

Al Walkenbach

Al Walkenbach, Tired Iron member and collector of several hit and miss type engines, is another of our group who is a native of Northwest Arkansas. He was born on July 5, 1947, at a small, six-bed hospital in the northeast part of Rogers. His parents Al Walkenbach, Sr., and his mom Irene Johnson Walkenbach lived on a farm about six miles east of Rogers. At the time of his birth, Rogers was a small town of about 4,000 population, and Bentonville had about 3,000 souls residing there. Al does not strike one as being especially old, but he remembers when the now very busy Highway 102 was gravel. That just means that the area definitely had a small town flavor but has grown greatly since his youth.

His grandfather on his dad's side of the family was from Tulsa but his varied work experience included a time as a policeman and time as an oilfield worker. A classic old photo of his grandfather shows him driving a horse-drawn police wagon in Chicago, probably in the early 1900s. The maternal grandparents were from Northwest Arkansas, but they moved to Tulsa before World War II to work in the oilfields for a while. These Johnson grandparents met his Walkenbach grandparents and they became friends. The Johnsons came back to the Rogers area before the war began, and Al's Grandfather Walkenbach, whose wife had passed away, came after the war to Arkansas to the countryside east of Rogers.

After serving in an artillery unit in the South Pacific during World War II, Al's dad also came to Rogers. It is not certain, but it is likely that he came there because of Al's mom. They married in 1946.

While Al was a young boy, his dad owned and operated a gasoline station in town. After operating the station for several years, he became an equipment operator for Benton County and later did similar work for the City of Rogers. Except for some work in the defense industry during World War II, Al's mother was a stay-at-home mom.

Even though Joan, Al's half-sister, was eleven years older than he and was leaving home about the time he entered the first grade, there were plenty of relatives in the area for him to enjoy in his growing up years. Both sets of grandparents lived east of Rogers, and his entire youth was spent among loving aunts, uncles, and cousins. His youth seemed to be a classic example of a happy rural life with much time spent in the homes of grandparents and, from time to time, with family dinners with dozens in attendance. A down side to having so many adult relatives nearby was that all of them thought nothing of administering punishment to a wayward child. He got lots of swats from those interested in correcting his behavior to set him on a proper path in life.

A lot of time was spent walking through the beautiful hills and valleys of the Ozarks and with swimming and fishing in area creeks, particularly Prairie Creek. Al didn't think anything of riding his bike or of even walking the six miles to his dad's station and back. He said he actually liked walking best since he seldom had to walk far before someone from the area stopped to give him a lift to town. He knew everyone in the area and they knew him. Incidentally, in case anyone reading this might wonder about his sister, she went to St. Louis, Missouri, and earned her PHD in psychology and spent her career teaching in St. Louis schools.

The main job Al had as a youth was working in the summer for a neighbor who owned a heavy equipment company for road building. By the time he was sixteen years old, he was operating all the equipment including a huge Letourneau scraper, which leveled road beds. One project he especially enjoyed was the building of the Lost Bridge Village Airport northeast of Rogers. It is likely this adult work during his youth set the stage for his successful work career as an adult.

When Al graduated from Rogers High School in 1965, he was not certain of which direction to take for a career. He was offered work as an electrician and he readily accepted. His pay was to be \$1.50 per hour, which was well above minimum wage at the time. Even though he simply lucked into the job, he found that he greatly enjoyed it. He came to know throughout his years as an electrician that, if you enjoy what you are doing, it's not work.

For about the first fifteen years, commercial and industrial jobs were most common. He knew these jobs meant that when they were completed he would be laid off, but jobs were plentiful and he always had a new project in a day or two. Usually, he would leave a finished job with one company on Friday and be at work on a new job with a new company by Monday morning. He even worked on projects with Tired Iron member John Waudby (see Tired Iron Newsletter for May/June 2014) during the late 60s.

The Bella Vista community had just begun its growth. One of the early jobs was the electrical work for the first Bella Vista clubhouse. Another notable job he participated in was the building of the first Wal-Mart warehouse in the area. Even early on, it was pretty apparent to many of us that Sam Walton had a good thing going. All who noticed this during the early 1970s and didn't invest in Sam's dream have reflected on "what if" we had invested at the onset. Al was no exception and he, like most of us when we were just starting careers and families, couldn't spare the funds for investing in anything except groceries.

Beginning in 1966 and continuing until 1972, Al was in the National Guard. He served in the same capacity as his dad had served...as a motor pool sergeant. His assignments were at Fort Polk in Louisiana, at Leonard Wood in Missouri, and at Fort Sill in Oklahoma.

By the late 1970s, work all over the country declined during a recession period, and Al found it necessary to travel to big projects in several states including Illinois, Oklahoma, and Missouri. In Northern Missouri he worked on the building of an electrical power plant. The massive project required 1500 electricians along with countless workers in the other crafts utilized for erecting an electrical plant. In McAlester, Oklahoma, his work was in helping build a large addition to the Oklahoma State Prison located there. In Bartlesville, Oklahoma, he was an electrician for the Phillips Research Center. This work for Phillips might have been the closest Al came to working in the oilfield business. Certainly the Phillips brothers role in developing the Bartlesville and Tulsa area oilfields, beginning in the early 1900s, is second to none and his dad and grandfather probably worked for the Phillips.

After three years of being away from home most of the time and even with making high wages with much time-and-a-half and with even double time pay, Al realized he was missing the formative years of his two young children. He came back to Northwest Arkansas to stay.

In 1982 Al began his own company incorporated as AAA Electric. His business savvy is evident in choosing the name since the "AAA" would be in the first of the telephone listing for such companies. He and his three employees provided service on residential and on small commercial projects. This time period was one when the entire Northwest Arkansas area was embarking on home building. This full speed work proved lucrative for his company throughout its existence until his retirement about seven years ago in 2007.

In 1996, Al married his wife Brenda, who, incidentally, grew up in Richland, Missouri. She is a counselor in the Rogers High School New Tech High School. It doesn't take long in conversation with her about her work to know she is excited and enthusiastic about the potential the program has to elevate the learning experience of her participants. It's easy to see she is devoted to the young people she serves during the day and in twice-weekly counseling in an evening program.

With their marriage, Brenda brought her son and daughter to join Al's son and daughter to complete the home scene. The children are grown and are making their own way in life. Al's son Van is an electrician in Fort Smith. Al's daughter Audra teaches in the Family and Consumer Science program at Bentonville High School. Brenda's son Cory is an architect in Fayetteville, and her daughter Lauren just completed a degree at the University of Arkansas. The grandchildren in the family include Audra's twin daughters, Hannah and Haley, who are sophomores at the University of Central Arkansas. Van's daughter Amber is a student at the U. of A. Cory's son completes the list of grandchildren.

A big event in the history of AAA Electric occurred about twenty-five years ago when Ike Lockridge, a home builder in the area, called to get an estimate on an electrical job. This call led to a work relationship that lasted until Al's retirement in 2007 and to a friendship that is ongoing. The work part is important since Al and Ike, along with Ike's son Rick, had about eighteen years of working together on many projects, but the friendship part is most important. These guys found they had similar interests in many areas, which made them best friends.

Perhaps the most important interest of the two guys was and continues to be motorcycles. Al's interest began in his youth when he owned a Ducati bike. He said it was a two-person bike...one steering and one pushing. It was hard to start. He said he was certain that his dad could have easily repaired whatever was wrong, but he disapproved of the bike and didn't help. Today, his bike transportation is a Honda Gold Wing, which is the polar opposite of the too old Ducati. Al said he thinks he would rather ride the bike than drive an automobile. As we will see, this is a passion shared by the Lockridge family.

Al's stories of bike vacations are too extensive to cover all of them, but some of the notable ones will give an idea of the extent of this endeavor. Al mentioned a trip he and Brenda took to Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island in Canada. Later, Ike and Al traveled on bikes to Bangor, Maine, where they were met by Al's wife Brenda and Ike's wife Carol. They crossed from Bangor to P.E.I. by ferry boat and then toured on their bikes in Canada. They made a similar trip, meeting their wives in Billings, Montana, and then touring Glacier National Park on bikes. The impetus for a bike trip to Tucson, Arizona, for Al and Ike was the wedding of Brenda's niece. The two guys rode bikes and the girls flew out to the event. It didn't matter that Ike didn't even know the folks out there. Other places they have visited include Key West, Florida, and Big Bend National Park in Texas, and as has been mentioned, too many other trips to relate. A part of the bike touring is the camping experience. They pull pop-up tents behind their bikes for camping along the way.

Another interest for Al is fly-tying for his hobby of trout fishing. He is a member of the Bella Vista Fly-Tyers Club. The lures in his shop are almost too nice to use, but they do provide the ammunition for many trout fishing trips. They are works of art in themselves.

Also, Al mentioned that he has been an enthusiast of metal detecting for Civil War artifacts for about ten years. This became abundantly evident when he began showing some of the many items he had found. In glass covered flats, he displayed dozens of bullets of all calibers, buttons, camp implements, etc. Much of this was found on his own, but included his participation with a metal detecting club in Siloam Springs. When he and his detecting friends searched the site of a new high school in Rogers, they found many artifacts. They showed their community spirit by donating much of the find to the school. He maintains an important historical perspective by labeling the locations of his finds. He is always alert to the stories one hears concerning the troop movements and encampments throughout Northwest Arkansas and neighboring states. Let him know if you know of a potential area for searching for these important relics of our past.

Brenda and Al are also collectors of antiques of most kinds, but perhaps most unusual is a very old

log cabin at their home. Al said the cabin was a result of a bad day of fishing. On a trout fishing trip, when it was obvious that he and Brenda were not going to have luck on the river, they decided to visit a friend who owns a Seligman, Missouri, antique store. When Al mentioned that if he and Brenda bought more antiques, they would have to build an addition to their home. The friend said he knew just the solution. He told them of a lady in Cassville, Missouri, who wanted to sell a very old cabin, which had been in her family for many years. Al and Brenda saw the cabin, they bought it, dismantled it, and brought it to Rogers. After six months of steady work, it was beautifully restored and is now full of antiques (see photo). He didn't say so, but it might not be surprising to see another cabin appear before too long since more room for antiques could be utilized.

Finally, we all know of Al's interest in Tired Iron and in his collection of hit and miss engines. He has only been in the club for a relatively short while, but it's obvious that when he gets interested in something, he goes all out. Al had already purchased and restored a 1947 John Deere M, which he said cost about twice as much to complete as the finished tractor was worth. He still has that tractor and a 1947 Allis Chalmers B, which does not run. He said he still needs some assistance on the timing problem to get it running. It would be an interest in old engines that made him fully involved.

He learned of Tired Iron from a show flyer he had picked up somewhere, and the emphasis the flyer placed on engines intrigued him and would soon take him in a new direction for collecting and restoring. He attended the show and talked with Lynn Barnica and then with Dale Crawford (see newsletter for Sept./Oct. 2009) and Don Mayes (see newsletter for Jan./Feb. 2007). The enthusiasm and friendliness Al encountered was encouraging. Dale told Al to buy an engine and call him if he needed help.

Soon, on a trip Al and Ike took to a show at Republic, Missouri, Al purchased his first engine. When he got it home, he tried to start the engine until he had blisters on his hands. When he called Dale for help, Dale invited Al and Ike to one of the twice-weekly work meetings at one of the club member's shops. They visited and the engine was soon running. Al, and Ike also, haven't looked back with Ike also in the engine business in a big way. Al has an impressive collection of fifteen nice engines. One of the nicest and the largest engine is a 15 H.P. Reed. This engine has a little history among Tired Iron members. Lynn Barnica brought the engine from an oilfield out west. He sold it to Bryan Parsons and Bryan sold it to Al. The engine is now beautifully restored (see photo below). It goes without saying, but it should be said...with or without engines, Al Walkenbach is a nice guy and a major credit to Tired Iron of the Ozarks.

