

Russell Leeman

Russell Leeman was born in Bentonville, Arkansas, to Ervin and Jeanne Leeman November 2, 1946, which just happens to be Daniel Boone's date of birth. And, in reference to that, the Leeman family can be traced to Boone's brother. The family, with Russell as the first of five children, lived about seven miles south of Maysville, Arkansas, on what is now Highway 43, and then about a mile east. Their home was too typical of an early 1940s farmstead. It had no running water, no electricity, and of course, an outhouse.

Russell's dad farmed eighty acres owned by Russell's grandmother. They worked the land with two horses. Russell remembers walking the plowed furrows in his bare feet, not an unusual pastime for a farm child. The family also had a riding horse, but fortunately, they owned a 1946 one-ton truck for transportation, mostly to the then bustling farm town of Maysville. They lived near Spavinaw Creek, which was crossed on a swinging bridge by pedestrians but with vehicles and horses using a ford.

By 1952 the Leeman family moved to Decatur, Arkansas, for Russell to begin school. Russell entered the first grade when he was still five years old. He remembers an early experience related to his age and size. When he was waiting his turn to use the schoolyard slide, a slightly older classmate asked him how old he was. Russell replied that he was five. The classmate exclaimed, "Five years old. You are not old enough to be in school. Go home!" Russell had to hang around school so he could get a complete vocabulary. Unfortunately for him, it involved four letter words he picked up from his classmates. The words had no meaning to him, so he was shocked when his mother heard him use one and literally used soap to wash out his mouth. He was much more careful with his language after that experience.

As well as Russell had done through high school, he found he needed remedial courses to catch him up to others when he entered the University of Arkansas in the fall of 1964. After catching up, he began pursuing a degree in geology. During his college years he accomplished 140 hours in his field. This included a required three hour summer course in three weeks in field biology from the University of Texas. He needed that course, not available at the University of Arkansas at the time, to finish his degree. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Geology in January of 1969.

While attending college, Russell worked summers, weekends, and school breaks in Decatur at Peterson Industries, the chicken conglomerate located there. One job was vaccinating chickens, but mainly he worked in the feed mill, then located near downtown Decatur. One part of his work was to fill in when full time employees took vacation or personal leave from their duties. By filling in at all jobs, Russell became proficient in all the operations of the feed mill. Another odd job he had with Peterson may have revealed a direction he would later take for his career in electronics. He set two tower antennas for Mr. Peterson himself. This budding interest in electronics would serve him well in the future.

When Russell finished college, the Viet Nam War was raging and he knew he was going to be drafted. He joined the navy in mid-February 1969. After basic training at Orlando, Florida, he was trained as an aviation electrician, flight deck trouble shooter, and quality assurance inspector in an antisubmarine squadron stationed, in San Diego. He made one Western Pacific cruise to the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Viet Nam, in 1972, aboard the aircraft carrier CVS 14 (Ticonderoga). One confusing element of this service was that the three carriers he served on were anti-submarine vessels, which launched impressive Grumman S2 Tracker airplanes for submarine surveillance of the gulf. However, there were no submarines in use by the enemy. He noted that at one time his ship was near

the coast when a major naval attack was launched on targets inland. His ship moved out of the way. Notably, Russell was assigned to the famous CVS 12 Hornet aircraft carrier on its last active duty voyage in 1970, after which it was decommissioned and mothballed. The vessel would later be moved to Alameda, California, where it serves as a museum to this day. That mention in this paragraph of Russell's work in the navy as an electrician is another hint at the direction his career would ultimately take.

Russell learned to SCUBA dive from two seal team members while in service. His certification dive was made in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of California with the water temperature a very cold 57 degrees. Also, during boot camp, his company was a precision drill team and a fifty state flag team. As a part of his duty he performed the intricate drills each Saturday morning. His group performed the riveting Queen Anne's Salute on many occasions. The drill teams and the salutes are available for viewing on several Internet sites.

Upon being honorably released from the navy in 1973, Russell reentered college in graduate school in geology. His dissatisfaction with his subject soon led him to follow what had become a dream and even obsession with him...electronics.

Russell began a home-based radio and television repair business in Decatur. In 1981 the business prospered when he began repairing electronics for Wal-Mart. The repaired items were returned to the Bentonville Return Center each week, via pickup and horse trailer. At the time, Wal-Mart had only about 300 stores to be serviced. Russell and business partners, worked from six in the morning to five in the afternoon when they would take a break for an hour or so only to return to work until ten in the night. After three years, more employees were hired.

The company grew and in 1985 became Ozarks Electronics Repair, Inc. To support the repair business with Wal-Mart, the company applied for and received authorization from essentially all major electronics companies to repair their brands. Soon, Wal-Mart began 18-wheeler delivery to and from Ozark Electronics' facilities. As the business continued to grow, the enterprise began opening satellite work facilities across the nation. In 1995 the company moved its headquarters to a 200,000 square foot building in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, where it continues to the present. Ozark Electronics, at its largest, employed over 700 workers and had thirteen facilities across the nation. These expansions brought about the requirement of quicker access and air travel was the answer. They owned four airplanes at different times to meet the need.

Over the years, the great volume of repairs is difficult for anyone's imagination. Ozark Electronics serviced millions of radios, telephones, and televisions (as many as 500 to 700 per day). Business began to taper off when televisions became less and less expensive and few repairs could or would be made on them. As Russell stated, "No one repairs televisions anymore." Telephones also became mostly throw-away items. Today, the company primarily services household appliances, window air conditioners, computer accessories, and tablets. It is notable that Ozark Electronics has been recognized on several occasions for its commitment to reclamation in general but with recycling of batteries in particular.

On a personal note, on December 26, 1986, Russell married Dianne Burr from Rogers, Arkansas. He had met her at his aunt's beauty shop in Decatur and soon ended his bachelor days. Dianne is a University of Arkansas graduate with a BA degree in accounting. During their marriage she worked for Simmons Foods for several years. Today, she is a successful Mary Kay consultant.

Dianne and Russell's son John was born October 5, 1988. John is amazing. In a report on KNWA, Dan Scoff, the lead meteorologist of the station, called John a genius. This statement was in recognition for John's having built a device to record earthquake activity, especially in Oklahoma.

From his childhood, John has pursued knowledge of areas related to weather, music, machines, computer science, mathematics, meteorology, geophysics, and as mentioned above, he, by the time he was ten or twelve years old, was active in Tired Iron of the Ozarks. When his family moved to Siloam Springs for him to attend middle school and high school, he immersed himself in clubs and in the subjects of interest, particularly weather, which included storm chasing with a truck well equipped for that service to the community.

Because of his many Advanced Placement classes during high school, John entered the University of Oklahoma as a sophomore. He graduated from OU with a bachelor of science in meteorology and one in geophysics. From OU he entered Pennsylvania State University to earn his doctor's degree in geophysics (without having to pursue a master's degree) with grants from the National Science Foundation. Today (Fall of 2016), he is ABD (All-But-Dissertation) and teaching at PSU. His dissertation is on slow-slip earthquakes, which release energy over hours or months and cannot be felt at occurrence. He will defend his dissertation and be awarded his PHD in the spring of 2017. In his spare time, he has created a business to build and sell sensitive instruments to aid geophysicists. Notably, John married Lendi Stirewalt on October 4, 2015. Congratulations to him and good luck to her, as the saying goes.

John and Russell's antique tractor and engine collection is impressive. It includes four trucks: a 1919 Liberty truck (see YouTube video), A 1924 Model T one ton to be restored as a Conoco tank truck, a 1945 Chevrolet 1 1/2 ton dump grain truck, and a 1948 Federal wheat truck with overload springs to haul three tons. There are about twenty tractors including a model G and a model Y Rumely Oil Pull, a 1924 John Deere D from the first production year as one of the first of 900 built, a 1927 Huber, a 1947 John Deere AO, a John Deere 40 crawler, an Allis Chalmers G, a Farmall C, and a Farmall Cub. Engines in the collection include a 1920s 20 H.P. Superior originally used in Caney, Kansas, to pump natural gas; a Ruston Hornsby diesel used at a Canadian grain elevator; a 1906 2 H.P. vertical International Harvester; a 2 1/2 H.P. IH Famous with hopper cooling; a Fuller & Johnson pump engine for a pump jack, and several one-cylinder engines including hit and miss varieties.

John and Russell have been members of Tired Iron from the mid-nineties. Russell's brother Frank is also a member. Their father was also a member before his passing. Dianne has been very supportive of the Leeman men's association with Tired Iron over the years. In the past, she has been a great help at dinner meetings and at show times. John is busy with his education and his varied interests. He has a strong background in and an appreciation for all things antique. Russell is to be commended for all he does for the club. His rare tractors and trucks make regular exhibits at our shows. Over the last year or two, he has worked many hours and has the club's SWEPCO locomotive running. I'm sure he will be seeking other members to assist in his plans to further restore this impressive exhibit. Thanks to Russell, Dianne, and John.



Russell at work at Ozark Electronics



One of Russell's Toys