

The Life and Hard Times of Harley Bennet

Harley Bennet was interviewed by Damian Macey and his oral history was transcribed by Katelyn Rhoads and edited by Gary Strohm.

Part 1



Harley Bennet was born in East Chicago, Indiana on August 16, 1938, the son of Joseph Benensky and Margaret Irene Elizabeth Clare Benensky. They were Hungarian and changed their last name to Bennet during World War II.

Harley has one sister and he explains that she is the reason that his family moved to Marshall.

"She was a sickly child when she was born," said Mr. Bennet. "They put her in an oatmeal, box and took pictures of her because she was premature when she was born. When she was maybe two or three years old, she had bronchitis all the time and we lived in Lake County, which is a wet, damp, swampy area. The doctor said we needed to move south to get out of that climate...The doctor said we could move just 200 miles south and that would get us out of the weather."

Harley said that there was a couple, Madge and Jim Davis, who lived next to the Bennets in Hessville, Indiana all through the war. Madge's parents, Harve and Ethel Nighlinger would come to visit Madge and Jim. "At that time," said Bennet, "All my grandparents were dead and Ethel and Harve became my grandparents. I'd go over and spend time with Grandma and Grandpa Nighlinger.

"Jim and Madge said, 'Well, we'll just move to Marshall.' We moved down to this area in '45, and we stayed with Jim and Madge on the Kyling Road...for probably a full year."

At that point, says Harley, the 40-acre farm where he and his wife Ann now live came up for sale. It had a house and barn on it. Years later, his father purchased a 160-acre farm across the road for about \$35 per acre. He says that it's now worth \$5-\$6000 per acre.

"When we lived on the "County Line Road, I lived on the south side of the road, which was Clark County. Charlotte and Hugh Five, Jr. lived on the north side of the road, and they went to Oliver School, because that was in Edgar County."

"A week or so before school was supposed to start, and I was supposed to go to Five Points School by Asbury Church, Dorothy

Wilson, who was a school teacher at Oliver, told me I was going to Oliver, and she would pick me up and take

me every day. So I went to Oliver."

It was a two-room school.

The Bennet family later moved to the farm where he and Ann now live, about three miles north of Marshall. It was across the field from the one-room Sassafras School. Harley went there until he was in the fifth grade. That year all of the country schools closed, and his family moved to Marshall.

"We were the country school (kids) and the townies didn't like us," said Mr. Bennet.

Harley didn't enjoy school. "I just wanted to get done with school. I didn't even go to my own baccalaureate. I was doing something else that day. I did go to my graduation, because I was forced into it by my parents and Charlie Bush. I thought I was going to be a farmer the rest of my life, and it didn't turn out that way..."

"When I graduated from Marshall High School, I graduated in the bottom third or fourth of the class. I never took an ACT or an SAT. I wasn't going to college."

"I got into the Navy Boot Camp, Great Lakes Naval Training Center. Six o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock at night was school of some sort or another - firefighting school, damage control school, sonar school, gas mask school, rifle school..."

"I graduated from boot camp and went to San Diego to a school. I went to storekeeper's school, which is bookkeeping for six or eight weeks. I got out of there and thought, "Man, I am done with school." I got aboard the ship, and the first thing, they gave was a test on finding out where every bolt and screw was on the top side and down to the bottom. After that, it was firefighter school, rope tying school, gunnery school. It didn't take me long to realize that I would be in school the rest of my life!"

After he got out of the Navy, Harley attended Bradley University in Peoria. "When I was about to graduate from Bradley, I had contacted the Navy and told them I was interested in making it a career. But not as reserve officer. I wanted go in as a regular Navy officer. I knew what happened with Navy Reserve officers. They were in and out and activated and deactivated as long as you maintained your commission. They could always be activated at a moment's notice."

"I even wrote Senator (Everett) Dirksen and told him I wanted to make the Navy my career. I even had the paperwork and all I had to do was sign it."

They said that I could go in on Reserve status and within a year, I could convert to regular status. I told them heard that same song and dance before, that wouldn't do it."

The Life and Hard Times of Harley Bennet

"When I was leaving the Navy in 1959...the Oakland Naval Supply Center was going to computers, and they had punch cards. The deal was the day that we finished transferring all the records from the ship to the naval Supply Center would be the day that my skipper gave me a release.

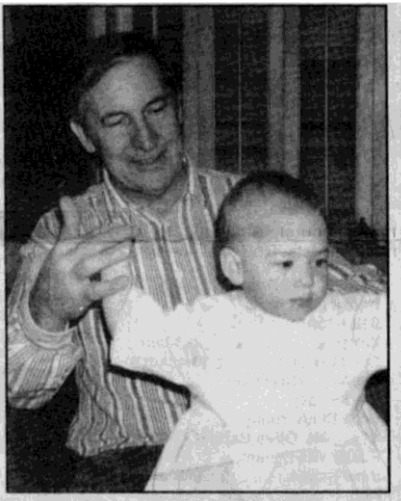
We were in Oakland, California and we worked like demons to get those punch cards. We had trays and trays of them." "The day everything was completed, I went to my commanding office. I told him that we were done. He asked, "Do you want in the active reserves or the inactive reserves?" I said, "What's the difference?" The active reserve is where you go to meetings once a month and then once a year for two weeks you go on a cruise. I told him, "I wouldn't have time for that. He decided I would be put on inactive reserves."

I got my papers, filed them in Cook County, where I was released to. I went to college in Peoria. A month or two later, I got a nasty letter from the commandant for the Glenview Naval Air Station that I had to report for duty, because they were going to hang me for not...I got on the telephone and called him. I said I was released into inactive reserves and he said, 'That's not possible.' I asked, 'Why not?' He said, 'The person who released you was supposed to release you to active reserves.'" Harley replied, "Well, the last order I received from a full bird captain was to report to inactive reserved duty. If you want to countermand that last order, you have to do it in writing."

"I graduated from Bradley in accounting and it was an interesting set of majors. Everything was geared toward

Accounting and business, including history and literature classes. They said if you want to be an accountant, you have to learn everything there is to know about business."

"I took business machines. It was an adding machine. This was days before computers. It was really days before adding machines. Manual comptometers were the word of the day. There weren't copiers either..."



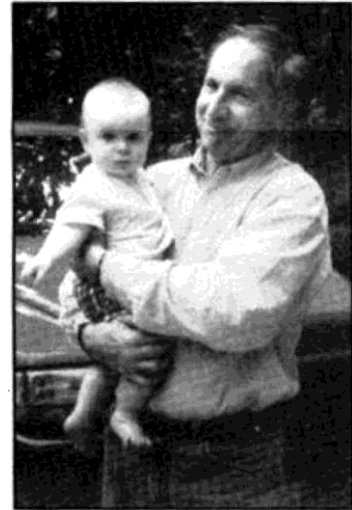
Harley with niece, Hannah

After graduation from Bradley, Harley got a job working for a CPA firm in Peoria. He worked there a couple of years, and he and Ann were married.

"She was making more than I was, as a teacher. She earned a degree from the U. of I.

Our oldest daughter (. She was Ann's daughter, but we both had to adopt her when we got married. We were married in her hometown of Centralia." Laura was seven at the time

"My sister, who was working as a florist in Peoria at that time, put the flowers together and shipped them down. A friend of mine from college drove down, and he was my best man. Another friend of mine, who had dated Ann for a number of years and actually introduced Ann and I, gave us a wedding present, Laura. He and his girlfriend brought Laura back to us.



Harley with one of his grandchildren.

We knew both of us would have to go back to work that Monday. We got married on Saturday and drove back to Leroy, where Ann was teaching. Richard and m,,Joan brought Laura to us Sunday afternoon." Harley later worked at the Dean Burns Asphalt Company and then Armour. "I was with Armour for many years and ended up as an internal auditor for them. I was the youngest internal auditor. I traveled all over the United States auditing."

"You could live anywhere where they had a facility. One day when I was some place in Ohio, my wife called me and said, "Some people came to move us today." I said, 'Oh, really? What happened?' She said, "I sent them away with a 30.06." She said, "We aren't moving." I got on the phone and called my boss in Chicago and told him what she told me. He assumed we'd move to Chicago because the plant was closed in Peoria. I said, 'I can live anywhere. All I have to do is live by an airport. He said, "It has to be where there's an Armour location." At that time, I got a job at Keystone Steel and Wire."

"That was a trying time. Keystone Steel and Wire at the time was a family-owned company. To give an example, we had a lot of vice presidents. We got a new vice president one day and one morning we were getting ready for our strategy meeting. The budgeting director and I were setting up to start and the VP came in. The budgeting director asked him, "Are you going to do something or are you going to be one of these do-nothing vice presidents?" He replied, 'My brother told me if I set foot outside of this office on the plant side, he would have me fired.'"

The Life and Hard Times of Harley Bennet



Not long after that, Harley took a job at Weston Paver in Terre Haute. He worked there for 35 years.

"We moved back to Marshall in 1969...There wasn't one house for rent or for sale in all of Marshall. I went to Burton Cline, who used to be my 4-H leader...I told him our situation.

He said, "You know there is a house that is condemned because they want to tear it down to build Cork Medical Center...but that's not going to take place for about another year. Will you need it another year?' I said, 'I hope not.' He and Charlie Bush got their heads together and got the house uncondemned, so we could move into it."

"There was a reason that it was going to be condemned. We went in and it had 14-foot ceilings and 12-foot windows. The floor slanted from south to north. We painted the floor and she said, 'You know all the paint has been rolled to one side of the room.' The kids loved the house, because they would ride their tricycles through the foyer, through the dining room, through the kitchen, through the living room and back through the foyer. That's how

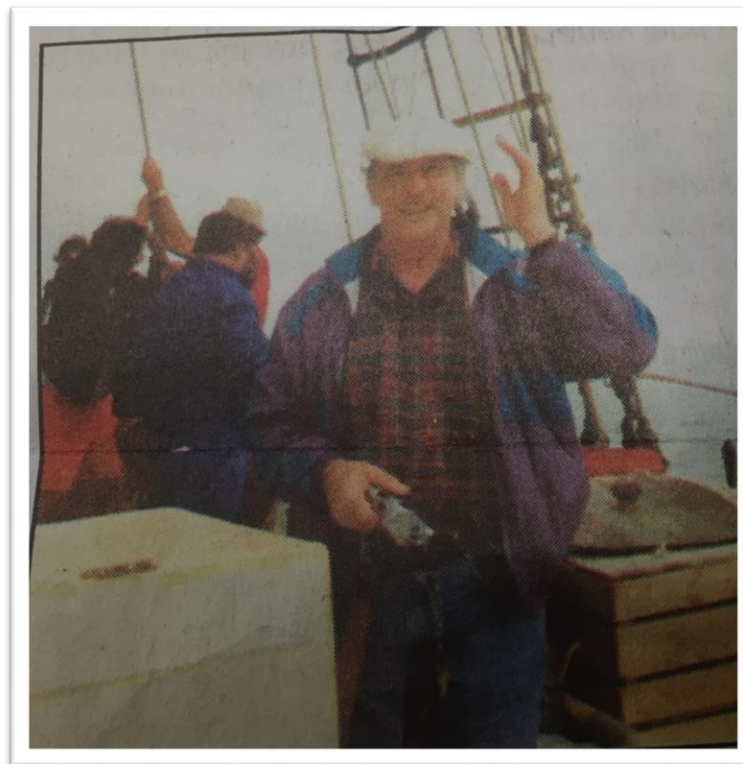
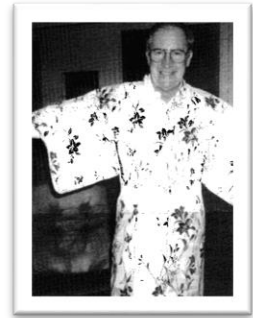
See Part II in Friday's Advocate

big it was. It was nearly impossible to heat."

We went to First National Bank...which was a long story. "Back when I was 15 years old, I wanted to buy a brood yellow. I went to Dulaney Bank, which was my folks' bank. They said they would be happy to loan me... \$100 to buy a registered brood yellow for a 4-H project. They said I would have to have my folks put up collateral for the loan and I said, "Nope, they aren't going to do that." Then they said they wouldn't loan me the money."

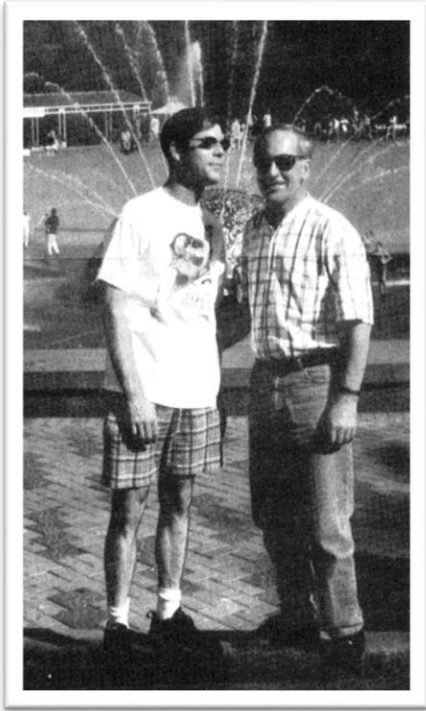
"I was leaving the bank and Percy Stanfield saw me and he said, "How come you look so sad? I told him my story and he told me, "Hey, you come over to the first National Bank. "We went in and he opened up his desk drawer and peeled off \$100. First he asked me if I wanted cash or check. I said, "If I had cash, I would go buy a hog right now. He peeled off those \$20 bills. I said," Do you want me to have my folks come in to sign paperwork? He said "Nope". If I can't trust your today, then I will never be able to trust you.

I have been a customer with First National Bank ever since. We went to the bank to build our house. Percy was long dead by then...."



The Life and Hard Times of Harley Bennet

Part II



Harley Bennet and his son, Joseph

When Harley and Ann decided to build a house, they went to First National Bank of Marshall for the loan. Percy Stanfield was long gone, and Mr. Morris helped them with the loan. Harley told Mr. Morris, "What I want to do is borrow enough money to get started. In 28 or 29 days, I will write you a check for the interest and I

will tell you how much money I need to continue. You add it to my loan and loan me that much money, and I will pay off the total loan on the 38th day." He thought about it for a minute and said, "I will do that. Everyone in town told me that was shocking. 'How did you do that?' Well, when the house was completed, they wrote the mortgage. That was fine with me. Every 29th day I paid the mortgage and every 38th day I paid off the loan in time. It was a month-to-month loan. I learned that from Bradley."

The Bennets built their new home in 1970. We build it for \$13,800. It was a little less than 1900 square feet at the time. It was all oak floors, trim and doors with redwood siding. That was everything-\$13,800!

About ten years ago we added another 400 square feet, because all of our children were bringing their children home for holidays, and we didn't have a real dining room, but now we do. We spent \$3500 adding on another 150 square feet to that and 13 windows."

Harley and Ann have two daughters - Laura, 59, Rachael, 51, and a son, Joseph, 48. Laura is a retired school teacher and works as a family counselor in Danville, Illinois. She lives in Westville.

Rachael is vice president of Kid's Hope United in Charleston, Illinois. Joseph is a doctor and lives in Seattle, Washington.

Ann taught for many years in the Marshall Schools. "Just as they were starting to put in computers in the schools, she retired just in time to not have to go through that ordeal. She does not like computers, and I don't blame her."

I retired in 1999. I was 61 years old then, and had put in my letter informing the management that I was going to retire at 62. They gave me a choice..." I could retire at full pension plus a golden parachute or move to Memphis, Tennessee for a year. So, I retired."

"Both my wife and I had free medical until we were 65 and went on Medicare," said Harley. "I think 90% of Ann's salary went to mutual funds that year. Part of my going away present from Weston Paper was they hired a consultant to help me learn how to become a consultant."

I did some consulting around the Marshall area and in Terre Haute and one day a former Weston employee, who was the chief financial officer for Boge in Paris called me and said, "My cross accountant is going on maternity leave and could you give me a couple of weeks?" Harley agreed and worked for thirteen weeks.

"A year or so later he called me and said, "My cost accountant is going on vacation for two weeks. Can you come and cover?" Harley filled in and six months later was asked to fill in a while for a cost accountant who had quit.

"This went on for number of years." Continued Mr. Bennet. "One day he called me and said, "My current cost accountant is going to quit with two weeks' notice. Can you come up? We need to talk." We came to an agreement, and I told him what my fee was going to be and he said, "Oh, by the way, Friday is my last day. How would you like to be controller too?" I said, "Well, we have to re-negotiate this contract" So he said. "Whatever you want you can have." So I shot him a price and Friday he left and I took over.

The first order of business was we had a million and a half IRS bill that was overdue. He said, "The problem is, I don't think we owe it." It took me about three weeks to figure it out after he left. I hired a new controller and the first thing I did was to give her a letter and said, "You need to sign this letter and save yourself a million and a half dollars right now." It explained what had happened. The bill should've been against a division in Michigan, not here. Anyway, I got that taken care of."

The new controller said, "How would you like to stay on for a while?" I said, "Well, it's up to you". So I ended up staying there until that controller left, and I hired a second controller. Then I stayed on until the Germans came in and installed an SAP system and helped them do that"

The Life and Hard Times of Harley Bennet

I straightened out all the insurance records and then I hired a new cost accountant. Then they were getting ready to consolidate all their business to Paris, Illinois. The Germans said, "Yeah, we will close the plant." And they did. The plant is closed. I worked there from 2000 until the plant closed about three years ago."

So now Harley is retired for the second time.

Harley has been very active in the community throughout his lifetime. I was involved with Boy Scouts for 25 years.... That was a long 25 years too. One of our current Conservation officers was one of my survival camping trainees. He has told, "That weekend we went out for survival camp really helped me a lot."

Harley explained that he would take two boys at a time out for survival camp I told their parents that I would have them back for Sunday morning church. They could bring any meal that they wanted to bring and that was it. The rest we would have whatever we found. I took some boys out in February sometimes. That is very difficult, especially when they won't eat cat tail roots, and fished through the ice. There's a lot of food out there, but you have to be willing to eat it." Harley helped many of the boys become Eagle Scouts.

In more recent years, he was very active with the Marshall Main Street program. "I think I got roped into Main Street by Charlotte Morecraft. She lived across on the north side of the County Line Road, and I lived on the south side. From the time I was seven years old, Charlotte tried bossing me around, and she still likes to boss me around."

One day she said, "You need to get involved with Main Street. The next thing I know, I was being elected president of Main Street. Main Street did a lot of good work for the city of Marshall. I remember the biggest projects we had were the Chautauquas.

The other one was getting the mayor to purchase Harlan Hall rather than tearing it down. Then a whole group of us worked on Harlan Hall in the lobby and got it whipped into shape. It is a beautiful building now.

Commenting on the modern conveniences which he has experienced in his lifetime, Harley says that essential heat is the most

important. "I grew up without essential heat, without running water, without electricity. And I remember when Ann and I, the first summer we were on Second Street in that condemned house, were lying there and were perspiring and I said, "When we build this new house, it going to have central air condition and it did. Still though, heat is essential. When we built the house in 1969 and '70, it was not unusual to lose electricity for days. So one of the first things that we did was put a secondary heat source in our house.

"We had a wood burning stove. It's a tri-level house and in the third level down, we had a wood burning stove, and it can heat the whole house. We would burn lamps. I have a lot of miniature lamps and I have several Aladdin lamps. When the power goes off now and I can fire up my lamps. The utility people usually stop by and say, "Do you have a generator?" I replied," No, we have lamps."

Mr. Bennet has seen many changes in Marshall during his lifetime. "One of the big things is that you don't see horses tied up at parking meters on the streets anymore. You know we used to ride horses. Back in the "40's & 50's people were still farming with horses in this part of the country. I had a neighbor who farmed with horses until the mid "70's .

"I remember the first corn picker that I saw. I was about seven years old. It left more corn on the ground then it would put in the wagon. The kids would have to clean the field. It was a single row corn picker pulled behind the tractor. It was terrible. You know, we could pick corn by hand with horses faster and more complete than the corn picker would. Today these corn picker combines go out there and if they lose 20 kernels out there in the field, I would be surprised.

In commenting about Marshall, Harley said that it is one of the cleanest town around. He tells a story about a time when his father-in-law visited Marshall. "He said he was going into town just to snoop around. He came back and said he finally figured out what it is about Marshall and how it's different. I said, "Why is that?" He said, "It is so



The Life and Hard Times of Harley Bennet

clean. Not only is it clean but even the vacant lots are mowed.” I said, “Yeah, It’s always been that way.”

Last fall some ISU students came to Marshall and helped clean up the grounds around the Clark County Historical Society building. They commented to Harley how peaceful and quiet it is here.

“It’s such a nice place” Harley commented, “I am about 3.5 hours from St. Louis. I’m less than 2 hours from Indianapolis. I’m 4 hours from Chicago and 4 hours from Louisville. Where else would you want to live? I mean, face it, you can buy a house for \$150,000. Taxes are low. We are right in the heart of Wabash Valley”

***Note: Harley Bennet is the Secretary of our Corporate Board and the Board liaison for our Advisory Committee. We are very grateful for his service to the Aging Network. This article appeared in the Marshall Advocate on March 4, 2016.*