$5,000 worth of parts.' So we said, 'Alright, we'll buy \$5,000 worth of parts.'"

At this point, Fred and Warren were the owners of Fred and Warren's Richfield gas station, a towing business and a repair garage, along with a single sales GMC truck agreement.

"When we got the Plymouth franchise, they said, 'What are you going to name it?' And we said, 'Fred and Warren' and they said, 'No, you can't do that.' That's when we became Miller & Petersen. We incorporated."

In 1966, Fred and Warren hired local teenager Ron O'Brien to work at their gas station. (Ron is the "O'Brien" behind the 1990 incorporated, Miller & O'Brien Inc. More on that further on.)

"I grew up in Pacifica," Ron said. "I was born in San Francisco in 1948 and my parents moved from Daly City to Pacifica in 1949."

Ron said growing up in Pacifica, he "knew of" various famous Pacificans—such as Pacifica's first mayor Jean Fassler and longtime businessman, and multi-Pacifica mayor Nick Gust, for whom Nick's restaurant is named—but he didn't personally know them.

"While I didn't know Mayor Grace McCarthy, I went to Oceana High School with her daughter, Pat McCarthy." (Pat McCarthy Kremer currently serves on the Pacifica Historical Society's Board of Directors.)



Ron was in the first class, 1966 graduates, that went all four years to Oceana. Construction on the high school was completed the summer of 1962, Ron's incoming year as a freshman.

←Ron O'Brien, Oceana High School, class of 1966.

"I grew up in Sharp Park and lived on Moana Way," Ron said. "Most of my childhood hangouts are gone now: Chubby's Burgers on Francisco Way is now the Peruvian, Mexican, Latin American restaurant El Torro Loco; the Seavue Theater in Pacific Manor is now a Walgreens. I remember going to the old Sharp Park Shopping Center where we had a Red Robin and to Louie's Malt Shop. Pacifica was a great place to grow up and it's always been, to this day, a great place to live."

Ron went to Sharp Park School, for elementary school, all the way through 8th grade. That site, on Palmetto, is now the home of Ingrid B. Lacy Middle School.

He took auto shop at Oceana and when he was 15, he worked at his uncle's gas station in San Francisco. He did oil changes, cleaned windows, filled the tank. He also worked in high school at a truck repair shop on 3rd Street in San Francisco. His first job in Pacifica was at Fred and Warren's Richfield as a gas station attendant.

"I hired Ron," Warren recalled with a smile. "His father was a diesel mechanic, a heavy-duty mechanic. Ron wasn't a mechanic when we hired him. But he had natural talent."

"I bought my first car in high school," Ron noted, "a 1952 Mercury. Then I bought a 55 Chevy. I used to take that to the drag strip at the Half Moon Bay Airport. That drag strip is long gone."

"Ron was really into racing," Warren chuckled. "He would go to the airport and use so much horse power racing, he would blow the differential out. Every weekend, after every race, he would come in and throw a differential up on the work bench." (The differential is a set of gears that transmit engine power to the wheels. This allows the wheels to turn at different speeds when negotiating turns.)

After high school, Ron went to work for Firestone for a couple of years in San Francisco. Then he came back to Miller & Petersen when they were still in Vallemar as an apprentice mechanic. He moved with them, when they moved to Pedro Point, in 1970.

Ron worked as a mechanic in the service department and also did tows. Both Ron and Warren have some towing tales.

"This story involves Fred, Joe Spruitenbug and me," Warren began. "In our third year, we bought a cab over truck (the cab of the truck sits above the front axle, it is essentially a big rig truck without a hood). This truck was a ton and a half or two tons. It had a hoist switch which was two booms. They are together, but you can unhook them. We did a lot of Devil's Slide work. Freddie, Joey and me were a team. Now if we had a car over Devil's Slide and you didn't have enough cable to reach, you had to splice in extensions, sometimes they had to go 300 or 400 feet down, where the car landed. Our routine was Joey

would take the cable and go down the hill holding onto the cable and when he got to the car, he would hook the cable to the car and he would stay with the car. Fred would stand up on the berm so he could see Joe. I ran the tow truck. Sometimes the weight ratio can get out of balance, and sometimes that meant, while I was running the truck, the front end of the truck would rise up – the wheels were right off the ground. Then I had to stop. So I would tell Fred, and he would tell Joe and they had to rebalance the car. One time there was a pin that broke and with two booms, let's just say you have a ten-ton pull. The pin broke and a five-ton pull came right down on top of my head. It knocked me out and split two teeth. I was taken away in an ambulance. I lived because I was on my knees, watching the winch, my truck and the booms. But Joey and Fred went back the next day and finished bringing that car up. Nothing distracted us from getting the job done!"

"There's one more tow story that immediately comes to mind," Warren continued. "This one was just me and Fred, and the background here is the City of Pacifica had an amphibious vehicle, a Duck."

A DUKW, nicknamed Duck—*military designations, "D" stands for 1942 model, "U" is amphibious, "K" is all-wheel drive, and "W" is dual rear wheels*—is a 2.5-ton six-wheel amphibious truck that was used in World War II by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps. Its main purpose was to ferry ammunition, supplies, and equipment from offshore supply ships to fighting units at the beach.

"The City went down the coast, with their Duck, to do a rescue and they beached the damn Duck. This is down towards Half Moon Bay. The chief of the Pacifica police said to me, 'Come get my Duck. They are going to fire me. It's a fiasco! The waves are coming in and it is going to fill with water!' This was Pacifica's first police chief, Neil Tremaine." (Former FBI agent and Santa Clara police officer Neil Tremaine was hired in May of 1959 and retired in 1970.)

"Freddie and I headed down there in our big tow truck. We got a cable out and got a hold of the Duck so it couldn't go back out in the water and get lost. But we couldn't pull it in because the tide was in. Fred says to me, 'I am staying with the truck. I don't want the ocean to get my truck.' He stayed there all night with the tow truck. I came back the next morning and he had placed a block of wood, like a four-by-four, right where the edge and the cable went over and then went down. Right next to that he had a hatchet. And he said, 'The ocean is not getting my damn tow truck. I'll cut that cable.' But we got it out and bailed the water out."

"You see a lot when you drive a tow truck," Ron noted, offering two towing memories of his own. "I was with Miller & Petersen and got a call. A car went over Sharp Park Road and it needed to be pulled out of a tree. This was when Sharp Park was still a two-lane road. The driver, who did not make it, was going way too fast, like way too fast. I think it was a 1970 Dodge Challenger and he hit the curb when he slid out and that hill drops off really heavily. The car flipped up on its side and went about 30 feet and wrapped itself around a big Eucalyptus tree – really wrapped itself around, the middle of the roof and both bumpers were on opposite sides of the tree."

"Here's a towing story that made a lot of headlines," Ron said, grinning at this recollection. "A local pilot had a plane at the Half Moon Bay Airport. He was out putzing around and one of his buddies was fooling with the knobs on the dash and the engine overheated and he couldn't get back to Half Moon Bay. So he landed on the beach in Sharp Park by the golf course, between the levy and the ocean. I headed to the levy in a flatbed truck and pulled the plane up off the beach and onto the levy. You can do good things with a winch and enough cable! Got it up on the back of the flatbed truck and luckily it was a smaller plane and the wings folded on it. So I was able to fold the wings back and tie it down. Then I took it back and put it back in the pilot's hangar in Half Moon Bay."

In the late 1960s, there was a plan to create a multi-lane highway that would head west over the northern part of the San Francisco Watershed, climb up over Sweeney Ridge and come down into Pacifica. (Concerned citizens fought over a period of years to keep this land pristine and in June of 1976, proceedings to build Interstate 380 over the hills into Pacifica were permanently "unadopted.")

"At the time, we understood that the plan for this freeway was to drop it right past our Vallemar business," Warren said. "So we decided to move Miller & Petersen to Pedro Point. There was a farmer, Victor McGrinn, who at one time had owned a lot of ranches in Linda Mar. He sold them when Linda Mar was being developed, so he had lots of money. He said to us, 'We will build 'to suit' out on San Pedro Point.' That meant he was going to build to what suited our needs. We had to put up \$5,000 for them to start the building, which we did."



Pacifica Tribune photo

**Warren Miller and Fred Petersen, in front of their newly relocated business at Pedro Point, November 18, 1970.**

The *Pacifica Tribune* celebrated Warren and Fred's new dealership, garage, tow and body shop on Pedro Point.

*November 18, 1970*

*More popularly known simply as Fred and Warren, from the old days when they operated "Fred and Warren's" service station in Vallemar, these two men represent a real, hometown success story*

*with the opening last week of their new Plymouth-GMC dealership on San Pedro road on Pedro Point.*



These two numbers are still the numbers for Miller & O'Brien.  
650-359-0122, towing.  
650-359-0414, complete auto repair.

"When we moved from Vallemar, we sold the service station," Warren said. "We had the garage, the towing business and the dealership. Triple A came to us and said you need a body shop. I didn't know the first thing about bodywork. I said, 'Okay, we'll do it!' So we bought a spray booth and said, 'Joe, you do the bodywork.' So Joe started doing bodywork and was manager of the body shop on Pedro Point.

"The car dealership business is up and down, feast or famine. Most car dealers do not own the cars. The bank owns them. So you have what they call a 'flooring line.' The bank allows you to buy a certain amount of dollars up to a certain point. So I would order a car from Chrysler, they would send the bill to the bank and ship the car to me. The bank would come every month and count heads, make sure I had all the cars there. I had to pay interest every day on that car and I had to negotiate the flooring line. If you weren't making enough money, the bank didn't want to up your flooring line and then you didn't have enough cars on the floor and that was our problem. When we first started in that garage, we didn't even have a flooring line. Our sales technique was as follows. You would want to buy a car and I would come crawling out from under the rack, clean my hands off and say, 'Now, what kind of car would you like?'

I had joined the Rotary Club and the bank manager at the Bank of America, was also a member of our local Rotary. He came to me and said, 'Warren, you gotta put a tie on. You gotta get out from underneath the cars.' So I had to move into the front office to run the dealership and not work on cars anymore. I liked working on cars. I have these hearing aids to prove it! They are because of the automotive air hammer.

"When we moved out to the Point, Ron came with us too. He was a mechanic in our service department. He left for a while. He moved to work up north at a dealership. He was up there maybe a month or two. They had him in a tin building, repairing cars, and he said it was so dam hot coming away from the coast, he wanted his job back with us. Of course we said, 'Yes!'

Outside of work, Fred, Warren and Ron also shared a love of water skiing.

"When we had the service station, Freddie had built a small boat out of wood and we went to Lake Berryessa (the largest lake in Napa County) and he tried to teach me how to water ski." Warren laughed. "It was a small boat and a small motor and I'm a big guy. Well he pulled me and pulled me and I couldn't get up. I must have tried 6, 7, 8 times. Finally I said, 'I'm done.' And Freddie said, 'Get in!' But I couldn't get in, my arms were spent. He had to haul me in!"

"We water skied a lot. Freddie bought another boat and I bought a boat. Ron was always water skiing."

"Ron's back is trashed from waterskiing," noted Ron's wife Tina, also a born and raised Pacifican. "Water skiing falls when you're younger, that you don't even think about, and also bending over cars all the time – that'll do it!"

Another love of Ron's was skuba diving. He had his Divemaster Certification and had countless adventures snorkling and scuba diving in locations which included: Monterey, the Channel Islands, the Virgin Islands and Hawaii. For a time, he helped run diving classes out of Anderson's Scuba Diving/Swim School in Pacifica.

While he did build a car at the shop, when it was Miller & Petersen, outside of the shop Ron got involved with restoring classic cars and building hot rods. He was always involved with classic car shows, including in Monterey and more locally with the Pacific Coast Dream Machines at the Half Moon Bay Airport.

"We worked hard and we played hard," Warren laughed, admitting that golf was and is still his game.

All three men were/are very much family men. Fred and Shirley were married 61 years, until Fred's death in 2013, and raised their five children in Pacifica.

Ron and his first wife have two daughters, and both are Terra Nova High School graduates. Ron and his wife Tina, who also has two children from her first marriage, have been happily married for 28 years and are proud to be the grandparents of ten.

"I have two sons from my first marriage and they are both Terra Nova graduates," Warren said. "They both had first jobs at my dealership as lot boys, washing the cars. When I married Karen, she had two boys and a girl and her daughter was 4. I met Karen in the Bank of America, the Linda Mar branch. She worked there. That was where I had my flooring line. Karen and I have been married 50 years. We are a wonderful match." (They are also proud grandparents as well as great grandparents.)

"I've got another tow truck story," Warren said. "This one involves Karen and it happened during the El Nino storm of January, 1982."

It was Monday, January 4, 1982. Torrential rains pounded the Bay Area and in Pacifica, that rain was already five inches over seasonal average. It caused flooding in Linda Mar, closing the shopping center. The hillside above Valdez Way "roared down the street," knocking two homes off their foundations. In addition, the hillside behind four homes on Oddstad Blvd. gave way. One of those homes was completely knocked off its foundation – tragically taking the lives of the three children inside. Then Fire Chief Cal Hinton reported to the *Pacifica Tribune* that in less than 24 hours, his department fielded more than 195 calls. Sixty businesses and 300 homes were damaged. Four homes were destroyed.

Miller & Petersen's tow trucks pulled many flooded cars out of the Linda Mar Shopping Center as a result of that storm.

"We must have towed 50 cars," Warren recalled. "I got people out of the Bank of America. That was where Karen was working. I was able to get through all that water in our big tow truck, and everyone that was in the bank came running out and jumped on the running boards. It was a rescue mission."

Additional rescuers arrived in boats, until all individuals were safely pulled from the newly-created lake.

When Miller & Petersen moved to Pedro Point, they were one of four Pacifica dealerships.

"When I left Vallemar, Ron Price came down and put a Volkswagen Dealership there," Warren noted. "Our dealership on the Point is where Mike Lewis Concrete Construction is now."

"Turner Dodge, where the hardware store is now, was next door to us," Ron said. "That became Yount/Middleton Dodge. On the north end of town, originally where you come off the freeway and where the City Corporation Yard is now, there was Howard Caylor Chevrolet. That was taken over by Ed Cordero and then he eventually moved Ed Cordero Chevrolet to where the gym is now, next to Anderson's. In the very beginning it was a grocery store."

While the business partners retained their GMC franchise until 1989, they got out of the new car field in 1983.

"First, and really the main thing, the economy tanked in the early 1980s," Ron said.

The recession that ran from July of 1981 through October of 1982, was at that point in time, the worst U.S. economic downturn since the Great Depression.

"In 1981, the interest rate was at 11 percent and inflation was over 10 percent," Ron continued. "So where we had been paying 2 to 3 percent interest to the bank for our flooring line, it climbed substantially. Everyone fled. In addition, Serramonte became auto row. You could look at five or six different cars in one shot. Hard to compete with that."

"When we signed our agreement with Chrysler," Warren added, "the agreement said they would help us in all these situations, but they never helped us. They were really hard nose. I got a visit from Chrysler's district manager one day. I wasn't selling enough new cars. I was selling a lot of used cars. They said, 'You're done! We're pulling the plug on you.' I had 15 employees at Pedro Point. I had four mechanics and five body men and numerous tow truck drivers. Well that got my Irish up, and as a result, when we were ready, we got out of the dealership. It wasn't hard. We outlasted Turner Dodge, Middleton Dodge and Ron Price Volkswagen. Ed Cordero Chevrolet was the last to close and that was in 1992."

In 1989, Fred was beginning to think about retirement.

"By then Ron was our longtime bodyshop foreman," Warren continued. "Joey had left us 11 years back to open his own business – Joe's Auto Body in our old Vallemar garage space. He was ready and he was very successful, which is not a surprise. He was excellent at what he did."

"But Fred and I, we flew by the seat of our pants to have our business," Warren laughed. "Nothing stopped us, not even not having a clue. But we knew how to learn. When we were in Vallemar and had the 3-A franchise, we used radios to take the 3-A calls, because the radio signal was okay in Vallemar. When we moved to Pedro Point, we had to put a radio tower in so our tow calls could get over the mountains. Of course, drivers also phoned us from phone booths. It was definitely a different time.

"But by 1989, Fred was ready to retire. He was a mechanical guy and he didn't like dealing with dealership issues or financial issues. Our lease was up on the Point in 1990 and so Freddie decided to definitely retire. He didn't want to keep his name on the business."

"The business was incorporated so it didn't matter if Fred's name was still on the sign, he was no longer a partner, he was not liable," Ron explained. "But Fred worried. It's expensive to create a new corporation, but we did it. When we moved to Francisco Blvd. in August of 1990, we did so as Miller & O'Brien – and our customers came with us."



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*One Partnership Ends; A New One Begins  
Miller & Petersen – Triple A Moving to Sharp Park*

*By Bill Drake*

*Warren Miller and Fred Petersen have been business partners for 33 years – first as Fred & Warren's Richfield at Vallemar and even longer as Miller & Petersen on Pedro Point.*

*The partners and their crews have pulled autos out of problems from Devil's Slide to the Edgemar freeway for years. Now, a business association that started just before the city itself incorporated in 1957 will come to an amicable end Aug. 31.*

*The Miller & Petersen name will not disappear, however. Miller will move the garage and the local California State Automobile Association (Triple A) franchise to 1518 Francisco Boulevard in Sharp Park and continue full operation.*

*Petersen is retiring, at least temporarily, and "taking a long rest" before he decides about his future.*

*Miller and the man who has worked for the firm longer than anyone else, Ron O'Brien, have formed a new business association. Under the familiar Miller & Petersen sign, their enterprise will be located near the intersection of Paloma and Francisco in a garage complex adjacent to the Olympic service station and near Winters Tavern in the heart of Sharp Park. The space was formerly the home of Pacifica Automotive Performance, which was owned by John Drew.*

*The central location of the AAA headquarters will make it more convenient to handle service calls, Miller said. Miller & Petersen has operated AAA, a full service garage, and a Chrysler-Plymouth and GMC truck sales dealership on San Pedro Ave. for the last 20 years.*

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"When I went into business with Ron, I told him, I am only good for so long," Warren said. "I ran the tow trucks and the business and paid the bills but the rest was up to him. My daughter went to San Francisco State University for four years doing volleyball, and while she was there, she got a chance to go to France to play in Dijon. So Karen and I took a trip to Dijon. I told Ron, I'm gone for three weeks. We hired a young woman to work when I wasn't there. When I came back, she said, 'I still want to work.' I said, 'Okay, you work two days and I'll work three.' She wanted more. 'Okay, you work three and I'll work two.' Pretty soon I was down to one day. I told Ron, 'You don't need me. Get me out of here!'"

"Ron is a great guy," Warren continued, grinning. "And the only disagreement we ever had was when I said, 'Buy me out.' We went to Nick's for lunch and I said, 'Well, here's my price.' And Ron said, 'Oh, no, no, no that's too much.' Finally I came down and we said okay. He didn't have the money and so he paid me, so much a month every month, until I got paid off. I think it took Ron maybe three years to pay it off. But Ron really is a great guy and that man knows how to work. It was a handshake at Nick's and that was all we needed."

"I hired Jeff Brammer as a tow truck driver and that's how I met him," Ron said. "This was the late 1990s. Jeff was a baby when he started working for me!"

"Jeff is a hard worker. He is trustworthy. He is a real go-getter and that's why, when I sold the business, I sold the business to him. That's where Tina and I take all our cars. I can't do much car work anymore. I am a little too stove up. But Jeff gets the work done right."

"I started working for Miller & O'Brien in September of 1998," Jeff said. "It was El Nino that first year I started. I remember that. There were definitely some interesting tows!"

"Did I know anything about driving a tow truck when I was hired?" Jeff laughed. "I never backed up a trailer in my life! I didn't learn until I was hired. Ron trained me for a day and a half and I remember pushing cars because I couldn't back up a trailer or car into a spot. I didn't want to damage the car, so I would drop it physically and push it where the customer wanted it. Because I figured if I didn't know how, I didn't want to damage anything. I was really particular on that. It was probably a good year before I learned how to back up a car, safely, or let gravity drop in and coast it in to a spot. Lockouts, it took me two or three years to nail it every time. But I am a hard worker. I will get it done, doesn't matter what it takes. That's how I am now."

Originally from San Francisco's Excelsior District, Jeff grew up "everywhere" in the Bay Area.



Jeff Brammer at work, Miller & O'Brien, 2014. (Jean Bartlett photo.)

"My grandfather had a wrecking yard. My uncle had a shop. My dad always wrenched and my uncles wrenched. Everyone worked on cars. It was always in the cards. I did take auto shop in high school. I bought my first car when I was 13, a 68 Mercury Cyclone GT. I still own it. I paid \$100 for it and roped it home. When I was 15, I had a 71 Mustang, blue with black interior. My personal interest is classic muscle cars.

"I started driving cars when I was 13, my dad's cars. He would let me wash them and drive them around the block to dry them off. So I was always washing his cars so I could drive them around the block!"

Right out of high school, Jeff started working as a stonemason.

"I got that job from a friend of a friend of my dad's and I enjoyed it. I learned how to do layouts. I had my own crew within three months, doing grouting. I was the person who did all the cutting for the stones for all the layers. We did work in Atherton, Hillsborough and Black Hawk. There are some homes that are unbelievable. That was actually a really cool job but the guy never paid on time. And that was okay because I was still living at home. But when you bust your hump and the guy walks past you on a payday, and doesn't talk to you about it – that's when I lost it. Just tell me, 'I'm short this week.' I had to take him to labor court. It's just part of learning."

When Jeff started driving tow trucks for Ron, he was working 110 hours on calls every week, for years.

"I've seen a lot of rollovers, some fatalities. I've done so many tows. I was really out there. When I was working for Ron, I maybe missed a day of work because he sent me home. Normally, I just went to work when I was sick."

In those first years, towing was with a pager and a phone booth. Jeff laughed.

"I remember Ron gave me a phone card so I could call the answering service and get calls. Oh, yeah, that was way different then. I paid for my first cell phone. Same cell phone number I have now. It was way before AT&T. This was Parrot Cellular. All the trucks had radios that would only work in Pacifica. Sometimes you got lucky. If I was on a mountain in Hayward, some place high, you could hear the chattering on the radio, because the radio signal wasn't being stopped by a mountain. That cost a lot for the two-way radio. In 2007, instead of that, I bought two-way walkie-talkies and that worked out better. I quit buying radios for each truck. That was like 900 bucks of radio and the answering service would have

the two-way so they could communicate. But we had to pay per mile, for AT&T, for that two-way radio. If someone worked on the AT&T phones, it would screw our lines up and no one knew how to work on it. There was just always something. Now Triple A handles the calls and most people have cell phones. The problems people have with their cars in need of road service hasn't changed much. But getting their calls is easier."

After Jeff was there for four years, he bought Miller & O'Brien Inc. when Ron decided to retire. Jeff was already involved in management: helping to best structure workmen's compensation and adding to the business income by becoming the go-to spot for clients to unload disposable vehicles. (Miller & O'Brien deals with all the hassles/paperwork that comes with that.)

"My wife and I love Jeff," Ron said. "Selling him the business was one of the easiest decisions I ever made."

Today, Miller & O'Brien does 15 or 20 Triple A calls on an average day, sometimes thirty. They are 24 hour towing. Jeff has five flatbed trucks, one wrecker and one service truck. He additionally has several old trucks to back up the new trucks. Their customer satisfaction stats through Triple A, which is happy with 86 percent customer satisfaction, is 97.1.

"What should people know about my business?" Jeff asked. "We're honest and diligent. We do everything we can. I'm not going to sell you something you don't need. I spend your money like it's mine. Everyone. I don't care if you live next door or 1,000 miles away, you get the same service.

"I believe in quality parts. It costs more but at the end of the day, I would rather have quality than quantity. I want to have it right.

"When I took over the business, I was focused more on the repairing end, because towing is towing and we got that one down."

How many work at Miller & O'Brien?

"First let me mention my manager, my right-hand man Brent Johnson. Any given time, we should have four drivers or more, right now we have three. Mechanics, we usually have two and me, but right now we have three. Usually six to seven people, I prefer eight or more and my focus is on good people. I want honesty, that is key. I also need willingness to work.

"What do I like about this business? I love people and working in this industry – these are the cards I was dealt from when I was a kid and I am here to make the best of that. I also love Pacifica. I'm not just saying that. I love Pacifica, even with the headaches – and the beauty of Pacifica is phenomenal. You can't beat it.

"What do I mean by 'headaches?' A for instance is I had an issue with something the City was charging me for and I thought that other businesses were not being charged for the same thing. But one of the things I've learned is instead of becoming the problem, become the solution. So I served two terms on the Board of Directors for the Pacifica Chamber of Commerce, and one year as Board President. From doing that, I was able to find out the facts and what did I find? I found out I had incorrect information. Having a voice in your local chamber matters. I'm very much still a member."

When Jeff first started working for Miller & O'Brien, he was living in San Bruno – Pacific Heights by Skyline College, right off of Sharp Park Road. He saved his money from being a driver and bought his first house in South San Francisco in 2002.

In 2011, Jeff bought a home in Pacifica.

"That all began with a Hallmark story,"

In 2007, a young woman named Corina stopped at Jeff's shop. Her car needed struts. (Struts are a major structural part of a suspension.)

"I said to her, 'I'm too expensive for you. Go to Sears. They're cheaper.'" And then I followed up. 'Did they take care of you?' 'Yeah, they did,' she told me. 'Do you want to go out for dinner?' 'Okay.'"

The couple married in 2009 and in 2010, their daughter Brianna was born.

"I moved a lot when I was a kid," Jeff explained. "There was nothing bad for it. It gave me the personality that I have, which I think is good. Ha! Ha! But I wanted for our daughter what my wife had. Corina was born and raised in the same house. Her mom still lives there. We had a new house warming party and a birthday party in July when Brianna was just turning 1. Our daughter Keira came along not long after."

Like the men of Miller & O'Brien and Miller & Petersen, Jeff loves being a family man. The family also includes a dog, a cat and several tortoises.



**As to Jeff's family of trucks, the two trucks above are a small sampling.**

**Vehicle Caregivers Miller & O'Brien ~ There for Pacificans since Pacifica's first days (anonymously sponsored)**

A business biography by Jean Bartlett ([www.bartlettbiographies.com](http://www.bartlettbiographies.com))

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Jeff has been on the Committee for the Terra Nova Car Show and Swap Meet since its inception. This year, on May 20, 2023, the show will celebrate its 16th event, <https://terrانovacarshow.com/>. Extremely popular, the event supports Terra Nova High School's Industrial Tech Program. Without it, the program is not possible. Along with showing cars, Jeff also provides the stage – one of his flatbed tow trucks.

Jeff, with a partner, also has a nonprofit – Auto Event Productions. They have been putting on the San Francisco Old Car Picnic in Golden Gate Park, since 2000. All the money made is donated to, and split between, San Francisco's Pomeroy Recreation & Rehabilitation Center—they provide recreational, vocational and educational opportunities for people with disabilities through programs and services that encourage self-expression, promote personal achievement, and lead to greater independence—and to Potrero Hill Family Resource Center. The San Francisco Old Car Picnic happens in October.

Asked if he thought his daughters shared the same love of cars that he has, Jeff called out the question to his girls who were not far from the interview room. They both shouted, "Yes!"

"Are you kissing my tush?" the proud dad laughed.

Miller & O'Brien, part of Pacifica since 1956. Complete auto repair, foreign and domestic, 24 hour towing, flatbed specialist serving all wheel and four wheel drive. 1518A Francisco Blvd., Pacifica, CA. 24 Hour Towing: 650-359-3511. Repair: 650-359-0122



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