



Waunakee Rotary Club

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What was life like in 1939, growing up on a farm in Arkansas with no running or electricity?

Waunakee Rotarian Phil Willems described his boyhood and how he came to live in Waunakee at the Nov. 17 meeting.

He grew up on a 160-acre farm that was partially wooded with ponds, two log cabins and a two-seater outhouse. One cabin housed sharecroppers, and the other housed an elderly man who cared for Phil when his parents were in the fields. From him, Phil and his sister learned to pick cotton.

Phil's family had land in the bottoms where the Arkansas River ran through, and as child Phil helped pick cotton, chop weeds out and pick corn.

One of Phil's earliest memories were of his family cutting trees down, taking them to the saw mill and eventually building a house. While that house was under construction, the family lived in the barn.

"We had no electricity, no phone. But we still had a house out back," Phil said.

"Most places we went, we went behind a team of horses," he said.

For fun, Phil would take his dog, Rover, with him and explore, go for a swim or sit by a campfire. He and a friend tried smoking everything they could light, he said. His other pet was a pig, Porky.

When Phil was 12, his father, who also worked mining coal, developed allergies. He was allergic to all the trappings of his livelihood in Arkansas – animal dander and coal.

So the family moved to Milwaukee, and Phil's father worked for the Falk Corporation as a brick mason. Phil bought a paper route, delivering the Milwaukee Sentinel, and the first thing he bought with his hard earned money was a model train. His next purchase was a bicy-

cle. Realizing he'd rather sleep a little later, he gave up delivering the morning route and bought a route with the Milwaukee Journal. Phil was an enterprising young man, finding ways to grow his subscribers, even taking some away from other carriers.

He also filled in for some paper boys who hawked the Sunday edition after church, and got in trouble when he created his own stand.

"I was always in trouble," Phil said. "It seemed to follow me my whole life."

After moving to Milwaukee, Phil also made the transition from a 4-room schoolhouse to Catholic school. He attended Marquette High School, where the Jesuits took him to task for his many demerits. As punishment, he memorized Portia's speech from "The Merchant of Venice."

Phil attended UW-Milwaukee for a few years, and all the while worked in retail at WT Grant. He left school to go through management training and eventually ended up working at a store on Madison's North Side until the company went bankrupt. Then Phil spent two years as a traveling salesman, selling buttons, lace and zippers to other retailers.

He and his wife, Betty, and their children lived in Waunakee at the time, and he heard a mall was to be built. He contacted the Ben Franklin folks, who were good customers, and suggested he open a store in Waunakee. Though he was told another person was already in line for the store, Phil and Betty eventually came to open it. They operated Waunakee's Ben Franklin for 23 years.

"We had great times," Phil said. "We made a good income."

The Ben Franklin franchise had been closed for 5 years when Phil and Betty decided to close the store here. They had invested in Culver's,

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Calendar of Events:

- Nov. 24, Thanksgiving Breakfast at the Senior Center
- Dec. 14, Christmas Party at Rex's Innkeeper
- June 8-9, Rotary District Conference, The La Crosse Center on the Mississippi.

and that franchise now has four restaurants.

Phil is still looking for the next place to open a new restaurant.

"I'm going to be 73 on my next birthday. I've got a lot of things to do," he said.

Other items:

- Work on Rotary Light is under way, with more workdays set Nov. 19 and 21.

- Thanksgiving breakfast at the Senior Center could use more volunteers. Serving is from 8-10:30 a.m.

Guests: Wendy Fahlgren, guest of Jim Leonard.

Birthdays: Dec. 6, Bud Zander.

Anniversaries: Dec. 1, Bob and Nancy Hoskins; Dec. 3, Jim and Kathy Kattner.

Prayers: Dec. 1, Leonard Allen; Dec. 8, Susan Vergeront; Dec. 15, Pat Durden.

Programs: Dec. 1, Club Assembly; Dec. 8, Eleanora Longo, Rotaract youth club.

Greeters: Dec. 1, Don Tierney and Lucas Tierney; Dec. 8, Jon Townley and Jim Tubbs; Dec. 15, Chad Updike and Susan Vergeront; Dec. 22, Aaron Vikemyr and Sean Wayne; Dec. 29, Phil Willems and Rich Wipperfurth.