

## RENEWING MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH DAD

Recently graduated from high school in July 1943, I was inducted into the V-12 Navy College Training Program designed to supply additional commissioned officers to the



United States Navy during World War II. When I returned home after discharge from the Navy in June 1946, I returned to a home I had never lived in. My parents had moved from Hampton, Iowa where Dad managed a bulk gasoline facility for Cities Service Petroleum Company to Ames, Iowa, where Dad had a filling station on the east end of Main Street in addition to the bulk gasoline service for that area.

*Photo taken in Hampton IA in 1943  
Little brother David dressed up in my Navy uniform*

Our home was located on Grand Avenue (also Highway 69), and my parents had gotten acquainted and settled into a comfortable social life before I came home. It was an ideal community for my 12-year-old brother, David. I was 21 years old and a commissioned naval officer, and Dad treated me pretty much as an adult. He may have thought I was more mature than was really justified because of my Navy experience. Iowa State College was located in Ames. I enrolled in the College of Engineering in the fall of 1946, and Elaine and I set our wedding date for December 22 during the Christmas break.

Dad spent many long hours working at the filling station, and employed a young man to help with the bulk service deliveries. Gene was very distantly related, but once when Dad visited his home, he was astonished to see a large photograph of his parents and their 14 children hanging in the living room.



*Dad is in the  
left corner of the  
photo.*

*The infant inserted in  
the upper right-hand  
corner of the photo is  
Russell who was born  
after the photo was  
taken*

*There were 14  
children in the family.*

The Varland Family  
Walter, Orville, Hazel, Harvey, Sina, Arthur  
Esther, Tobias, Gordon, Edgar, Freda, Merrille, Malinda, Ruth, Truman

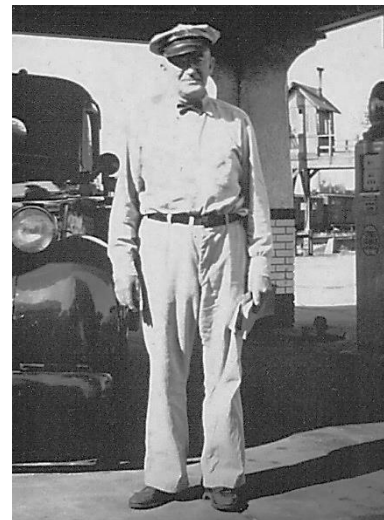
The filling station became a sort of mecca for Dad's male friends. They would come in for gas or other service and stop in any time they were in the area to visit and talk politics. The regulars included three insurance agents, a physics professor at the college, the senior pastor at the Lutheran church, and the owner of the lumberyard located near the station. They weren't always there at the same time, but I could count on hearing a heated debate on some religious or political question whenever I dropped in. Dad was a staunch Democrat and most of the regular group were Republican, but Dad could hold his own. As impassioned as these disputes became, they always concluded with a handshake and a promise to see one another in the next day or two.

These friends and their wives got together socially, too, and animated discussions carried over into the gatherings at their homes as well. The wives usually did not enter into the arguments, and when it was time for coffee and dessert the conversation turned to less volatile issues that included everyone.

After Elaine and I were married, we lived with my parents for six months because finding housing was so difficult due to the huge influx of married students at the college after the war. During that time, Mother and Dad readily accepted us into their social life, and we enjoyed their friends, too. One of their primary social activities was playing bridge. This might best be described as playing "at" bridge because playing was not very serious, and more time was spent talking than playing bridge. Bidding was generally low and slam bids were rarely even considered. On one occasion when Elaine and I were playing with their bridge group, Dad and Elaine were partners and made two grand slams in a row. I remember Dad during the second game; perspiration beaded his brow and he was laughing almost hysterically. This occasion became one of my Dad's favorite bridge stories, and Elaine established her reputation as a bridge expert.

Elaine and my parents got along famously. Twice, however, Dad showed a bit of anger toward her—and both for about the same reason. On one occasion Elaine refreshed Dad's cup with hot coffee while he was reading the morning paper. Not noticing that the coffee had been reheated, he took a big gulp of what he thought would be a pleasantly warm cup of coffee and spewed the coffee out of his burned mouth explosively. Elaine's response was to laugh, but he didn't think it was such a big joke! Another time he sat down on a chair with loose rungs that broke under his weight, and he fell to the floor. Guess who laughed again! Elaine also remembers a time she and Dad laughed together as they were attempting to prepare a whole chicken for frying. They discovered it was not as easy as it appears when watching someone else do it. Only by pulling, cutting and twisting were they able to accomplish the task.

Dad had several mishaps at work that could have been serious. His station did not have a hydraulic lift, and cars drove over an open pit in the ground for oil changes. Once he fell backwards into the open grease pit but emerged uninjured. Another time while climbing on the vertical storage tank, he lost his footing and fell about 15 feet before grabbing the ladder that saved him from falling another 30 feet or so to the ground. To measure the amount of gas in the tank, it was necessary to climb to the top of the tank, insert a long measuring stick into the tank, pull the stick out and check where the liquid level was marked on the stick. I have often wondered what OSHA would think of both the open pit and the method of measuring tank capacity.



Another time Dad was driving his tank truck to the bank to make a deposit, probably holding the deposit in his hand while driving. The driver of an auto failed to stop for a stop sign at an intersection, and smashed into the rear of the truck rolling it over onto its top. The tank was empty, but miraculously there was no fire from a spark as the truck slid along on the pavement. Dad remembered being dazed, sitting on the curb and people handing him money and checks from the deposit that had flown out of the truck on impact. When all was said and done, only three dollars were missing. One day after repair of some minor damage to the truck, he spotted two dollar bills on the floor as he was driving down a very bumpy rural road. Remarkably, only one dollar of the deposit was not recovered.

I helped at the station on a limited basis while going to school. Sometimes to keep my dad company, I would accompany him on rural gasoline deliveries to farmers and to small general store businesses in outlying towns. I remember once after delivering gas to one of these small stores and finishing our business with the owner, a local farmer drove up and asked if he could get some air to fill his tires. The owner asked the farmer, "Where do you get your gas?" The farmer replied, "Out of the tank at my farm." With that the owner said, "Get your air at the same place!" I have shared this story with many people as a wonderful lesson on poor customer relations.

After reading the newspapers and news periodicals, Dad's favorite hobby was listening to the Chicago Cubs or White Sox games on the radio. Growing up in northern Illinois it was only natural that these were his favorite teams even though they never seemed to win a pennant. He would nap on the couch in the study, and if anyone lowered the volume or turned off the radio, Dad was instantly awake and wanted the game to be put back on. He would know the score, the inning, who was at bat, and who was pitching. This subliminal concentration always astonished me.

Dad was a superb conversationalist, and he could meet almost anyone and find some connection either with a relative, a friend or a location. As far as I knew, Dad did not have an enemy in the world and could relate to almost anyone. Dad was a kindhearted *people person*. My mother once told me an amusing, but revealing story about Dad. Years after retiring from the filling station, Dad answered a knock on the door one evening. She heard him conversing with someone, and when he returned Dad told her he was talking with a man who confessed that years ago he had driven away from the gas pump without paying his bill. Now he had "found Jesus" and was doing his best to make amends. Dad had thanked the man, then commented to Mother that he wished more people had found Jesus. Dad was generous in offering credit, and I suspect there were many unpaid accounts when he left the business.



The six months that we lived with my parents allowed us to know each other as adults and share many social events and family outings. Elaine always said she learned her cooking skills from my mother. From both of them we learned that simplicity, honesty, good nature and the acceptance of people as they are is a good criterion for a happy life.—**Walt Varland**