

BOB ARNOLD:



AN AMERICAN LIFE

My interview with my grandfather

By Collins Arnold

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How would you like to own a business for twenty five years? Well I, Collins Arnold, interviewed a man that did just that. His name is Bob Arnold and he is my grandfather. I call my granddad Papa. It is much easier to say and I like it better than granddad. He owned an auto parts distribution store. I really liked learning about his business.

These are some of the things he told me on January 31, 2007:

Papa had always been interested in automobiles. He remembered people such as Sir Malcolm Campbell, A British racer who set all kinds of records in the early years of car racing at the great salt flats in Utah.

That started his interest in automobiles and has continued to this day. Even though my granddad was not very good at fixing cars, he never lost interest in automobiles. After World War II he went to college. Then he went to work in the parts department at Beaudry Ford Motor Company in downtown Atlanta.

He opened Southern Auto Parts in Atlanta, Georgia in May, 1964 with "a lot of faith, very little money and in looking back, dependent on the American tradition of hard work assuring success".

He had no money of his own but he borrowed ten thousand dollars on his home, and "set sail!" Even in those days that was not enough to start a new business but he said he did not know

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any better. With that small amount of money, he was not able to buy any parts for stock, so he figured out a plan.

He rented a small office on Spring Street in Atlanta. His rent was three hundred and seventy five dollars a month. Then he hired two people. One to answer the phone, and one to deliver the parts. He paid himself eight hundred dollars a month, which was a very small amount of money back then. By the time he paid himself, two employees, paid rent and expenses it is easy to see why he had no money to buy parts.

When he made a sale, he would call it in to his store. The clerk would then call a warehouse and order the parts. At the end of the day, my grandfather would go back to the store, sort the orders out to the dealers he had made sales to and then bill everything manually.

He saved the box from each and every part he sold. He then put the empty boxes on the shelves to make it look like he had those parts in stock, just in case a customer dropped by.

My grandfather told me that somebody told him once, that the way he ran Southern Auto Parts was like somebody trying to run a restaurant with no food.

In those days there were not as many car dealers as there are now so what he did was draw a fifty mile circle around Atlanta and any town that had a dealership. If he made no sales in any of those dealerships he then would move on to others.

His start up money was “running low, so when I made his first profit in the eighth month of operation, I felt the world had been lifted off his shoulders”.

To start a business the way he started Southern Auto Parts would be impossible today, he told me.

He had no computers in his early years of business. “That, in itself, has been a big change but the biggest change has been in the industry, the way the cars are built and all the new things that have been added. Improvements have been drastic compared to 1964”.

"Cars are much lighter than those built some forty years ago. Lightweight materials are used, computers enhance the manufacturing of parts, consequently, parts last longer and so do the cars. In those days, most engines were worn out at fifty thousand miles, now they seem to last forever," he said.

“Inflation has also caused many changes. In 1964 for instance, the average cost of a car was thirty five hundred dollars and the average cost of a new house was thirteen thousand dollars. Gasoline was thirty cents a gallon, postage stamps were five cents, average monthly rent was one hundred fifteen dollars a month and the average salary was six thousand dollars a year”.

My grand father really enjoyed his work. He said, "Being the owner I tried very hard to make it a happy workplace". He once worked at a place where almost everyone was unhappy on their job. He did not want to "foster that situation on anyone". He stated that, "Most of a person's

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day is spent on the job and an unhappy situation at work affects one's homelife." He also says that "a happy employee does better work than an unhappy one and will stay on the job much longer".