

## **A 90<sup>th</sup> Bagnell Dam Christmas Grand Marshal**

*A glimpse at ten decades of a Lake of the Ozarks native who will lead the 37<sup>th</sup> Lake of the Ozarks Christmas Parade on the Bagnell Dam Strip, Saturday, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1:00 p.m.*

by Loretta Srch

Tennyson Alroyd (T.A.) DeGraffenreid, who was indeed a pleasure to meet again, needs to make something clear before we start this interview. He explains his circumstance of relying on a walker. Four years ago he backed up and fell with a chainsaw in his hands. Since then, he's not gained full stability in his gait. The phrase his daughter, Marla, used about him comes back to me, "A country boy at heart." A country boy who at age 96 pitched in on the farm chores and took a misstep with a power tool in his hands.

Working hands. I place a pad of paper and a pen on the table, explaining it's there for clarification, questions, in case he has trouble hearing me. He claims that pad and pen and writes numbers at the top, calculating the exact number of days until he's 101 years old, February 14, 2022. And that's where our interview starts, at life before Bagnell Dam. His youth, a country boy, "Poor as Job's turkey," his mom used to say about his younger years, a time Tennyson didn't notice how poor they may have been.

A country boy still, T.A., now a widower, has long ago returned to where his family home was, eastbound off Rt. 42, down on an old gravel road that holds reminders of his ancestry in some buildings still standing, while others have diminished to their foundation. With several relatives still around and settled back in near where the family started in 1858 from a Land Patent signed by President James Buchanan, Tennyson recalls an easy-going life of hard work.

It was before the Depression, he remembers, "Dad and Grandpa worked on the dam and he drew 35 cents an hour. Grandpa had an old tractor and grader. He graded the road. There was no rubber-tired stuff then. The steam shovels was all coal fired in '29 and '31. And after that was over, why, quick as the dam went into operation in October of '31, why, a few thousand people just go on like birds and the Depression hit. So, what we got?"

"We had a good garden, and a good spring, we raised everything we could raise; cabbage and potatoes, tomatoes and beans, and parsnips and everything. We had a garden about an acre or a little better. We had plenty of water; the spring put out about two hundred fifty, three hundred gallon a water a minute, so we had it right there. It was dry '34 and '36.

"Two sisters were born there in '27 and '31, in near that old rock house. People carried water from the spring in '34 or '36 or both, I forget which it was.

"We fed people out of the garden. Grandpa and Grandma were down in there where we live now ... why we'd kill a two hundred and fifty pound hog. We made our soap, we had our lard, we canned sausage and they took what few little eggs we had left over from eatin' to town, to Ulman, to the Exchange. And the cream. They had a cream separator and what we didn't use, we took there. That's about it, we bought sugar and dry beans and coffee. That's all we bought."

By now there are several marks on the paper accompanying explanations Tennyson shared, as if his hands move with his mind through the pen: turnips potatoes, chickens, milk cows, hogs, work resulting from the seasons of nature that sustained the family. “We cooked the sausage and then we had the hot lard; put ‘em in half gallon jars and poured the grease in there and then sealed it up and turned it upside down so the grease was all over the sausage. We had sausage and tenderloin and plenty ... we ate good.”

After his Dad and Grandpa worked on the Bagnell Dam, the DeGraffenreid name ties back to the dam a couple times more. When he was ten Tennyson’s aunts, whom he calls “Omi and Nomianne,” were written into local history as Oma and Noma DeGraffenreid the sisters first to cross the dam on opening day, May 31, 1931. His deceased uncle’s wife, Aunt Eldie, who is not mentioned in the popular story, was the third person in the car that day. Tennyson remembers the car, a 1928 Chevy, green with black fenders, where he was to ride along, but it was raining so hard that morning, the women left without him.

Visitors were a weekly occurrence at the house. Church was a preacher, Simon Cox, riding circuit monthly offering services. Schools, church services and cemeteries, with shared resources, bound communities.

Elementary grades were at the one-room schoolhouse called Barnett School, “Close enough where I could run home for dinner and back;” Tennyson describes, where they all drank water from the same cedar bucket with a shared dipper. Learning with about twenty other students at their own grade levels, Tennyson recalls an orderly classroom. While each grade of a few students was called to work in front with the teacher, the remaining children worked independently. The schedule of the Barnett School took him out of grade order in the fifth and sixth grades, but grade shuffling was of no concern and Tennyson graduated along with the School of the Osage 1939 class, whose motto is “Climb Though the Rocks Be Rugged.” He perseveres in the climb, carrying the banner as oldest living graduate of his *alma mater*.

Rugged was a part of growing up in these foothills of the Ozarks as the Lake developed. People primarily walked when he was young Tennyson explains. His interest was drawn, however, to other power; steam, gas and diesel engines. He climbed in educating himself in that area, “I corresponded with diesel schools in Nashville, and automobile schools in first, one place, then another. And I finally wound up with aviation school in Kansas City in October/November of ‘40. Couldn’t get a job nowhere around Kansas City or Wichita, so I wound up in Texas in July of ‘41.”

An enjoyable story teller, Tennyson takes us on a condensed version of decades following. The casual country boy tone picks up the pace as Tennyson’s story moves him in a four-man crew to Texas where they are hired for fueling, inspecting, cleaning and care of airplanes for flight training for the impending war. Tennyson figured he’d be enlisting, his status being 1A, but the Air Force had other plans for him to continue his work on planes and he found himself instead joining the Air Force Reserves in order to stay with the work. The Reserves eventually sent him to Germany as a radio operator and clerk typist. Six weeks after the war was over, Tennyson, finished with the war effort, but still eligible, was drafted and completed his commitment

stateside for eighteen months. With a twinge of regret, his spirit of adventure wishes he would have stayed and done some more traveling while on that side of the world.

In Feb 1947, after service, after pursuing work that returned low wages, he returned back home with no job waiting for him. For three years he raised chickens, until one day, a guy stopped by who said, “They’re going to hire five men over at Union Electric.”

Tennyson followed the lead, “Tuesday morning I went over there and went on in. He didn’t say anything, just handed me a letter. Said, ‘Take that up to the company doctor and see if there’s anything wrong with you.’” Tennyson explains his hunch that someone paved the way and put in a good word for him. When he returned from the doctor, he was offered a job, started at 11:00 p.m. that very night and stayed for 33 years, working in the control room at the Bagnell Dam, and retiring as Supervisor of the Control Room. Leading up to supervisor position, Tennyson listed some skills he learned on the control room job; “... turn the water on, start the wheels, generators, operate the turbines, electrician’s work, talk to load dispatchers in St. Louis.” Making more marks on the paper with his recollections, he tells of an incident where levels were high in both St. Louis and at Bagnell Dam, without any clue as to why. Turned out it was the result of a generator going out in Michigan, demonstrating how Bagnell Dam works as a part of a much larger system.

Vivian Neill, a young teacher from Buffalo, Missouri arrived to teach at School of the Osage in 1950. Mr. Mills, namesake of Leland O. Mills Elementary School, influenced the meeting of Tennyson and Vivian, resulting in their marriage in 1953; a marriage lasting 65 years. “She was a home ec teacher, and she made me eat when I was supposed to eat,” he chuckles, “That’s what I tell ‘em anyway. She grew up on a milk farm. Was the oldest of six kids.” Tennyson and Vivian’s family grew with their children Marla and Jon, three years apart, and also School of the Osage graduates.

Tennyson says he was “interested in steam engine shows and diesel engine stuff. I was always mechanical.” His first car he remembers, “It was a ’41 Buick – 50 Series. It was the sweetest little car you ever saw. \$1400. Bought it in 1943.” Friends George and Fred Robinson had a Model T Ford that took them to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in Jefferson City in 1929, and “that’s the biggest thing we did back then. It was a really big deal. We had a 1927 Chevy (growing up). We’d take it to Tuscumbia, Iberia ... I started driving when I was eight years old, didn’t have drivers’ licenses then.”

A man with a mind for engines and ventures, T.A. and Vivian’s family were one of the first in their group to have a boat. They recreated with friends and family on Lake of the Ozarks, fishing, water skiing and pleasure cruising. An airplane was added to the fleet with Tennyson’s intention that Marla and Jon each fly solo on their sixteenth birthday. Though both declined the adventure, Jon eventually got his private pilot’s license and his own plane. Tennyson would often fly the couple and maybe friends to another city for lunch or dinner. Also a means to an end, he tells of Lee Mace’s invitation to ride with him in Mace’s plane to Mexico MO to go look at a tractor. Fly up, take a long cab ride to and from town, look at the tractor, fly back. Tennyson smiles in the telling.

Vivian and Tennyson took advantage of outdoor activities and with friends, mostly JW and Pauline Marberry, made lasting memories. The couples traveled, RVed, fished, camped, played cards, near home, by water, by highways, by air.

After retirement Tennyson and his brother John turned their attention to several Bagnell Dam Boulevard properties including the White House. Their investments involved more than an economic decision, “Grandpa built that White House in about ’33. I still have the old lease when he leased it to Hargus and Fry in 1934,” Tennyson said, and then takes us on a mental tour of the Strip naming buildings, owners, builders, businesses, pointing out family properties, giving the unique perspective of one who witnessed history in the making. Tennyson is a fine guide to the past, filling it in with images and descriptions of people and places, facts and figures, woven together in rich, detailed stories. His storytelling evokes curiosity for more detail.

It was an era of decline and adjustment on the Strip due to diminishing traffic based on the building of the new 54 highway, the 2008 recession, and the new route 242, which all affected business. A retailers’ landlord is a demanding role, answering to crises at all times of day and night. It was of no interest to carry on the role for any of the four offspring of the DeGraffenreid brothers. After a long wait for a buyer, they eventually sold their properties in 2013 to Iguana, just six months before John died.

Working hands. There was always something to keep T.A. busy. “If I could walk better, I’d be working every day. I could find something to do. Someone said, ‘What do you do in your leisure time?’ I said, what do you mean leisure? I never had leisure, I just take the time when I need it, if you want to call that leisure.”

We look at memorabilia pulled out for this year’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, certificates from his school days are in the stack. The ornate lettering is beautiful and Tennyson explains what it’s for. Every Friday brought weekly spelling contests. He and Herbert Robinson were the best spellers in that twenty-one student Barnett Schoolhouse. They earned some honor for these skills. It wasn’t always spelling, he adds, “Sometimes it was making marks. Subtraction of fractions, addition of fractions, and just plain division and all the things of math.”

Making marks. It’s time to gather my things. The top page of the paper tablet is filled with lines, numbers, letters from names, random squiggles that together are quite beautiful as reflection of a creative, busy mind finding its outlet through the man’s hands. Working hands, older than the Bagnell Dam, hands touched a lot of life and lives.

*Loretta Srch is BDSA’s artist-in-residence and correspondent, with her own long history on the Bagnell Dam Strip as a street entertainer. A poet, mixed-media artist and playwright with four staged plays; her crocheting was incorporated into the **Hyperbolic Crochet Community Coral Reef** at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in DC. Her feature articles appear in a variety of local publications.*

