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WELL DRILLER WAS FRUGAL BUT COMPASSIONATE – HARRY FENTON - 1922 - 2002

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When Harry Fenton did business, it was with a gentleman's agreement. Instead of a contract, a handshake and man's word was all he ever needed.

Fenton, the founder of Fenton Well Drilling and Pump Service in Merrimac, always trusted his customers and took things at face value, said his son, Wayne Fenton .

Fenton died Nov. 9 of lung cancer at the age of 80.

Born in Merrimac on April 5, 1922, Fenton was the only well driller in Montgomery County when he founded the business in 1955. After serving in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Fenton returned to his home in Merrimac and took a job as a truck driver, then worked at the Radford Army Ammunition Plant before he bought a drill rig originally planned for quarry work.

Fenton decided to use the equipment to start a well-drilling business with partner Frank Johnson, whom he soon bought out. The business became Fenton 's life, and he continued to work there until he passed it on to his son and grandsons, Tony and Terry. The company's office on Merrimac Road is next door to the home where Fenton was raised.

Wayne Fenton helped his father at work as a teenager during school vacations. "Dad had a regular helper, but he wanted me to be there," he said. "So after high school, I went to work with him full time."

Well drilling is not easy work, and an accident almost took Harry Fenton's life. "A cable came loose, knocked him into a well pit and broke his back," his son said. It was not Fenton 's first near-fatal accident. As a child, he was playing in the yard and ran into a family member carrying hot apple butter and scalded himself. The scars covered much of his body. They bothered him throughout his life, as did his back, but Fenton didn't slow down and didn't complain. He never considered giving up his work.

"That was his business," said his wife, Margaret Fenton. "It was what he wanted to be."

"He loved well drilling - loved being around it," Wayne Fenton said. "Me, too. We're doing things that not too many people can do. It's very challenging and very fulfilling."

"He was a firm father, but mom told us he loved us," said Harry Fenton 's daughter, Sharon Fenton. "He was pretty old school. To say he was frugal was to put it lightly."

Unless someone needed his help.

Instead of money, he'd accept other means of payment for drilling wells. One customer traded a one-room log cabin on Craig's Creek in Craig County for Fenton 's services. The cabin became a home away from home for the family.

Sometimes he did the work not just for trade, but for free, Margaret Fenton said. "He'd always help people who were down on their luck," she said. "He just wanted to do that. He did a lot of work for nothing."

When other well-drilling companies moved into the area, it didn't hurt Fenton Drilling. Business has remained steady over the last 47 years because of population expansion in Montgomery, Pulaski, Giles, Floyd and Craig counties.

Fenton officially retired in 1985 but still kept a close watch over his son's and grandsons' work. He wanted them to head out to work early in the day, but not to work so long that it would keep them away from their families.

"He always kept us in line," Tony Fenton said. "He gave us a lot of advice, like when he thought I was spending too much money."

Wayne Fenton said he even kept the cost of a new piece of equipment from his dad at first, afraid of his reaction to spending so much money on it.

"He couldn't let the business go at all" after retiring, Wayne Fenton said. "He was up there every day, wanting to know how it was going. I would take him all I could to ride by and check out some jobs. We even went on the way to his cancer treatments.

"I raised my sons the way he raised me. He lived simply, and we're all like that still today," Fenton said.

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