

Matt Larson's interview with is grandpa Larson
Interview date December 27, 1997

Me: This is Matt Larson traveling to Chicago. I am interviewing William Beckwith Larson about his life.

Me: When and where were you born?

Bill L: I was born in Ironwood, Michigan at Grandview hospital 2-6-37.

Me: Where did you spend most of your life as a child?

Bill L: The first five years were spent on Norrie St. about a block across the Montreal River to Hurley, Wisconsin. Plus a block north of the railroad tracks and several blocks from the cemetery, I also went to kindergarten at "Slate" school. The next two years we moved to a place where I forgot the name, but it was the main road to North Ironwood, two blocks north of the highway and on the East Side of cement Stucco in a two-story home. We spent the first and second year at Central school where we would have to walk across the railroad viaduct over the railroad yard.

Me: How often did you go to Church?

Bill L: We went to the Houghton Methodist Church when I was about eight to ten years old. Then of and on we would go to Ironwood at least every other weekend which was the store headquarters and where we would visit our uncle, aunt, cousins, and grandparents lived. So I would rather accompany my dad than go to church regular.

Me: When you were growing up what was discipline like?

Bill L: I don't believe that discipline was but seldom used. Outside of the house when the kids got noisy when all the cousins were together they adults always said that kids should be seen and not heard, so they would send us outside or something. I don't recall much but a couple good spankings and stern looks from my father.

Me: What kinds of fashions did you have growing up?

Bill L: I don't really recall about any fashions just that most kids wore blue jeans and the size was one size fits all unless you were really tall. Levi's and peg pants came out at about '53 '54. Marlin Brand's motorcycle movie influenced a lot of dress with caps and shades. Also living in Houghton, at Tech Engineering made engineering boots and bookbags. Almost everybody had bookbags. Outside of school lots of kids would have had jackets and sweatshirts with the team colors of their school.

Me: What do you remember about blue Swede shoes?

Bill L: Well, first of all we always used to have white bucks, and actually they were white Swede shoes. Blue Swede shoes didn't become popular until Elvis Presly made it popular with one of his greatest hit "Blue Swede Shoes". Another thing I recall is that all the girls had skirts and bobby socks with the saddle shoes. *Swede*

Me: When you were kids what kind of games did you play when you were growing up?

Bill L. Well we used to get together and chose up sides for scrub baseball, which were hardball games where the us from central end west Houghton would take on east Houghton or the Huron team. In the winter we would be skating which we had to scrape of the ice because everything was outdoors and of course because Houghton got a lot have snow and there was a warming shack for when you got cold. Houghton had three ice rinks, Hancock had five rinks and every small town had one. I also played Junior Varsity Basketball and I was a starting guard.

Me: What were your parent's occupations?

Bill L: My dad worked at the docks in Ironwood, then he went to the docks in Superior Wisconsin where he was loading and unloading fretters. I remember one time he told me that they were unloading cod (hard slabs of fish) and they were treated in lye for lutafisk. From there he went to the grain elevators where they shopped grain out. Then he went to the railroad yard where he worked as a boilermaker for rebuilding steam locomotives. From there he went to the Duluth steel mills where that shut down and closed the road de-rails to him and is partner Chat Peterson from the Arrowhead country in Minnesota and they eventually met their third partner Glenn Michael's in Gary Indiana. From there they went to work in Pontiac *Freighter*

Michigan where he met my mother who was from Jackson Michigan. When they got laid off there they heard about an opportunity in Ironwood to open a body shop so they went there and they tried five and dime stores and gradually they produced an auto part store. Mother worked as a secretary at the Oakland Car Company. She was also a poster girl then with two other girls. After they got married she became a full time housekeeper. So it was common for dad to work long hours. Also when dad started the Houghton store he commuting back and forth.

Me: Did you have any brothers or sisters:

Bill L: He, I have a brother John who was born about a year and several months before me and a sister Marylyn who is about six years younger than I am.

Me: Who were your heroes when you were growing up?

Bill L: I don't recall any specific but we probably influenced by many.

Me: Did you obtain your diploma?

Bill L: Yeah, I graduated Houghton high school in 1955 which was the year Houghton won the class C basketball state championship, and graduated from Michigan Tech in 1960. *what kind of engineering?*

Me: How did you feel about the cold war with the Soviet Union?

Bill L: We were raised at the beginning of the Cold War at the inception you might say because it came right after WWII and Korea and we were at that time not trusting our WWII allies the Soviet Union who was getting very aggressive and they were getting nuclear war heads and at that time bomb shelters and airbases were becoming quite common like K. I. Sawyer and Kincholo. They sprang up every few hundred miles along the U.S. and the missile delivery system became constant about upping the anti for that many years really.

Me: How did you feel about the Vietnam War?

Bill L: Well like most military actions we all started out pretty patriotic. But we got demoralized and more frustrated the more we learned

and it wasn't the first time the politicians got us into it as being worlds policemen. And for wanting a better purpose on that. We had two nephews Johnny and Ricky Koski whom both served in Vietnam.

Me: How did you feel about the Korean War?

Bill L: At that time they didn't call it a war they called it a police action. And those that went over didn't receive the same standing as those in WWI and WWII and obviously that repeated itself in Vietnam.

Me: Do you have any past memories of WWII?

Bill L: I mostly recall characters of Ojoe and Hitler and they were painted on dirty windows. Also in school we were buying saving stamps with our dimes. And accumulating them for a saving bond. A tokens were used as money for buses so we didn't see too much of it although we seen tokens for meet since coins were being elicited. Also that's when copper pennies were being replaced with Zinc because they needed that for the war. So everything that was needed for the war we had to make adjustments for. And a lot of thing became short of supplies like good rubber innertubes and that's when they came out with black synthetic tubes. I also recall the parade in Ironwood when the war was over and there was tanks thundering down the main street and I was a pretty small boy at that time so that was pretty awesome.

Me: How did you get involved with your business.

Bill L: Well I was raised in a business so after school I was cleaning floors washing windows, stocking shelves, and adjusting shelves cutting glass and making deliveries, and eventually working on the counter through high school and while I was at Michigan Tech. So at that point when I eventually graduated I took over the Calumet store.

Me: What kinds of products did you make or sell?

Bill L: my dad Hilding and his two partner Chat Peterson and Glenn Michael's founded the business. We sold new and rebuilt auto parts. They were almost a hundred percent wholesale until the federal government eliminated fair trade. From then we did a lot of shopwork and building

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engines mag nietals fuel pumps carburetors generators, starters. So the store was a big factor.

Me: Was it hard to keep the business going.

Bill L: Well, yes because you always had to work on it and it was a constant challenge in of employee turnover and developing good policies through trial and error. Growing in a maturing and competitive climate. O.K. auto became the leading auto part store through the thirties and seventies and eighties. So our company had a lot of firsts through inventory control. Which provided efficiency to allow for that growth and resources.

Me: Was it hard keeping employees?

Bill L: Without ^{good} could employees ones company cannot grow and it was necessary to train good employees so that you lose the competitors so growth is not just through the business. You can hire better and train and then you become the place where people want to come and work for.

Me: Did technology take part in your business?

Bill L: Well until the nineteen seventies writing and bookkeeping was all done manual and any technology in the store was the tools and machinery. Our first computer mily had fifteen megabits of distorage. And when you look at them it looked like three big platters bigger than the seventy-RPM records. So each one of those platters had five megabits of memory and we had three big drives. Our ^{accounts} counts receivable computer had five megabits so we had a total of two computers of twenty megabits to handle fourteen stores of inventory to 40000 part numbers and about 4000 counts receivable. So that's to computers as we know it know. From there we went to a general automation which we had to sign of because we could not sell it to Russia or any other communist country. It had sixteen megabits of ram and about 120 megabits of drive. At that time we put on about 70000 part numbers and we had seventeen locations. Just our Industrial had about 30-40000 thousand part numbers.

Me: Has the population of your company changed from the employee's new ideas?

Bill L: I think our primary change has come from the government influences. With no trade laws on could sell retail and therefor once they eliminated them we were all forced to sell retail. The formally structured distribution system of manufacture to distribute a wholesaler to retail into many variations. So retail hours and sale hours had to be increased to compete cause we still had open Saturdays.

Me: What was a typical day at work?

Bill L. In the early days it was from eight in the morning to six Monday through Friday and eight to noon on Saturdays some stores if they government accounts they might have started at seven in the morning. And it was very common for us to get called out early in the morning for emergency repairs for snowplows or whatever.

Me: Did the business keep you away from your family and hobbies?

Bill L. As a youth working part time, it kept me away from friends and sports still I played most of the sports like ball picking strawberries and making forts. As I got older I still played a round of golf each week if not more, took family camping not as often as other families but we had a good variety. We may have had too much work and not enough play makes Jack a dull boy how busy hands keep people out of trouble.

Me: At any times was there a lot of stress for you working longer hours then others?

Bill L: Yes, obviously our family wasn't doing what other families were doing all the time. Plus all the rules of regulation that the government passed and the forces had to be implemented with no outside help or assistance. If politicians had to jump to what the businessman did they wouldn't pass these laws. So stress takes time thoroughness and expensive legal accounting advice which takes more and more time and at both times you can be in very short supply which that becomes very stressful.

Me: Do think it was worth while the way you made the business or do you think there should have been some changes.

Bill L: Certainly it was worth while, obviously you should have made minor adjustments. But when you live and react to the day you wouldn't do

the same thing over. One can only learn and prepare so much than you do the best thing you can.

Me: How many years have the business been going?

Bill L: Well dad and his partners started an auto body shop in Ironwood around 1933 and the auto parts at about 39-40 and our first branch of store was in Ashland, Wisconsin and then in Iron Mountain and Houghton in 45. Then Brian Larson (his son), John and me bought the business over my dad in 1980. We sold the stores in 1995 but we started a new company.

get exact names of stores

Me: Do you plan on moving to a warmer climate in the future?

Bill L: Yes, were starting to enjoy the warmer weather continuously for the years that we are healthy and until our health goes out we will be seasonal, staying here in the summer and in the South during the winter. Once our health goes out, winter and old age aren't very compatible.

Me: Did you have any other jobs that you wanted to do other than working with the business?

Bill L: Well one other company that I worked for was at Al's Chomers in West Alice, Wisconsin in the department doing research development, because I was an engineers assistant class "B" one year. One year I was also entertaining and becoming a CPA. In the sixties when my dad was about to sell the business Carl enjoyed whatever work I did, but you make your own challenges and you make it what you want it to be.

Me: What kind of music did you listen to when you were growing up?

Bill L: Well at that time there wasn't to many choices but on the radio pop and country was popular and there was also some big band music so I really enjoyed them and I still do today.

Me: What sports did you play when you were growing up?

Bill L. Well I can remember on the school grounds we played hopscotch and rover red rover. After school on weekends it would be hardball and in school you would play basketball. I plated football one year

and one game. Out at camp it was swimming, water, skiing, boating and maybe a little bit of fishing.

Me: Did you have any pets when you were growing up?

Bill L: Yes, we had a family dog and his name was Trigger and he was the size of a black Cocker spaniel.

Me: What hobbies did you do when you were growing up?

Bill L: Well we had campaign and golfing and a lot of local sport events. We also had saunas if you call that a hobby.

Me: When did you get your first car and what kind was it?

Bill L: Well, at about the Sophomore Junior year me and my brother got a '41 Chevy Coop. It's rocker panels were all rusted up. So dad spent the winter up above the store in Houghton in the backstreet where you could drive up above the store. So he fixed that up and we rebuilt the motor. So my brother and me had to rebuild that. But we primarily walked to school.

*marriage to
your grandmother?
date of
children's
birth?*