

Leon Buckwalter's Biography

The following is a brief biography of my brother, Leon, as told to me (Clair Buckwalter) by him.

Leon: I was born on December 21, 1923, while we were living in Witmer, Pa., on my grandfather's farm. I was born in the General Hospital in Lancaster. I do not know how I got to be so lucky. My sisters were all born at home.

Clair: So Leon, you moved with our parents to the farm in Upper Leacock township. When was that?

Leon: That was 1927, I'm told.

Clair: You lived on that farm until you got married?

Leon: Well, no. I left there before I got married, actually. I went to B.Z. Mellinger's in New Holland. A lot of things happened that year. That was 1947. I changed jobs. And I got married.

Clair: How did you meet Miriam?

Leon: Oh well. I knew her a good many years. I met her actually at Carpenter's church, I guess.

Clair: When did you start to go out with Miriam?

Leon: I guess that was in '46.

Clair: 1946? And you got married in the end of December of 1947?

Leon: Yes, 1947.

Clair: So you had been farming on the farm up until when?

Leon: The summer of 1947

Clair: What made you decide to get a job at B. Z. Mellinger's?

Leon: Well, they sort of came after me. They heard I was interested in changing so they came after me.

Clair: You decided you didn't want to farm?

Leon: I decided I didn't want to farm. I had my crew full of farming.

Clair: How did Dad and Mother take that? Did they have any reaction to that?

Leon: Oh yeah, they had a reaction to that. It was unknown to them that I was even considering leaving the farm. They adjusted to it.

Clair: Did they give you any hassle about it or anything?

Leon: No, my parents weren't ones to hassle.

Clair: Do you think that was important in their decision to sell the farm or did that have nothing to do with it?

Leon: Oh, I think it was, yeah. I think it was important in their decision.

Clair: So that means Dad was tired of farming too, and wanted you to take over?

Leon: Actually, after I got off the farm we began looking around. I decided I might go back

to farming.

Clair: You mean after you got married you thought about farming?

Leon: After I got married.

Clair: And you were looking for a place?

Leon: Yeah, we were running all around looking for farms at the time. But then I guess I decided that I had it made without a farm.

Clair: Working at Mellinger's?

Leon: Right.

Clair: How did you decide to work in the car business? Was it because of your friend, Biz.? Or was it because you liked working with cars?

Leon: Well, I guess mostly it was because of my friend Biz. I think he sort of got me the job.

Clair: You started out in the parts department?

Leon: That's right.

Clair: Sounds like a pretty good job.

Leon: It wasn't too bad. I had trouble adjusting to the job. In 1949, I guess it was, I left Mellinger's and went to Farm Bureau.

Clair: That's when you drove the gasoline truck?

Leon: Yes, gasoline and oil.

Clair: So what didn't you like about Mellinger's?

Leon: Well, it was mostly my own frame of mind, I guess. You know, I went from the farm right into Mellinger's. I never had any experience with the public or anything like that.

Clair: It was a hard transition? And you were inside all the time, too.

Leon: Yes.

Clair: So how long did you drive gas truck?

Leon: I started in '51. I left Mellinger's in '51 and was on the truck until '54.

Clair: About 3 years?

Leon: Yeah. And then the fellow who took my place at Mellinger's quit around that time. Carl Spence, the general manager at Mellinger's at the time came looking for me.

Clair: You were pretty fortunate that way: people asking you to come work for them.

Leon: Yeah. It was through Harry Good. Harry figured he didn't want to train anybody else. So he offered me more money than I had been getting at the Farm Bureau job and more money than they had been paying me before I left.

Clair: Where did you and Miriam get married? At Carpenter's or where?

Leon: No. We got married in her home.

Clair: In Miriam's home in Brownstown? Did everybody get married at home those days?

Leon: If you wanted to have special music and floweres you had to do it at home.

Clair: The bishop didn't have that much control there? Is that it?

Leon: Well, the bishop actually married us. It was Mahlon Witmer.

Clair: The bishop could tell you what to do at church but didn't have as much control over the home?

Leon: Right.

Clair: Do you remember how many people were at your wedding?

Leon: John Mumma was my best man. And Ellen was Miriam's maid of honor.

Clair: So who was the preacher at Carpenter's when you got married? Was it Mike Wenger?

Leon: Yes, it was Mikey Wenger.

Clair: Did you go on a honeymoon?

Leon: Yeah, we went to Niagara Falls the day after we were married, I guess. My folks had a family get-together, you know, on Christmas day. So we left that afternoon, I guess.

Clair: Was the family-get-together a yearly thing?

Leon: Yeah.

Clair: Did Uncle Issac and his family attend?

Leon: No, it was just my siblings, I think.

Clair: So after the family get-together you were off to Niagara Falls?

Leon: Yep. I was dumb that time too. We got to Niagara Falls. We parked along the street, you know, and I didn't put any money in the meter. So the cop comes along just as we were ready to get into the car. I told him we were leaving. He gave me a ticket anyway.

Clair: What kind of car did you have?

Leon: That was a '47 Ford. I had a brand new Ford by that time. Mother was after me for I don't know how long to get a new car. I had this '39 Dodge that my father bought me. And mother thought I should get a new car. She thought that would help me get a girlfriend, I guess. Anyway, I had gotten a steady girlfriend, Miriam, before I got the new car.

Clair: Where did you and Miriam live after you got married?

Leon: We lived in Leola in B.Z. Mellinger's garage. He owned the house. I guess there were two parties in the house. And he fixed up the garage for an apartment. We moved in there. That was due to Esther Mellinger Bair. She leaned on her brother, B.Z., I guess, to let us move in there.

Clair: You had a lot of people looking out for you.

Leon: Herb was born when we lived there.

Clair: You lived in Leola a couple years until Dad bought the place in Bareville?

Leon: It wasn't that long.

Clair: I think it was '49 when Dad bought the place in Bareville.

Leon: Well, I don't know about dates. We moved down there before they did, of course.

Clair: How did that come about?

Leon: The part we were moving into was vacant.

Clair: You didn't live there before he bought it. After he bought it you just moved in there before they did.

Leon: That's right.

Clair: When was the sale on the farm: before or after they moved?

Leon: They must have had sale in March of '49.

Clair: Was that a difficult time for everyone to say goodbye to the old farm?

Leon: I guess so, I don't know. You see, I wasn't in direct contact with anyone at home at that time.

Clair: Were you at the sale?

Leon: Yeah, I guess I was. I think I asked for off on that sale day. But, I don't remember much of that sale. I remember the Amish playing cornerball in the dung yard.

Clair: Was Fred born when you lived in Bareville?

Leon: Fred was born in Bareville in '51.

Clair: And Dana?

Leon: Dana was born in New Holland.

Clair: So you bought that house in New Holland in what year?

Leon: I think it was '51. I think we lived there '51-'62.

Clair: Did you move to New Holland to be close to your work?

Leon: I don't know. It was sort of a dumb thing that I bought that house. I figure I paid too much for it. I paid about \$9200. I sold that in '62 for \$9000.

Clair: So the housing market wasn't too wonderful in those nine years?

Leon: It wasn't wonderful at all. I tried to sell it myself, you see, and I got nowhere fast.

Clair: Where did you attend church?

Leon: At Neffsville.

Clair: When did you start attending Neffsville?

Leon: We went to Carpenter's a short time after we were married. We heard they were starting a church up there (Neffsville). You see that was a result of a Brunk revival campaign. We heard they were starting at Neffsville and we knew most of the people that were going there, except John Rudy's. I guess that is the way we got started at Neffsville.

I remember John Wentling running after us saying, " Ve'll take you back, ve'll take you back." He didn't want to see me go.

Clair: So how did you and Miriam decide to help with the church in New Jersey?

Leon: We were interested in moving out somewhere and I guess Henry Swartley heard that we were interested and he came after us. He called us one night on the phone, I think. He asked us whether we would be interested in moving over there.

Clair: So through networking you told the people at church you wanted to move? Is that how Swartley knew about you?

Leon: Well, actually we were in contact with a mission board. I don't know which mission board it was any more. They were looking for a place to put us. In the meantime Swartley heard about us and he came after us.

Clair: So what exactly motivated you and Miriam to do this? Was it in the interest of doing something for the church or were you just tired of doing what you were doing?

Leon: Some of both, I guess. I was really tired of my job in New Holland.

Clair: So that was 1962?

Leon: '62 we moved over there, yes.

Clair: What did the children say about the move?

Leon: They didn't say much. Only now are we hearing what they really felt.

Clair: What are they telling you now?

Leon: Well, I guess it is mostly from Fred. Fred was interested in going but he says Herb had second thoughts about moving over there.

Clair: How old was Herb?

Leon: Herb was, I guess, a junior when we moved. Herb was in the last class that graduated at the old Washington High School. I guess it was '66 the year he graduated.

Clair: How did you find a place to live and how did you find a job?

Leon: I thought I had a job when I moved, you know. But when I got over there I found out the guy had hired someone else. I was going to work with a painter, painting houses. But it didn't take me long to find out I should stick with what I was doing. I found a job at Hackettstown Auto Parts; the Poyer boys.

Clair: So that was a job very similar to what you had in New Holland?

Leon: Yeah, the only thing is they had the parts of all cars. They appeared that way at least. I worked there for 19 months. Then I became friends of a fellow that was managing the milk routes in New Jersey for ..., I can't remember the name of the people he was working for. Anyway, they had a depot in Washington. This Warren Hilkert was his name, I met up with him during the time I was attending the CBMC meetings in the Washington area.

Clair: What was that?

Leon: Christian Business Men's Committee. I sort of dropped out of there real quick. They pounce on you to take an office. Nuts, I didn't want any offices.

Clair: But, anyway, you met the man who managed the milk routes through them?

Leon: Right. Bush Dairy Farms is the name. They were in Flemington, New Jersey.

Clair: So you drove milk truck for awhile?

Leon: I drove milk truck from '64 to '67.

Clair: So you got up in the middle of the night to deliver milk?

Leon: Yeah, I would hit the road at 3:30 on the morning. I had to get up at 2:30. When I started with Bush I had a local route, a wholesale route in Wasington. That was in the

spring of the year. I stayed on that job until the summer time. Then a route in the lower part of the county became available: due to some guy quitting or something. So I took that job. That was retail and wholesale. I'll never forget that. I started out up in Washington and ended up down in Highbridge. It was a lot of work, man. I drove 50 miles and had a 100 stops. A lot of physical work, man. That's what I blame a lot of my knee problems on.

Clair: How old were you when you doing that?

Leon: I was just a kid, so to speak. I guess in my late 40's or early 50's.

Clair: You began to feel it in your knees.

Leon: No, I didn't feel it in my knees until I retired and moved over here. That's when my knees started to act up, so to speak.

Clair: So how long did Bush Dairy deliver milk to homes after you left?

Leon: A couple years at the most, Clair.

Clair: So you were one of the last of that era, so to speak.

Leon: Yeah, that's right.

Clair: After delivering milk from '64-'67 what did you do after that?

Leon: That is when I went to selling automobiles.

Clair: What company was that?

Leon: That was Allegar. Allegar's Rambler.

Clair: What were they changing the name to then; Rambler to what?

Leon: American Motors. They were trying to shake the name of Rambler. I discovered that after I went with Allegar. Do you remember the old American car? It was a pretty good car. American Motors did not want to be associated with the name Rambler any more.

Clair: So how long did you sell for American Motors?

Leon: I guess in '71 I left there.

Clair: Then what did you do?

Leon: I went to Ferranti Brothers in Oxford. They had a gravel pit. You see there was another guy there when I went there. I thought he was going to stay there. I was supposed to be his helper. Wasn't too long until I discovered he was going to retire and quit. So, I had the whole ball of wax.

Clair: Ipso facto, you were in charge?

Leon: Yep.

Clair: Working a lot?

Leon: During the day I was as busy as a one armed paper hanger. There Ferranti&well, old man Ferranti they say he was a good fellow. I did not have any experience with him. But his two boys were operating the business after he died. And they ran the thing into the ground. There is no more Ferranti Brothers. They had their headquarters in Bernardsville, N.J. And they came up here to operate this gravel pit because it helped them in their concrete work. And they were connected to a guy up north of Oxford there. They were hauling gravel out of his field. That's where they were getting gravel after they ground everything up in Oxford. They had to look for supplies.

Clair: So how long did you work for the gravel pit?

Leon: I think it was about eleven months I was there. I got fed up one weekend. I guess I told you this before. One weekend I wanted to go to a wedding on a Saturday somewhere. And I told Jim. Jim seemed to be in charge. Jim Ferranti. About sending trucks, I said, I don't want any trucks up there after noon time on Saturday because I was going to a wedding. But the trucks just kept coming. So, Jim happened to make the mistake of calling me about something else from Bernardsville. I said, "Jim these trucks are still coming in here and I want to go away." He said, "I'll knock them off." I guess he did knock them off but I said, "Jim, I'm giving you a two week notice right now." His brother Connie was up the next Monday. He said, "What happened to you and Jim on Saturday?" He said that you are quitting. "Yeah," I said, "I can't put up with this." Well, anyway that is how I got my job with Hoffman- LaRoche.

Clair: How did you know they were hiring?

Leon: I was telling Duane Swartley about my experience with Ferrantis at church the next day and he says, "well, come over for an interview. I'm sure they will hire you." So I went over for an interview that Monday afternoon. I was in there. I had no trouble getting in at that particular time.

Clair: What year was that?

Leon: That was '72. I started with Hoffman-LaRoche in October, '72.

Clair: And you retired in '89?

Leon: I retired in '88. It was 16 years and some months. Yeah, you see they gave me my retirement day when I was hired: Jan 1, '89.

Clair: So that was a good experience working there? You liked that?

Leon: Oh yeah. I liked that. I hated to quit there. But I did. I didn't work there after

sometime in December of '88. I went into personnel one day and they said, "you don't have to come back." They close down anyway between Christmas and New Year's. So I didn't go back. I don't think I worked after the 20th of December of '88.

Clair: So they were a good company to work for?

Leon: Yeah. If you did your job there, nobody bothered you.

Clair: What did you do there? What kind of jobs did you have?

Leon: I was on the expansion crew for awhile. There were three of us on the expansion crew. That was when they expanded the operation to, I forget how many tons they were aiming for...per day...in a 24 hour period. We ran the plant around the clock.

Clair: You always worked in the vitamin C building?

Leon: Yes, I always worked in the vitamin C building. Except, I was hired for another building the first month I was there. They took the one shift off. Shortly after I went there, one day they called us all in. He told us about the laying off of the crew, but he said they need you over at vitamin C. So I went over to vitamin C as did some of the other guys.

Clair: You had to work different shifts on that job?

Leon: Yeah, when we started it was all day work; when we started vitamin C up. Then suddenly they said to two of us (Sam Brands was the other guy): "We're going to run this plant around the clock in two shifts each twelve hours." He said, "You take the one crew and Sam Brands will take the other crew." "It doesn't matter which crew you take or which time you want to work: night or day." So, I took the night crew because I was involved in the church at that time.

Clair: What hours did you work then?

Leon: We worked 8 at night until 8 in the morning.

Clair: You were the foreman?

Leon: I was acting foreman.

Clair: That is quite a long shift. Did you work that 5 days a week?

Leon: We worked seven days. We didn't have any time off for the first ten years I was there.

Clair: You didn't get any days off?

Leon: We were complaining like crazy so finally they put us on a system where we worked swing shifts. We finally got on a system where every fourth week we had a long weekend. That was from Friday morning until Tuesday afternoon. That gave us a little time off. But before that we didn't have any time off.

Clair: Wow, I didn't know you worked seven days a week! How did you manage to do that?

Leon: It wasn't easy. That's all I can say. It wasn't easy.

Clair: So, tell me about the school board. How did you get involved in the school board?

Leon: It was in the township of Oxford. Well, how did I get involved? That is easy. Sam Brands' brother lived close to us and they had a vacancy on the board. George came after me one day and said, "How about you coming down to the school board?" I said, "George, I don't know if I am school board material or not. I don't even have a high school diploma." He says, "that doesn't matter. Come down anyway." He says, "come down this evening. Our board meets this evening." So I went down. To make a long story short; I ending up getting on the board.

Clair: Had you ever attended a board meeting before?

Leon: Never. So I filled a guy's position that was on before me. Then they talked me into becoming a candidate for the next three years. So I did that.

Clair: You had to be elected to that?

Leon: I had to be elected to that. I never campaigned or anything. Never did anything. They just elected me to the board. The township elected me to the board. And then that year yet; no it was the second year I was on the board I became board president.

Clair: Did you have to get elected to that position?

Leon: The board elects the president.

Clair: It is pretty amazing to get elected president. How did that happen?

Leon: Yeah, I sort of enjoyed it after I got going once. Then I hated to quit; once I got going. I was just learning the ropes.

Clair: How long were you board president?

Leon: I don't know. I was president for six years at least, maybe longer. One year the president moved out of the township because of his work and then they looked over their noses at me to be their president. I was president until...I'm not sure what year. Anyway, then a guy came on the board that wanted to be president. I said boy, you can have it. My buddy, Warren Stark, wanted to be president. I said you can have it.

Clair: So what were your jobs as board president?

Leon: The hardest job I ever did was negotiate salaries across the table with the teachers.

Clair: Were the teachers unionized?

Leon: Yeah. It is the strongest union in the country they say; the teachers' union. Anyway, that and we had a little trouble: we fired one of the teachers one year. Then the townspeople got up in arms about it. They all came to a meeting. And boy, oh boy! They asked more questions than I could answer. I just began saying that at this time I can't answer that question because I would have to take that up with the board. That was difficult. Because they sent a guy...the teachers' union sent a guy in an army uniform and he sat up there and started working on me.

Clair: Did you visit the school often?

Leon: Yeah, I went down to the school every couple days at least. I wanted to back up the principle at that time, Mr. O'Maley. I wanted to back him up. I didn't know how to do that other than visit the school, which I could do pretty easily. Selling automobiles at the time I could stop in there most any time.

Clair: What did you do when you went into the school?

Leon: I talked with Mr. O'Maley and some of the teachers.

Clair: So in 1988 you retired and soon after put your house up for sale?

Leon: We put our house up for sale in March of '89. It didn't sell until March of '90.

Clair: Then you came over to Lancaster county to look for a house?

Leon: Yeah, we had been over before we sold over there; back in April or May of '89.

I was in contact with John Neff who was the only guy I knew in the real estate business over here. We came over one day and he showed us all around. And it was through him that we

finally go this place. This was his cousin's place. I called him after I had sold the dhouse over there. Gee, he says, "My cousin's place is still for sale on Mayfield Drive." I said, "Where's Mayfield Drive?" Well, he says there are actually two Mayfield Drives but this one is in Warwick township, just south of Lititz. To make a long story short, we ended up buying this. That was '90. We moved here in '90.