

Interview with Denton Brasel (2015)

As Denton Brasel looks out his kitchen window onto the 17-acre field he helped farm as he was growing up, he thinks about the changes he has seen in his lifetime. It would take days to prepare the field for planting. Without herbicides, the extra step of cultivation was required. Since his dad didn't get a tractor until 1948, they farmed with four head of horses. A combine with a 10-foot header would be used for harvest producing 20 bushels of soybeans per acre. With advances in farming and a combine with 30-foot header, the same field now produces 71 bushels of soybeans per acre.

Denton was born in 1930 and grew up across the field from where he now lives. Don't let that statement fool you. He has been around the world with many achievements in a variety of areas. He attended Sherman School, located $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from his home in good weather and 1- $\frac{1}{2}$ miles when bad weather kept him from taking a shortcut. The two students who began first grade with Denton, moved at the end of first grade leaving him as the only second grader. The next year he was allowed to work at his own pace and completed both 2nd and 3rd grades in one year. Then he came in town to attend Kinmundy Alma High School from 1943-1947. High school classes were held in the basement and second floor. The main floor was for Kinmundy Grade School. The freshman class started with 29 students, but veterans who had been drafted before finishing high school came back after World War II making a total of 33 students in the class.

During the war, there was a shortage of men for local jobs. When Denton was 14, Lura Robnett came to visit his parents. Lura was a teacher at Kinmundy Alma High School and owner of the Ice Plant. Since Denton was big and strong, she thought he would be a good worker. No one asked him, but Denton was hired to work seven days a week from 6 p.m. – 6 a.m. Since Denton was going to school during the day, he slept when he could, but the 1-cylinder diesel engine with 7' fly wheel and ammonia compressor needed to continue to run through the night. It ran on kerosene and cheap motor oil. The oil wasn't very clean, causing the filter to clog. When the engine started missing, it would wake him. He would shut it down; clean the filter, and start it up again. The capacity of the Ice Plant was 100 cakes of ice, staggered in groups of 10. It took an individual cake of ice 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ days to freeze in a tin in the salt-water brine. Twice during each shift, Denton would pull 10 of the 300-pound cakes of ice from the brine to the floor using a hand hoist. He sprayed water on the ice to remove it from the metal can. He used a scoring machine to make a $\frac{1}{2}$ inch cut and then used an ice pick to finish making the desired size. Since a 25-pound block was easier to handle and the size most customers chose, that meant cutting each block into three pieces and each of them twice. Finally each of those was cut into two pieces.

The ice-scoring machine was built by Bud Robnett in the family's machine shop located behind the Ice Plant. When Bud joined the army and went to serve in World War II, the machine shop was closed. After Bud's return, he built a bypass filter that allowed the engine to continue running while a clogged filter was being cleaned. Then the ice making process was not interrupted. Denton remembers Bud as a very intelligent man.

The Ice Plant offered home delivery service. Even though there was electricity in Kinmundy, businesses had soda pop coolers that were not electric, and most homes still used iceboxes because refrigerators were expensive. There were two town routes running on alternate days with no delivery on Sunday. Customers were provided with three cards for 25, 50, or 100 pounds of ice. If a card was placed in the window, the delivery man would deposit the ice in the icebox and pick up the money which would be in a lid on top of the icebox located on the back porch or kitchen. Doors weren't locked, and delivery didn't depend upon customers being home.

In the summer, Denton wanted to increase his hourly wage. He was making \$19.28 a week for 84 hours of work. He took a town delivery job for thirty cents an hour. Then a country ice route became available, and his dad took over the town route. Denton purchased everything needed for a country delivery job for \$400. That included a 37 Chevrolet pick-up, ice tong, shoulder ice bag, and pick. He hauled 1800 pounds of ice per load and made \$24 per day.

Denton was the oldest child in a family of five children. At the end of the route, a leftover block of ice was not suitable for sale. However, he could take it home to make ice cream for the family. One can imagine the treat they would enjoy along with one of his mother's homemade pies. Even though his mother married when she was only 16, she developed excellent homemaking skills. When Denton's sisters bring pie to a church event, they receive high praise, but they always say their pies aren't as good as Mom's pies.

REA, which is now Tri County, came along and hooked up everyone. Refrigerators were waiting on back porches throughout the countryside. Ice delivery business was not good after that. By then, Denton had graduated from high school and was ready for college.

He attended University of Illinois for one year with encouragement from Lura Robnett. Sometimes he would hitchhike on Route 37 in Kinmundy to get to college. His dad referred to Route 37 as "The Slab." Anyone would pick up riders since hitchhiking had not yet become dangerous for driver or rider. He worked as a bus boy while in college, which included meals on the job. He only made \$2 or \$3 a week, but since he had a healthy appetite, he felt the pay was ample.

After a year in college, he joined the Air Force in 1948. He was first stationed in San Antonio, Texas, and ended up there 20 years later. When basic training was

completed, Denton went to Chanute Air Force Base to become a jet aircraft mechanic. He credits Senator Johnson with sending the jet planes to Europe during the Korean War leaving no planes to service. Rather than become an air policeman, he was able to receive on the job training to become a helicopter mechanic. Helicopters in those days resembled dragonflies. The blades were covered with fabric at that time. He was stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. Denton married a teacher from Costa Rica, and a daughter was born. The family followed him to Florida for duty with climatic hanger testing until 1955. By this time, he had two more daughters and was assigned to a year in Greenland, a lonely year away from his family. Then he came back to Texas, serving as a small arms instructor and member of the base rifle team. During his last four years of service, he was a member of the All Air Force Marksmanship High Power Rifle Team. He was doing what he loved and getting paid. Then the Vietnam War came along, and Denton had four teenaged daughters and a son who needed their dad. He retired from the military with the rank of Master Sgt. and used the GI Bill to finish his college degree in math and science in Reno, Nevada in 1972.

Denton brought his family back home to Kinmundy and taught at Kinmundy Alma High School. He retired in 1992 from what had become South Central School District. With a strong work ethic, high intelligence, and dedication to family and country, Denton is an excellent example of what has made the United States a strong nation.