

Don Christensen

Donald Carleton Christensen and his twin brother, Arlo James, were born on the family farm near Milford, Iowa, on March 27, 1932. That happened to be Easter Sunday; so they were the Easter Bunny gifts to the family. They joined two older sisters in the family. Within eight years the family was blessed with three more boys and one girl, a total of eight children. Their parents were Bernhardt and Anna Jorgensen Christensen. Don's two youngest brothers are deceased. All his surviving siblings reside in Minnesota.

Don's dad immigrated to the United States from Denmark in 1920 when he was twenty years old. He was first employed at the John Deere plant in Chicago, Illinois, before becoming a hired man on farms in Iowa. After his marriage in 1926, he rented farms until he could buy one of his own. His mom was a second generation citizen with Danish ancestry. When asked if he learned Danish in the home, Don said he did not. His parents only spoke English around the home but did conduct private conversations with each other in Danish. While Don was still very young, his dad, in 1941, bought a farm near Princeton, Minnesota, at the small, one-store community of Wynette, where the family lived and farmed with horses.

During World War II, in the fall of 1944, the farm was sold and the family moved to Renton, Washington, near Seattle. His dad had gone ahead to Washington, and the rest of the family later traveled by train to join him. His mom worked as a riveter and his dad as a painter for Boeing Aircraft Corporation, which supplied B-17 and B-29 bombers for the war effort. After about seven months in Washington, the family headed back to Minnesota in 1945. The ten members of the family traveled in their four-door, 1937 Dodge. The children had to take turns seated on stumps of wood set on the floorboard.

Back in Minnesota, Don's dad rented a farm near the small community of Dalbo, which was about thirty miles from St. Cloud. After about a year there, his dad took a job managing the large Whitney Farm near a town called Clearwater just south of St. Cloud on the Mississippi River. The 500 acre farm was a dairy and hog farm, which provided full-time work for the entire family. At first, the family continued to use teams of horses to help them in their labor. This improved when a home-made tractor powered by a Model A Ford engine was added. Don remembered the tractor had thirty-eight inch, round-knobby tires. The payment for the family work was half of each year's proceeds from the cows and the 100-head of hogs.

The family home on the Whitney Farm had no running water, no electricity, and no telephone. A windmill and a hit and miss engine supplied water to the huge dairy barn, but water for all home purposes had to be hauled to the house in ten gallon cans. When a ringer type telephone did become available, calling someone on the party line was simplified by the fact that telephone numbers were two digits. An advertising thermometer Don has lists the telephone number of the fellow who hauled cattle for them as "17," with no number or letter prefix at all.

Although the home-made tractor worked well, the work improved even more when a 1947 Farmall H tractor with a two-row cultivator was purchased. On one occasion when Don was using the cultivator for cross planting a corn field in the rich, Mississippi River bottom soil, he went to sleep and made a diagonal path across the one-half mile long field. He couldn't deny his mistake since his dad could easily see what had happened. Don, his brothers, and one sister attended a two-room elementary school.

Don continued to work on the farm until he and his twin brother, at the age of 21, received

greetings from Uncle Sam telling them that they were being drafted into the army. The twins were raised with, and continue to have, a strong belief in the tenets of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, which maintains a prohibition against taking up arms against another person. They were given the status of conscientious objectors. After three months of basic training at Camp Pickett in Virginia, they were assigned to medical duty at Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Denver, Colorado. For their two year tour of duty, they worked in the tuberculosis ward and in the pediatric nursery.

While in Denver, Don attended the local Seventh-Day Adventist church. It was there on a church sponsored hayride that he met a girl by the name of Rosemary Jean Altman. Everyone on the hayride, including Rosemary, noticed Don because he was more lightly dressed on the cold Denver night. The others were heavily bundled, but Don was accustomed to the colder Minnesota winters and did not feel the cold as much as they did. Rosemary worked as a payroll clerk at the Air Force Finance Center in Denver. She and Don started dating and then married on September 12, 1954, with Don still having a few months to go on his army tour of duty.

When Don was discharged from the army in April, 1955, he and Rosemary moved to Clearwater, Minnesota. There, for a short while, Don did custom feed grinding for local farmers. He used a portable grinder and went from farm to farm. The young couple next moved to Pendleton, Oregon, where Don worked at a lumber mill. After two years there, they moved back to Denver near Rosemary's folks. Rosemary had suffered two miscarriages, and her mom wanted her to be attended by the long-time family doctor.

In 1957, Don went to work for Gates and Sons, a Denver area manufacturer of concrete accessories such as forms and hardware to hold the forms together. This included the company's patented wire-ties and over twenty other patented items. While working there, Don had the desire to use an apprentice program offered by the government to become a cabinet maker. He had always enjoyed working with wood, and still does. After testing for the program, he was told his aptitude would be better applied in the machinist trade. Don pursued under-job training as a machinist through the program and was soon working on tool and die jobs with Gates. His work ethic was such that he occasionally worked 24 hours to complete jobs. He continually progressed with the company and entered the engineering and design department. He became a machine builder and developed factory machines to automate the manufacturing processes in the company. He became a shop foreman and then supervisor over all the machine shop, the welding shop, and the maintenance department. When the company built a new plant north of Denver, he became manager.

When Don went to work at Gates and Sons, the entire company had about a half-dozen workers. By the time Don left, after twenty-nine years of service in 1986, the company had seventy-five to eighty employees. The company distributed its concrete products all over the nation for all types of concrete structures, including roads, bridges, dams, residences, and office buildings. One big job was the pouring of the modernistic, twelve-floor, Anthem Blue Cross-Blue Shield building in Denver in 1973.

In 1986 Don became dissatisfied with his employment at Gates when the older Mr. Gates retired and new leadership came in that clashed with his way of management. Don resigned from the company, sold the home in the Denver area at Longmont, and moved to Arkansas. While in Denver, Don and Rosemary had three sons: David the oldest, Dana the second son, and Darren the youngest. Don and Rosemary left the three, by then grown boys, behind in Denver for a while.

In Arkansas, Don would return to his farming roots. He and Rosemary rented a home south of Gentry on Dawn Hill Road while they purchased a forty-acre farm with two chicken houses on Browning Road north of Gentry. While starting the farm, Don worked part-time at Mid-America Cabinets for a couple of years while Rosemary took care of the chickens much of the time. As growers

for Peterson Farm chicken processors of Decatur, they soon added two more houses.

After nine years in the business, Don was surprised, since he was not looking to sell his farm, when he was approached by an out-of-state investor who asked if he would sell. The fellow made Don an offer he couldn't refuse, and he sold out and went into retirement. On the Browning Road property, Don kept newly purchased wild animals for The Wilderness Safari until they could be gradually moved to the main display areas. The Wilderness Safari currently owns the property.

The next home was a home with a few acres located on John Zodrow Road about a mile west of Gentry. This property included a couple of shop buildings where Don was able to use his retirement time to the fullest. He used his machinist skills on many projects.

Over the years in Arkansas, the three sons began moving into the area and eventually would all live with their families in sight of the home on John Zodrow. David is married to Terry, and the couple gave Don and Rosemary two grandsons and one granddaughter. Dana is married to Joy, and they gave one grandson and one granddaughter. Darren is married to Charlotte, and they added two granddaughters and, with one of those granddaughters, a great-granddaughter.

Don and Rosemary were obviously quite content with their lives, but it was in the year 2000 that tragedy struck. Rosemary was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Those of us who knew her were witness to her gallant struggle with her ailment and Don's unwavering support for her. She and he faced the illness with great determination and hope, but she passed away in March of 2003. Her funeral service was a celebration of her life. Don and Rosemary were married for forty-eight years.

As tragic as Rosemary's loss was to Don, he, as has been mentioned earlier, closely followed the biblical teachings as adhered to through his Adventist faith. A clear declaration from the Bible is that we are not to be alone. And too, a desire to seek another spouse after a loss is testimony that the first marriage was good.

So it was that Don would not protest when a friend wanted to introduce him to someone. The friend was Lyman Williams of Gentry who knew the widow of a deceased friend of his in Wichita, Kansas. The lady was Arlene Russell Keller, and a plus was that she too was Adventist. When Lyman called her and asked her if he could give her telephone number to a gentleman in Arkansas, she was filled with trepidation, but she finally said yes. After two phone calls from Don, Arlene, still filled with uncertainty about seeing someone, told him they had better "cool it." When Don saw Lyman in town, he told him that he had received a "Dear John" telephone call. However, Arlene soon relented and she and Don began their phone conversations again, but they had still not met.

The opportunity to meet came when Arlene and a Texas friend of hers were coming through Siloam Springs on the way to Branson, Missouri. She agreed to meet Don at, of all places, the Holiday Inn. When Don entered the lobby, he saw two ladies seated, and he thought he might have his pick. When Arlene spoke, he knew she was the one. In the ensuing weeks and months, Don and Arlene spoke often by phone, and Don visited her in Wichita from time to time.

Arlene was doubtful about marriage since she was well established in Wichita. She has one daughter who has Arlene's two grandsons and two granddaughters there. Her work career was thirty-eight years with Farm Credit, where she worked in the computer department for accounting until her retirement in 1995. In retirement, she continued to work, first at a flower shop and then for seven years with an oil company in its accounting department and from time to time at the front desk. It is easy to see why she might hesitate to commit to someone in Arkansas, but finally, in May, 2004, she and Don were married.

Arlene kept her home in Wichita for a while, and the couple, while living in Gentry, made frequent

trips back to Wichita. Upon their return to Gentry from Wichita on March 12, 2006, about ten o'clock at night a tornado hit. Fortunately, Darren and his family, who lived in a new trailer home nearby, had come to the main house for protection from the storm. All the family members had just made it into the house when the tornado hit. The roof of the house was blown completely off, but the main structure of the house remained intact and protected them. Darren's home was completely obliterated, making it obvious that his family escaped almost certain death.

In the aftermath, good came from such a frightening situation. Don and Arlene bought a fifth-wheel RV and lived there, as well as in Wichita, while a new home was being built next door to the original home. Darren bought the damaged home from his dad and has rebuilt and remodeled it into a beautiful place. Don and Arlene moved into their beautiful new home on September 12, 2006. And too, Don has a fantastic new shop with his machinist tools ready to work. He enjoys making metal tools and parts. All he needs is a photograph to build most items. His shop is lined on two walls with many interesting antiques. His antiques include tractor seats, cream separators, water well pumps, glass butter churns, tools, and much more. By the way, it seems that Arlene is pretty sure the marriage is going to work since she finally sold her Wichita home. She feels she and Don were meant to be together. Not long after their marriage, she too faced serious health problems. Arlene credits Don, with his army medical experience, for helping nurse her through the crisis and back to health.

All of this is to point out that Don is a charter member of Tired Iron of the Ozarks. He joined the club after a couple of meetings in its inaugural year of 1992 and has been a valuable member ever since. He has worked tirelessly and generously on many projects for the club. He has painted two club tractors and a John Deere hay rake, has worked on erecting the club's buildings, is most faithful to help with the maintenance of the show grounds, maintains and operates the "Glory Train" for kids, drives in many tractor drives, plus much more. His 1951 Farmall M and 1953 Farmall Cub tractors are always a hit at our shows, at area festivals, and in community parades. He has also become the custodian and owner of Dick Shadduck's 1948 Farmall H.

Thanks to Don and Arlene for their continued involvement in and support of Tired Iron.



Don & Arlene at 2009 Veterans' Day Parade



Don in his shop