

Orville Bartley

It's not often that we get to know a person with the background and knowledge of someone like Orville Bartley of Gentry, Arkansas. His story begins in the rugged western state of Colorado and continues to this day as he operates a clock and watch repair shop in Gentry, Arkansas. A big part of this story will concern Orville's early years. The story details the hard work and the hardships of growing up during what were the remaining years of the American frontier and during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl years.

Orville was born in Genoa, Washington County, Colorado, on July 23, 1924, to Everett R. "E.R." Bartley and Katherine Main Bartley. Orville had a younger brother named Charley, who passed away in Gentry a couple of years ago. He has two sisters, Mary Jane Myers of Gentry and Lila Palmer of Pryor, Oklahoma. His father homesteaded a quarter section, actually located about twenty miles north of Genoa, where he grew pinto beans and wheat.

To do the farming, his dad bought a Fordson tractor. His dad didn't like the Fordson; so he sold it and bought a Hart-Parr tractor. The story of the purchase of the tractor reveals that these were more casual days for personal financing. Orville's dad didn't have the money for the tractor. He met the local banker on the street, and when he told the banker of his desire to purchase the tractor, the banker asked him how much he needed. The price was \$1700 (obviously, a lot of money in those days). The banker told him to write a check for the tractor and the amount would be covered. They shook hands and the tractor was purchased. Fortunately, the next year yielded a good wheat crop, and Mr. Bartley paid off the tractor in full.

In the fall of 1926 the Bartleys sold out and moved farther north to about 40 miles from the Kansas border. Here, Orville's dad rented a section and later added two more sections for farming. He was able to do this because, with the Hart-Parr, he was able to attach a one-way, ten foot disc plow; a ten foot disc; a ten foot seed drill; and a ten foot smoothing harrow. He could make the crop all in one pass. Another way Orville's dad was ingenious in his use of implements was revealed in his conversion of a mechanical, horse-drawn combine into an engine-driven one by his addition of a Waukesha engine. Orville said the whole operation was much more efficient. Such skill in mechanics was passed on to Orville, and later in life he would use those skills in his early work career and to the present day.

Orville's mechanical ability began at an early age. About a month before his fifth birthday, the hit and miss engine which operated the pump-jack for the farm's well broke its timing gear. Orville's dad obtained the new part and dismantled the engine. He had to leave to handle other farm chores before he had time to put the engine back together. He had shown Orville how to time the engine; so Orville reassembled the engine and timed it. When his dad returned, the engine was running.

It was on this farm that Orville remembers his first regular work responsibilities. When he was five years old, his father asked him if he could handle chores involved with the threshing. It was Orville's job to shovel the wheat being blown into the wagons to even out the load. His older, ninth-grade sister also helped by driving the tractor to pull the combine. A 1920s farming operation truly involved the entire family.

The next big event was the coming of The Great Depression in 1929. Up to the collapse of the U. S. economy in that year, income might be as much as \$80 per day. About three bushels per acre was the usual crop yield; so profit was narrow most of the time. The ultimate determiner of a profitable year was the amount of rainfall: ample rain...successful crops: insufficient rain...things got tough. After the economic bust, a day's wages brought a dollar.

Orville's mother wanted to move back to Arkansas; so in 1933 they moved east of Fayetteville to Round Mountain. His dad bought a team of mules and put in a successful tomato crop. They didn't stay long in Arkansas this time because, in 1934, they moved back to Genoa, Colorado, to his grandfather's farm. They didn't stay there long because the Dust Bowl years were underway in the west and crops were not possible without rain. Average rainfall on the prairie was five inches and now there was none.

Orville's brother had a condition which required them to move out of the dusty region to El Dorado Springs near Denver, Colorado. Work was scarce for his father. He worked as a night watchman and then as an ambulance driver on the great project to build five tunnels through the mountains to bring water to Boulder. Orville got to visit this massive engineering effort on lots of occasions. They next moved into Boulder where his dad sustained the family by doing odd jobs, which were all that were available since the Depression was continuing.

In 1938, the Bartleys moved back to Arkansas to Siloam Springs, but in March 1939 they moved to Fayetteville again where, for a couple of years, the family operated a tourist park and an Esso station belonging to a friend. This was an early example of a motel with six cabins, and the gasoline station carried a line of groceries.

The family moved back to the Siloam Springs area in 1942 and lived on what is now Country Club Road north of the present Webb Wheel plant. Orville started the seventh grade at the Duckworth School. The building still stands on a part of the old Dawn Hill Golf Course. During this time he suffered a scrape on his ankle that got infected. The medicines of that day proved ineffective, and he stayed essentially immobile for nine months as the doctor attempted to provide a cure. At the end of those months, the doctor in desperation thought to treat the wound with boric acid. He filled the open wound with the boric acid and wrapped it. Orville was instructed to come back in two weeks if it did not cause pain but immediately if it did become painful. When he did go back, the doctor was delighted since he could see the wound was healing.

Along with the ankle problem, Orville faced a decline in his vision. He could not see well enough to read his school lessons; so the doctor wrote him an excuse for not attending school. Even then, the requirement was to stay in school until sixteen years of age; however, this medical condition effectively ended Orville's formal schooling. Dr. Walker of Gentry began to treat the vision problem. He told Orville to strengthen his vision he should stop wearing glasses. His theory was that one's eyes weakened when not fully used and glasses were merely a crutch. The other part of his treatment was a requirement that Orville should eat three ounces of raw, unsalted, sunflower seeds each day. His eyes improved, and in three years his vision was nearly normal.

Orville started his work career in mechanics at the McJunkin family owned Bloomfield Garage, which was located in the old Bloomfield Hotel on North Wright Street in Siloam Springs. Rooms were still rented in the upper floors. He said the gas pressure for the shop stove was so low from time to time that the owner of the shop would build a fire out of old rags and anything else available on the dirt floor. Amazingly, the shop didn't burn down. The shop was moved in 1943 to Mt. Olive Street where Jepson's Pharmacy is now located. It was known as the Log Cabin Garage since it was largely a log building. It too had a rental apartment located in it. He worked at the shop until 1945 when World War II ended.

He had a short stint at the mechanic shop at John Brown University. Orville said that Dr. John E. Brown brought in his Oldsmobile with a loud differential. The foreman of the shop used improper methods to repair it, and Orville told him that it would not work. After the foreman had left for the day, Dr. Brown picked up the car. He returned a few minutes later complaining that the car was worse than ever, and he needed it for a trip the next day. He asked Orville if he could stay late and fix the problem.

Orville agreed and said that he knew the problem, and it would not take long. He opened the differential and made a few adjustments. The car ran great, but the next day the foreman fired him for interfering. He could have made a grievance, but he was already considering another job. Dr. Brown came to Orville's new job on two occasions to ask him to return to work at the college, but he liked his new job; so he politely refused the offer. .

He went to work at the Foster Esso station at the corner of East Britt and East Main and worked there until 1952. Orville took time off from the station during two summers while his boss's son worked in his place. Orville worked in the hay fields for a man who had a wire-tie hay baler. He was paid one cent per bale to tie the bales, and he said he made more money doing that than any other way during this time. They were baling 120 bales per hour.

In 1952 he started working for the Peace and Son Nursery, located on Highway 59 where the present Bill Young Road turns east. He continued to work at the Esso station from time to time. The owner of the nursery built him a cabin with a tar paper exterior and wall board interior so he could live there and take care of the nursery. The walls didn't do much to protect from the cold winter wind. His job was to maintain the temperature in the propagation house. He did a good job because, while he did this, he had 80 to 90% success with rooting the plants. Mr. Peace bought a milk run in 1951, and in 1952 he paid Orville \$100 per month extra to make the route. Orville left the nursery business because the damp conditions aggravated his arthritis.

In March 1954 Orville moved to Gentry, Arkansas, and bought a garage and salvage yard. He operated the business until 1958 when he was injured and had to quit that type work. He had married and his wife was the owner of the local clock and watch repair shop. She had an older gentleman running the shop, but he wanted to retire. He taught Orville the watch repair business, and Orville started operating the shop in 1959. He still has the original clock he worked on to learn the basics of the trade. As of March 2008, he is still repairing watches and clocks in Gentry. He is well known throughout the region for his expertise.

In the meantime Orville and his wife had accumulated 240 acres of creek-bottom farmland on Little Flint Creek just west of Gentry. In 1974 all but 95 of the acres were purchased by SWEPCO for the purpose of building a coal-fired, electric power generating plant and for building a lake for the plant. In December 2007 the company purchased the remaining 95 acres, which are just north of the main plant. Orville has an agreement with SEPCO that he can continue to live in his home as long as he desires or as long as he lives. Recently, he built a shop near his home so he can work on restoring his many tractors and implements when he retires, which he plans to do in the near future.

Orville has an impressive collection of tractors and farm-related items. The tractors include a 1920 or 21 Titan 10-20, a late teens or early 20s Wallis Certified (made by the J.I. Case Plow Company from patents owned by Massey Harris of Canada, and all the parts interchange with Massey Harris), a mid-50s Allis WD 45, a 40s era Allis B, a World War II era U.S. Army Air Force Case, and two 1951 Farmall Cs (bought new by their original owner in Siloam Springs), and a 1944 Ford 9N. His engines include a Fairbanks Morse hit & miss, a Ward-Sattley hit & miss, and a magneto driven International. He has a nearly complete line of implements for his 1951 IH tractor and a two-bottom plow, an IH mowing machine, and assorted other items. One of the most interesting items is a 1940s era Jayhawk hay stacker. It has a huge metal framed device for placing hay into huge stacks. His many vehicles, most of which were used on the farm and parked at some point, include a 1924 Model T Ford which had been converted to power a wood saw, a 1937 Chevy 1 ½ ton truck, a 1938 Chevy pickup, a 1951 Chevy pickup, and a 1937 Chevy four-door auto. All this is a tractor and engine collector and restorer's dream.

We are all very pleased with Orville's involvement with Tired Iron of the Ozarks. He has proven

to be most helpful by generously providing his time and his sawmill to cut lumber for our building projects. Also, he is most informative about all things related to farming and to tractors and a delight to talk to. He has a wealth of knowledge about such tractors as the Rumley Oil Pull and Huber. He can describe details of the inter-workings of such old tractors in an amazing way. If you want information about tractors, go to Orville. Thanks Orville.

