

Message in a Bottle

Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Douglas Earl Overstreet – “Exacto Facto” Master Mason

August 30, 2012, 7B

Douglas Earl Overstreet, Earl to his friends, was born not far from Village Mills, Texas, on the edge of Tyler County.

Without electricity or indoor plumbing, Earl’s job was drawing water, one bucket at a time for clothes, cooking, and bathing. They had to heat water for a bath. It was tough.

He went to school in Warren through the fifth grades while his father worked for 35 cents an hour in the Warren saw mills.

At the end of the day working in the Warren grocery store, if there was old meat or day-old bread, Earl was allowed to take it home for free.

Earl remembers President Roosevelt’s speech on December 8, 1941, after Pearl Harbor.

“It scared a lot of us. Nobody knew what was coming. Defense jobs started to open up. Daddy got a job working in the Beaumont shipyards.”

Soon they moved to the government built Multi-max Village into an apartment with indoor plumbing and a refrigerator. It seemed like the high life.

“Daddy hired a guy to haul our stuff on a flatbed truck. My dad, mom, and younger sister rode inside. My older sister and I sat on a couch on the back of the truck all the way to Beaumont.”

Earl finished the seventh grade in Beaumont as WWII wound down in 1945.

“One day in 1945, I woke up and my father was gone. Our father left us. It was just my mother, two sisters, and me,” Earl said. Shocking. “My mother got a job at Kress’ dime store for \$18 a week. I got job at a grocery store for \$2 a day. That was all we had to take care of four people!”

At 15 Earl was providing for his family. He would never leave his family. Soon a friend told Earl about a job for Western Union paying 65 cents an hour to deliver messages.

“I never heard of such a wage,” Earl said. “Only, one had to be 16 years old, so I told them I was 16. I did that for three years, making about \$30-35 a week. Now we could get candy bars and cokes and things.” He bought a scooter on credit which made delivery a lot easier.

In 1952, Earl joined the U.S. Army and became a gunner on a tank.



“I never got into any trouble,” he said. “I did not like the Army telling what to eat and what to wear, but I endured.”

After the Army, he met Sue, the love of his life, and they married in June of 1954. In 2012, they have been together 58 years. They have one daughter, Sharon Overstreet.

A better job availed itself making templates at Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation in Fort Worth, later the Convair Corporation. Earl signed up for everything the company offered, including math, trigonometry, welding, drafting, and such.

During their three years there, they rented a little house on a hill, only to find out they were in the glide path of the Convair B-36 Peacemaker, which shook dishes in the house. The B-36 had six engines, three on each wing pointed backward each with 19-foot propellers. It was 35 feet from the pavement to the fuselage.

As government contracts ended, the Overstreets moved to Denver, Seattle, Oklahoma, and Houston.

A friend from Earl’s days in Fort Worth came by as the National Guard was called up to deal with the Bay of Pigs and later Cuban Missile Crisis. His friend needed someone to fill in for him at Cameron Iron Works.

Earl worked for Cameron from 1961 to 1994 – 33 years!

Cameron grew as it manufactured products for the military, energy and aerospace industries, including the Alaskan pipeline. In 1989, Cameron Iron Works merged with Cooper Industries.

Earl was in quality control and acquired the moniker of “Exacto Facto,” which he did not like at first.

“I held things to a strict tolerance,” Earl said. “I’d kick it out if it failed inspection. Some of the bosses wanted me to fudge a bit, and I would not do it.”

Measuring tolerances could be exacting and relentless work. He inspected parts for jet engines, fans, guns, landing gear, missiles, ball valves, blowout preventers, and even the Alaskan Pipe line.

“I never tried to fool anybody,” he said. “Many times if I was not there, customers would not work with anyone else. I told it like it was, good or bad. I was good at memorizing specs.”

A coffee cup was given to him with “Exacto Facto” enameled on the side.

After retiring to Woodville, Earl became a Freemason in 1996 at 63 years old, and he applied himself with his usual gusto.

He was initiated in February and completed his Master’s work in June, being made a Master Mason. That was quite a feat. But Earl was just beginning. On top of that he earned an “A” Certificate in all of the Texas Masonic work – perhaps a first to have



learned so much so quickly. Not many can, because it involves a high volume of memorization.

“Earl is a local icon in Masonry,” said Keith Fuller. There is hardly a leader in Masonry in Deep East Texas that does not feel the same about Earl’s legendary mastery and skillful presentations.

As a master teacher, Earl taught hundreds of men the “work” that the candidates memorized in order to progress. More than that, Earl memorized all of the lectures for the various parts of each of Masonry’s three primary degrees, including lodge installations and funerals. Earl’s mastery impressed the best in Texas Masonry, and he brought a dignified aura to public presentations with his perfected diction and smooth deep resonating voice.

Dignity is important. One does not become a Mason by simply paying annual dues; one has to be “made” a Mason. Most people are aware that Masonry has a detailed initiation. Yet, because this very public fraternity has secrets, most non-Masons rely on the reputation of their Mason friends and famed Masonic charity for the fraternity’s integrity and dignity – like Earl – and unfortunately some rely on the hearsay of anti-Mason critics and a few disenchanting ex-Masons for nonsense.

I was honored to be taught by Earl, and I dedicated my book on the fraternity to Earl, titled *Character Counts—Freemasonry Is a National Treasure and a Source of Our Founding Fathers’ Constitutional Original Intent* (2006; see PreciousHeart.net). The book challenged the best critics and outlined the best work on Freemasonry in the spirit (I pray) of Earl Overstreet’s dignity. Masonry is all about character counting.

For the last fifteen years, Earl’s woodshop was the primary schoolhouse for hundreds of newly initiated Masons from all over East Texas, sometimes over some sausage cooking on a small grill.

Also since retiring, Earl has played the guitar and violin and engaged in woodworking. His lavishly detailed cedar birdhouses created another kind of reputation for generosity. Each one was unique, created with meticulous care to doors, farm implements, secret passages, and innumerable nuances – Exacto Facto in cedar too. Never charging, he gave every one of them away.

In the photo, Earl stands before one of his birdhouses surrounded by his many Masonic certificates and awards on the wall of his woodshop and schoolhouse.

Laverne Darsey said, “I’m proud to say he taught my husband. And I am a proud owner of one of his famous birdhouses. Truly an honor to know him.”

In 2005 when the Tyler County Courthouse needed a fundraiser for their Relay For Life team. Sharon Fuller said, “I asked Earl if he would make a birdhouse. Boy did he make a fine one. It was his 100th birdhouse and the last birdhouse he made. We raised \$600.00 dollars off that birdhouse for Relay For Life. Everyone wanted it. Walter and B.J. Fink became the proud winners that year.”

Earl’s serious health problems have slowed him down considerably. Yet, for those who have had the privilege of knowing him, Earl’s personal character is as “exacto facto” as his work.

