

## Eugene Witzel

NOTE: On February 27, 2012, long-time Tired Iron of the Ozarks club member Eugene Witzel will make his 57th trans-Atlantic Ocean flight. Also, he has crossed the Pacific Ocean four times and made two around the world journeys. The following few paragraphs will outline not just his travels but this interesting man's life journey.

Eugene "Gene" Witzel was born in La Valle, Wisconsin, on January 27, 1935, to Albert and Alma (Costerisan) Witzel. He is the third eldest of seven brothers, all who belatedly welcomed the one daughter born to Albert and Alma.

Gene's parents married at the beginning of The Great Depression. The family's experience would be shaped by the difficult conditions of that era. Since the banks soon owned most of the farms through foreclosure, many farmers, including Gene's dad, worked the land on a share-crop basis. On a dairy, "rent" would be paid by splitting the monthly milk sales 50/50 if the land owner supplied dairy cows. If the renter supplied the herd, he would receive as much as a 60/40 split. A common procedure was for a farmer to move on a farm, usually about 120 acres, improve it and get it profitable only to see the bank sell the land making it necessary for the farmer to move to another farm. As a result of this practice, Gene's father moved the family thirteen times by the time Gene was thirteen years old. The longest he lived in one place during this time was three years. This meant the family moved more than once each year on some occasions. These farmsteads were usually within a fifty mile radius of La Valle, but on two occasions, the farms were 100 miles away.

Most of these farms were dairy farms; so Gene and his brothers shared chores usual for such an operation. As a small child, Gene had definite responsibilities. From the age of four or five through the second grade, he watered and fed chickens and gathered eggs. When he was a little older, on a typical day he was up before daylight to feed the cows and curry and harness the horses for his dad. After school he fed, unharnessed, and curried.

For most of these years, part of the farming activity involved the raising of feed crops for the cows, horses, and chickens. The early farming of oats, wheat, corn, and alfalfa was done with single and double teams of horses. The first tractor Gene's dad owned was a late 1920s or early 1930s Fordson. Gene remembers his dad paid \$40 for the tractor and \$40 for the plow. This tractor, while old and cumbersome, revolutionized their farming. By the time Gene was in fifth grade, he operated the tractor with an eight-foot, spring-tooth harrow to loosen the soil and remove "quack" grass, a pervasive type of prairie grass. If the harrow was deep in the soil when he came to the end of a row, the tractor would not turn and he often hit fence posts. He would have to find his dad to come and turn the tractor. He would climb back on and continue his work. Gene said at the end of the day he could still hear that worm-driven gears whining.

In most of these early years, Gene attended a one-room school. It was on an occasion when the family lived close to La Valle that he attended a multi-room school and had the luxury of electricity. La Valle was on the Baraboo River, which had a dam to supply generation for a small electric power plant. At that point, the farm had electric milking machines which handled about 2/3s of the dairy cows. Some of the milking continued to be by hand. Another feature of living in La Valle was that ice was harvested in huge blocks during the winter to be covered with saw dust and stored in a communal ice house for the coming summer. The ice would last through at least the Fourth of July celebration.

Travel was an issue in the 1940s. While small towns provided day to day sustenance, once each year the family would travel a long distance to Reedsburg, Wisconsin, for major purchases. At first the long trip was made in a horse-drawn wagon. An early family car was a Model T and later a Model A Ford. Gene remembered that in 1942, during World War II, his dad bought a 1934 Oldsmobile with 17" tires. This was fine, but when tires were needed, they were not available due to the rationing of rubber tires for the war effort. The car sat on blocks through the end of the war. Also rationed were sugar, gasoline, and all major staples such as flour and corn meal. One way to get needed items was through barter. Gene often walked to a nearby store to trade a gallon pail of eggs for food supplies for the family.

After the war, in 1947 when his dad wanted to purchase a new tractor, he found that a person had to sign up for the opportunity to buy one since the supply had not caught up with the after-war demand. The wait could be as long as two years but with WWII veterans having the best chance to get a tractor. However, when the family moved to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, his dad found he could buy an 8N Ford immediately, and he did. This farm already had two tractors, a 1939 Allis Chalmers C with hand brakes instead of foot brakes and a 1947 Farmall H.

In 1949, Gene was ready to enter the ninth grade at Wisconsin Adventist Academy in Columbus, Wisconsin. His two older brothers attended this boarding school, and his younger siblings would eventually receive schooling there. It was here that Gene first lived in a place with indoor plumbing.

Since the school had tuition and other expenses for a pupil, he had begun early to earn money to pay his way. His parents still had a large family to support and couldn't assist very much. When he was just fourteen, a neighbor let him use two acres to grow watermelons and musk melons. These he harvested and sold to the school cafeteria. This gave him a start. Fortunately too, the academy had its own 300 acre farm where students could work for part of their school expenses. He appreciated the availability of good equipment to work with on the farm. He had a 1939 Farmall M, a 1941 Farmall M for general work, and a Farmall B for cultivating. After a year and a half and at the age of sixteen, he was needed back at the family farm to assist his dad and younger brothers. He had to suspend his education for a while.

While back on the family farm, he took care of all the farm work while his dad drove a truck to earn extra money to support the family. This meant Gene had the responsibility of milking the cows every morning and evening, and, between those tasks, doing the general farm work. To earn extra money, Gene worked evenings for a neighbor who had a potato business. The potatoes came in 100 pound bags, and Gene's job was to bag them into ten pound bags, which then would be delivered to stores. This amounted to bagging three or four tons an evening.

When Gene returned to school, he entered Mount Ellis Academy, an Adventist boarding school for high school students in Bozeman, Montana. Here, during the school year, he worked in the school dairy, a job he knew well. He was up by 3:30 a.m. to milk the cows and milked again in the afternoon. During the first summer break, besides milking, he also worked with the school's D4 caterpillar with a dozer blade clearing land, etc., The summer before his high school graduation, Gene worked on a one section ranch which had a dairy. Tractors used were a W9 International, a Ferguson, and a Farmall H. Since the feed crops were being harvested when his senior year began, he stayed on and was a month late for school.

Surprisingly, with all the responsibilities Gene faced in his young life with his family and school, not all was so serious. During Christmas break and spring break, he and a friend took hitchhiking trips to different places. Once they traveled from Bozeman all the way to Seattle and up the coast to Canada and back. Another time, by himself, he went from Bozeman to Walla Walla, Washington, and back. One Christmas, he journeyed from Bozeman back home to Wisconsin, a distance of 1200 miles one-

way. These were adventures which would not be too advisable today.

The summer after graduating from Mount Ellis, he returned to Wisconsin. He started driving trucks for the neighbor with the potato business, Two or three times a week he would drive 200 miles north to potato farms, load eight tons of potatoes, and drive back in one day. Arriving back, he had to unload the eight tons and bag half or more into ten pound bags ready to deliver the next day to stores and restaurants around southern Wisconsin. He worked with the same business the summer between his first and second year of college.

Gene entered college at Emmanuel Missionary College (EMC), which is now Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. He began working on a major in engineering, but his lack of a sound background in mathematics proved too difficult when he faced the advanced classes. However, in one of those classes which required elaborate formulas to determine the area of a complicated layout, he used a simple triangulation process to obtain the answer. He was the only one in the class to find the correct answer. He still changed his major to something he knew well...agriculture.

EMC had a furniture factory which provided work for college students. Gene's first job there was to drive a truck delivering furniture to a railroad siding about ten miles away to be loaded on railroad cars. Also, he delivered truck loads of furniture to a freight terminal in South Bend, Indiana. He enjoyed having the job driving the truck, but since his major was agriculture, he soon went back to work at the school farm. After five years working and attending school full time, Gene finished college with a degree in agriculture.

It was a lucky day for Gene at school when he noticed a beautiful girl who also attended EMC. The girl was Irene Klute. After dating for a time, in 1958 Gene asked for her hand in marriage. Irene accepted and the two would soon set out on an eventful journey together.

Irene's story is amazing in itself. She was born in Poland before World War II. Her father was a pastor, but when the Germans occupied Poland, he was conscripted into the German army. For two years, Irene, her two sisters, and her mother had no knowledge of where he was. After the war, her father did not want to return to Poland because of Russian enforced communism in the land. He sent a coded letter to the family in Poland instructing them to attempt to escape from Poland by way of communist-held East Germany to safety in French-held West Germany. The most perilous part of the escape was when the family had to cross a river at night with a blind man and his helper as guides. The men carried Irene and her younger sister, but her mother and older sister had to wade. The older sister slipped and screamed causing shots to be fired. Fortunately, no one was injured and no troops came to investigate. At the time, America was closed to immigration. When the offer was made to Irene's father to allow the family to go to Australia, he said he would wait for an opening in the U. S. In 1949 when a lady running a nursing home in Indiana agreed to sponsor the family, they were allowed to come to America. They were obligated to work at the nursing home for two years, and when that time was up, the family settled near Chicago, Illinois.

After graduation in 1959, Gene was hired as farm manager at Monterey Bay Academy, an Adventist school about fifteen miles south of Santa Cruz, California. While here, the Witzel family increased with the birth of the first two of their three children, daughters Suzan and Victoria (Vicki).

The school had been an army base during WWII and was purchased in 1948 for one dollar to create the academy. Its scenic position on the bay led to the motto, "Where land and sea unite to inspire." The farm was fairly extensive. It had a dairy with thirty cows and a pasteurizing plant for the milk. Gene was pleased to have plenty tractors to take care of the 150 acres of crops for dairy feed. They included a CA Case, a C Farmall, an NAA Ford with a bucket, a TD-9 crawler, and an R-4 Cat with a dozer blade. They later added a B-14 International.

Gene established an exemplary reputation for himself by bringing improvements to the farming operation. He noticed that the beans being raised were discolored because of the weather and soil conditions. They only brought \$7 per hundred pounds. He found a seed market for the crop with Boise Seed Company. The company was concerned about the health of the beans, not their color. The new price was \$15 per hundred. Another change was in the marketing of their excess milk production. When Gene arrived, the milk was being sold at a loss to a powdered milk company. The academy already had an ice cream machine; so Gene began making ice cream for school use and for market at a profit. Another change brought by Gene was relative to the equipment. Operating on the belief that workers would have more respect for the equipment if it were well kept led Gene to begin efforts to clean up and paint the vehicles. He, often with his own labor and time, painted the tractors and the school Dodge truck. The school logo was placed on the truck's doors, a move that brought needed and inexpensive advertising to the academy. All this brought much needed income to the school, and as expected, a new and improved attitude of the students concerning the equipment and their work.

In 1961, Gene's good work at Monterey Bay led leaders in the church to seek his leadership at another school needing improved management in its farming operation. He was asked to take his family and move to Riverside, California, to manage production of field crops at a farm affiliated with La Sierra Adventist College. At Riverside, there was a dairy with over 200 cows to milk and feed. Again, tractors were important on this large farm. They included two, older Minneapolis-Molines with two plows, a Farmal 400, an MT John Deere, another John Deere with a frontend loader, a D-2 Cat which was later traded for a Fordson Major, a 9N Ford, and a Massey Ferguson with a front-end loader. Of important note, it was here that Irene and Gene's third child was born, a son named Evan.

After two years at Riverside, in 1963 the family was on the move again, this time to Walla Walla College in College Place, Washington, near, as might be expected, Walla Walla. This time, Gene would be an associate manager of the nearly 300 acre farm and large dairy. This school's tractors were an 8N Ford, a Massey-Harris, a 3010 JD, a 530 JD, and a Selectomatic Ford 5000. Two other vehicles Gene enjoyed were a Jeep used for baling hay and for moving irrigation equipment and a handy vehicle they called "The Goat," which was originally used to move airplanes at an airport.

The next step was a big one. In January 1967, Gene was asked to move his family to Nigeria to teach and to manage the farm at the Adventist College of West Africa, a school organized in 1959 with the primary purpose of training pastors. Gene explained that the expected language barrier was an interesting problem. Nigeria had been a British colony so the new language he had to learn was British accented English. It took only a couple of weeks for Gene and his students and workers to communicate without too much difficulty.

There were many problems to face in establishing and maintaining a farm in this part of the world. The school was located about fifty miles north of Lagos, Nigeria, at the edge of the tropical rainforest. After clearing farmland, it had to be constantly tended since left alone the jungle would retake the land by at least fifteen feet each year. To add to the difficulty, the tools available for clearing and farming the land were hand tools such as axes, shovels, hoes, and wheel barrows. The orchard crops were bananas, pineapples, papayas, and oranges. Corn and other crops were raised mainly for feed for chickens kept at the farm. With his science and math background, Gene began teaching biology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. His degree in agriculture and farming experience came in handy for teaching poultry science classes, but when he began teaching tropical agriculture; he had to work to stay ahead of his class.

After the family had lived in Nigeria for six months, a new and potentially deadly danger arose. Nigeria became embroiled in a war against its province of Biafra, which was seeking independence. The war began in July 1967, but did not come close to the college until late 1969. In that year the

fighting came within thirty-five miles of Gene and his family. The American ambassador required most American nationals to come to the consulate in Ibadan, Nigeria, to be air-evacuated quickly if needed for safety. Irene and the children went to Ibadan, but Gene stayed behind. For about two weeks, he was the only non-Nigerian at the campus. Gene said the watchman at the school had a homemade gun constructed from a pipe. He went about with this rifle pointed forward across his shoulder and with his finger in the barrel. The situation stabilized when the rebels were driven back, and the family came back to the college.

When the war ended, Gene was asked to go to Biafra to manage the rebuilding of church property destroyed during the fighting. He said that church schools, hospitals, and church buildings were heavily damaged with walls shot to pieces and roofs gone. He had only two or three people to help him in his work. Church groups in Biafra would contact Gene to come and assess the damage. He would determine what was needed and order the materials. Locals did the repairs except for the buildings at the church mission headquarters, which had been the center of three major battles. Gene personally supervised the repair of damaged building and, with two buildings totally destroyed, the construction of new ones.

Getting to Biafra was an extremely dangerous undertaking. Because of the war, everyone had guns and many of the local people had become bandits. Gene had to go through twenty-five military checkpoints to get to Biafra and back, a round-trip of 1000 miles of bad roads. All people entering the area had to have a military pass, which was limited to a two-week period. Gene said that was good since he would get to go back to his family until the pass was renewed. A close call occurred when he topped a hill and saw what he knew to be bandits at a Land Rover vehicle ahead. He slowed his British Ford transit van as if he planned to stop but floored the accelerator as he got even with the renegades. He said he was certain the robbers, because they could not see well into the van, thought he had government troops aboard. They jumped back from his van and did not fire their weapons. Gene felt his guardian angel had protected him, especially when he found out that the next day a bus was stopped by bandits at the same place. The driver was killed and the passengers were robbed.

The next move was in 1972 when Gene was called to a school in Ethiopia to supervise farming activities and to teach science and math. This might have been an easy assignment, but in March of 1974 a revolution overthrew the famous Haile Selassie. Since Selassie had been friendly to the church and its mission, it now became more difficult. The school was only five years old and in need of buildings to replace the temporary mud structures. Gene and his workers set out to build a girls' dormitory out of concrete blocks. With money, fuel, and materials in short supply, the work had to be done mostly by hand. They dug rocks by hand and used a 2010 John Deere tractor to power a rock crusher and used donkey-drawn carts to bring sand from the riverbed. Steel could be purchased for window frames, and Gene welded them for the building. He made his own window putty out of lime, gypsum, and boiled linseed oil. Rustoleum paint was used to protect the metal. Gene returned to the school twenty-five years later, and even if windows were broken, the putty was still holding fast.

For the next few years, life was a little more ordinary for the adventurous Witzel family. In 1975, they returned to Illinois where Gene taught in a secondary school. Between Nigeria and Ethiopia Gene had started working toward a master's degree, which he finished in 1978. Back in 1977, he went to California to work in construction with one of his brothers. While there he was hired at Pacific Union University which overlooked Napa Valley, in Angwin, California, where he taught construction classes in the technology department. He was there for five years.

Next, it was back to Africa, this time in 1982 to Burundi to work for the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. Here he would help build four medical centers in four different provinces of the country. The great difference was that the projects were funded by the U.S. State Department. Gene

worked directly with embassy leaders and became friends with government leaders in Africa and in the U.S. In so many instances, money had been a major problem, but now he felt fortunate to have full funding with \$1,300,000 at his disposal. When asked if he needed more money from the government, he amazed the authorities when he told them, "No, I have enough." Gene worked on these projects for over two year.

In 1985 Gene was asked to go to Kenya to be the principal of Maxwell Adventist Academy, a secondary school near Nairobi. He had resisted earlier requests to move into administration jobs, but here he took on the task of moving the school from an urban to a country-side location. He insisted he would stay on for one year. He had responsibilities of negotiating for and buying the land, planning the school's campus, and of bringing the plan to completion. Since much had to be done, he agreed to stay on for one more year. At the end of the second year, he resigned as principal but stayed on at Maxwell to do the actual building. He put up fifteen metal buildings in five months. As the school grew, Gene began seeing to the building of beautiful stone buildings on the campus. He stayed on for thirteen years. This was long enough for him to see his beginning class of first graders graduate from the twelfth grade.

In 1998 Gene retired and moved to Gentry, Arkansas, to build a home on property inherited by his wife Irene along Bloomfield Road west of town. One of Irene's sisters had moved to Gentry in the 1960s. Later her parents came to the area, bought property, and settled down. However, Gene's plans were put on hold when he almost immediately returned to Africa on another project. He returned to help build Gimbi Adventist Hospital, a seventy-bed, inpatient/outpatient facility at Gimbi, Ethiopia. This was a poverty stricken area and little money was available. The beautiful building that was the result was built with shovels and wheel barrows. He would return to the hospital for a total of four trips in the next few years.

Before he set out for Gimbi the first time, Gene contracted to have a shop built on the Gentry property. Between trips to Africa, he built his and Irene's first home in Arkansas. He eventually sold that home and built another one on the property. Gene has made many two or three week trips since Gimbi. These trips took him to church projects in Mexico, Peru, Guiana, Belize, and Chile. No one would be surprised to know that Gene was in Belize in Central America when a tornado in March 2006 took the roof off their home.

Fortunately, back in the mid-nineties, Gene found the time to join Tired Iron of the Ozarks. He has a beautifully restored Allis Chalmers G tractor you should be able to see at our shows. And too, when he has been at home in April and September, he has been faithful to help get our club grounds ready for shows. Most recently he helped Don Gilbert finish the club's log cabin. Gene, thanks and congratulations for all you have done in your career.

It is not surprising that Gene would comment, "While growing up in Wisconsin, I never dreamed I would have a life like I have lived." It would not be surprising if he makes lots more world-wide journeys.