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Mayor Don Baird – Colmesneil Christmas Spirit

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Mayor of Colmesneil for 12 years, just sworn in for his seventh straight term, Don Baird has been giving all his life.

Soft spoken, calm, and a ready listener, Don has a way of quickly becoming your friend. Not many chips on his shoulder, and his sincere laugh is catching.

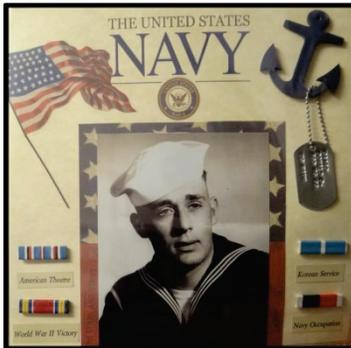
He was born in Little River, Texas, about nine miles from Temple. For as long as he can remember, he has worked hard, growing up in the Great Depression, with many memories of struggle in the early '30s. They had no indoor plumbing, no electricity, no refrigeration.

They cooked with wood they cut and canned what they could.

At 14, he pushed a wheel barrow filled with concrete that was then poured for patios behind the PXs at Fort Hood, quite hard work before the commercialization of concrete trucks.

He graduated from the Little River Academy in 1945 and went straight into the Navy.

For three years, he was the “radar man” on the 675-foot USS Fall River, a heavy cruiser with nine 8-inch, twelve 5-inch and 74 smaller 44mm and 20mm guns, just below the battleship in armament.



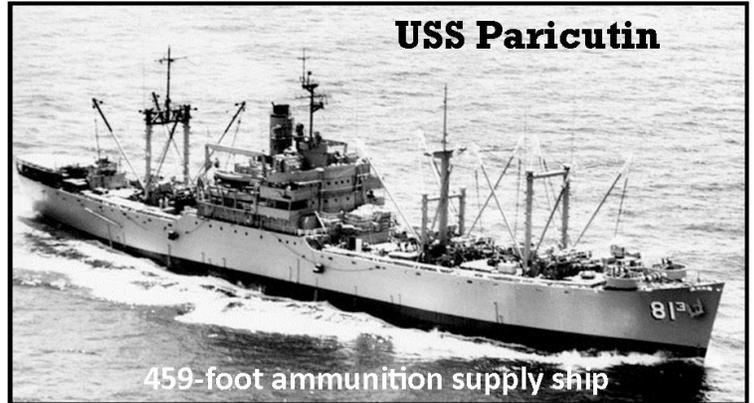
“We went everywhere in the Pacific,” Don said. In front of a radar screen, his shift would be from 8-12 hours a day. On deck or on leave, his rowdy side he preferred not to share, nor the trouble he got into in China and other places. “Some ... not all legal,” he laughed. There has

been much water travelled since then. The days-gone-by are a long way off, and today his mischievous smile complements his self-effacing nature.

As the radar man, in many ways, he was the heart of the ship, endlessly tracking its location and all things near and far away in the days before GPS. From his observations and calculations, the ship would navigate to reload its arms, fuel and supplies and set its distance from the shore or from other ships so the gunners could land devastating shells on the enemy.

Interestingly, on several jobs in the decades to come, he would track and coordinate, being again the veritable heart. After three years in the Navy, he came back to Texas and entered Temple Junior College, intending to study agriculture while still in reserve status.

Then China and the USSR helped North Korea invade South Korea in 1950. The U.S. led the United Nations defense in what would become the “forgotten or unknown” war for the lack of public attention. Only Don was in the thick of it, called back up in 1950 to serve three more years on the 459-foot USS Paricutin, one of two huge ammunition resupply ships operating in the Pacific with a capacity of 400,000 cubic feet.



Once again he was the radar man inside the ship, not far from the captain’s quarters, and thankfully so, for the Korean weather was brutally cold in the winter. And dangerous.

“We carried about 20,000 tons,” said Don, “including shells and napalm. It would take two to three days to load, then we would rendezvous with a ship. Often, as with a carrier, we would be running on one side and a fuel or supply ship would be running on the other side. Destroyers would be guarding us from submarines. If we blew up ... well, it would be big.”

After Korea, he spent the next 22 years with the Railway Express Agency in Temple, retiring in 1976, most of those years at the heart of operations as terminal manager, the last 12 years in Beaumont. They did what UPS does today.

His good friend, Jim Smith, was vice president of Speirs Foods and asked Don to manage a store in Port Arthur.

During this time for 27 years he was married to Beatrice. They had a daughter and two boys, Cherie Coker, Keith, and their youngest, Kevin, who succumbed to hardening of the arteries and died at 47 in 2004.

After Beatrice passed, Don met Barbara while working at Luther News in Lufkin, and they tied the knot in 1981.

She had five girls, Lisa Blevins, Chyrl Pounds, Jeannie Johnson, Pam Lofton and Benita Citrano. In 2004, they lost Lisa and grandson Caleb in a tragic car accident—that is, they lost three in 2004! Today they have 22 grandchildren and 35 great-grandchildren.

Oh, how they love their family. About two weeks before Christmas, they gather at the Colmesneil Community Center, and then on Christmas day Don and Barbara will join one of their children’s gatherings. Christmas is the best



time of the year.

Famous for his huge Christmas displays, about 100 blowups in front of his house are spread out as long a football field. Reindeer, elves, cartoon characters, snowmen and Santas of every stripe, Snoopy dressed as Santa, several nativity scenes, several moving displays, many five-feet tall, and one Santa about 15-feet tall—all light up the night. Giving credit to their children and grandchildren who start after Halloween, especially Chyrl and Benita, they work and laugh together—a winter wonderland.

In the vast display, there is a memorial to their grandson Alex Johnson who died in a traffic accident and who had lived with the Bairds for several years. Don said with a smile, “His granny washed his clothes and babied him.” Then sad, he said, “Alex would climb a tree like a squirrel to put up the lights. He would do anything I asked him.”

Don partnered with Mike Wiley to form MPC Distributing that supplied seven of Wiley’s stores, again at the heart of logistics organizing the supply routes. Wiley decided to sell out because of health problems. That freed Don up, so he purchased the Country Market in the heart of Colmesneil for five years.

After two years on the Colmesneil city council, 12 years ago, several asked Don to run for mayor. Some thought he had no chance as an outsider, but he won the election two-to-one. Once again, as a volunteer, he was at the heart of things, as mayor with a Christmas heart all year long.

In a not-so-joking tone, Don said of long-time city secretary Carrie Edwards, “If she leaves, I’m leaving. A mayor needs to know a lot of things, and she has been invaluable.”

Edwards said, “I have seen him devote endless hours to the city, his church and the youth in the community.” He facilitated over \$1.5 million in initiatives and grants for youth, feeding the elderly, beautification and infrastructure. He plays Santa for the elementary school, even after his knee surgery and recovering from a broken leg. Walking with a cane, he helped students put flags on veterans’ graves. “He can be tough at times,” Edwards

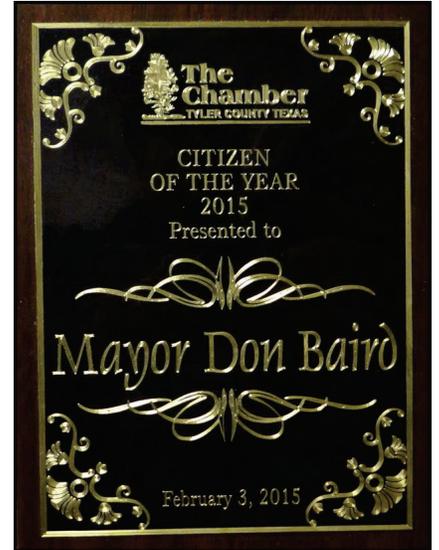
said, “but ‘Pops’ is one of the kindest, most caring people you could ever meet.”



Don said, “We have shared a lot of tears through the years, but we have had a lot of great times, accomplished great things and shared a lot of laughs along the way.” He is especially thankful for his partnership with Commissioner Mike Marshall and how they worked together to build the Emergency Services District #7 Station, new home of the Colmesneil VFD and more.

Last year at the 2015 Tyler County Chamber of Commerce banquet, President Amy Bythewood presented Don with the Tyler County Citizen of the Year Award.

All of his long life Don Baird has given, often at the very heart of things. For his and Barbara’s quiver full and this younger generation, he wishes a good education, to live right and to live for God. With perhaps the largest display in the county, the heart of a winter wonderland—something we can share—they wish the sincerest good will to all and a very Merry Christmas.



Merry Christmas