

Bob Armstrong: The Whistling Mailman

by
Gary Dielman

Oldtimers know Bob Armstrong as "the whistling mailman." During his U. S. Postal Service career (1947-1970), Bob's whistling mail delivery made him a fixture in the community. That, plus the fact that he was a black man in a 99.8% white town. Recently, Bob reminisced about his fifty-plus years living in Baker City.

Born Robert Lee Armstrong, Jr., February 13, 1921, in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, to Robert Lee and Myrtle Redmond Armstrong, Bob grew up mostly in the homes of extended family members. Not long after his birth, Bob's parents split up. He has no memory of his father, a railroad worker, until age fourteen, when he and a friend caught a freight train to Detroit, where he looked up his father. They spent some time together and got along well, but Bob's father died not too long after the visit.

Bob characterizes his mother, who was just fifteen years old at the birth of her first and only child, as "rather independent." He spent his first few years in Bartlesville in northeastern Oklahoma about forty miles north of Tulsa bouncing between his mother and a maternal aunt, Maggie Hazelwig. Bob has difficulty remembering his living situation in his very early years. He remembers living with his Aunt Maggie during his first three years of grade school, then with his mother during fourth and fifth grades. When he was with his mother, they lived in the servant quarters of the home where she was employed as a live-in domestic. Young Bob spent many lonely hours by himself in those quarters while his mother worked.

By sixth grade Bob was living in the home of his maternal grandmother, Stella Williams Redmond, in Parsons, Kansas, a town of 12,000 inhabitants in the southeastern corner of the state. His grandmother's house was large and full. Six of her seven children—all but Bob's mother—were still living at home. The oldest, one of Bob's two maternal aunts, lived there with her husband and their child. The rest were still children: four uncles and an aunt, the latter being younger than Bob. Seldom at home was Bob's maternal grandfather, who followed construction jobs practicing his trade as brick mason and cement worker. Last but not least was Bob's great-grandmother, who rounded out this four-generation household. Several years later, when Bob's grandmother died, his great-grandmother became the head of the household.

All the children in the house had their chores, such as milking the cow in the vacant lot next door or gathering eggs. Bob's job was to go to the store and get a sack of cornmeal and twenty-five cents of beans, the family's food staples.

Whenever she would send for him, Bob would live with his mother for a while. Bob never questioned his ever-changing living arrangements. "That's just the way it was in those days. I accepted it," he says.

In Parsons in the 20's and 30's, that's just the way it was with other things, too. If you were black, there were certain businesses you just didn't go into. At the movie theaters seating for blacks was in the balcony. In the school system, blacks and whites attended

different schools from kindergarten through eighth grade. But grades nine through fourteen--the town had a junior college--were integrated. Integration of the grade schools was just entering the talking stages by the time Bob left Parsons in the early 40's.

Bob developed a healthy work ethic early in life. In junior high school he worked in the National Youth Association (NYA) program for needy children doing janitor work at East Parsons High School. At age fifteen he worked collecting trash on Saturdays.

After graduating from the ninth grade, Bob quit school for financial reasons and joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), lying about his age to get in. For the better part of two years he worked on projects in Kansas such as planting trees, rip-rapping stream banks, and building dirt dams for agricultural water storage. Part of his time in the CCC was spent at Fort Riley, Kansas, fifty miles west of Topeka, where Bob got a taste of Army life. Among other units based at Fort Riley was the all-black Ninth Cavalry. Likewise, the CCC crews were also segregated, except for the white officers in command positions. His experiences at Fort Riley led him during the Second World War to enlist in the Navy rather than the Army, because, he says, "I'd at least have a bed to sleep in at night, rather than a tent or a foxhole."

Perhaps the most significant lesson Bob took away from his experience in the CCC was a desire to continue his education. With the country fully in the grip of depression in the early 30's, many of the CCC enlistees were out-of-work older men who knew the value of an education. As mentors to Bob, they urged him to go back to school and get as much education as possible. So, after a couple of years Bob was back at Parsons enrolled in tenth grade.

Besides being a good student academically, Bob participated in varsity sports, playing guard in basketball and end in football. Although classes were integrated, sports were segregated into white and black programs. Blacks played other black teams at separate black gyms and football fields. About his athletic ability Bob says modestly, "I wasn't the first or last to be picked. I didn't have to be the star. I just strove to be a worthy opponent."

During his senior year of high school, Bob worked for a white woman, Miss Myra Edwards, doing house and yard work. Miss Edwards, knowing Bob's graduation was coming up, bought him a suit to wear at commencement. But he ended up not attending the graduation ceremony, the story of which is one example of racial discrimination in his home town and Bob's reaction to it.

As mentioned already, East Side High School in Parsons, Kansas, had integrated its classes but not its sports. Its commencement exercises were a similar mixture of integration and segregation. The tradition was to have a joint commencement for whites and blacks at the same ceremony. But when the diplomas were handed out, the white students always went first. During the spring of Bob's senior year, some people lobbied the administration to hand out diplomas alphabetically without regard to race. Bob remembers the principal announcing shortly before commencement that the

traditional practice would continue; however, those not wanting to participate could pick up their diplomas at the school office before the ceremony.

Feeling the practice of handing out diplomas to whites first and then blacks was not right, Bob decided not to attend the ceremony. When he explained to the woman who had given him the suit that he would not be wearing it to commencement, she supported his decision.

In the fall of 1941 at Bob's mother's request, Bob migrated to the Northwest to live with his mother and step-father, John Ray. Myrtle and John lived on the outskirts of Yakima, Washington, in a house in the front of which they ran a small café selling fried chicken dinners mainly to clientele of a nearby nightspot named Marie's Barn.

In January 1942 the family packed up all the possessions they could carry in their pickup and headed for greener pastures in Pocatello, Idaho. Winter driving conditions caused them to stop overnight in Baker City. But two local citizens Bob's step-father met on Main Street turned Baker City into an end point rather than a stopover: Tom Speros and Henry Tebeau. Speros, owner of the Trail In Café and the Pythian Castle, offered John a job. Speros also owned a shoeshine parlor at 1931 Main Street between Connie Crabb's Smoke Shop on the south and Radabaugh's Barber Shop and Miller's Lunch on the north. The man working in the shoeshine parlor—Bob believes his name was Fred Williams—was elderly and in ill health. Speros needed someone to help him out. Tebeau, a black man born and raised in Baker County and uncle to Claude Hines, Baker City's outstanding high school athlete from the 1920's, stepped forward and offered the family temporary housing in his home.

John accepted both offers. Right away he began working in the shoeshine business, which, after Williams' death, he bought from Speros. John and Myrtle soon rented a place at 1769 Valley and later purchased their own house at 2030 Resort. Myrtle worked as full-time domestic help in the home of George P. and Louise Lilley and later in the A. C. Lighthall home. Both employers were in the lumber business. G. P. Lilley owned Baker Lumber Co. and Lighthall was president of Oregon Lumber Co. Myrtle ended her working career cooking at St. Elizabeth Hospital, beginning when it was still in the stone building on Fourth Street. John operated his shoeshine parlor until his death on December 8, 1970. Myrtle outlived her husband twenty-five years dying in Baker City on August 17, 1995. They are buried beside each other in Mt. Hope Cemetery.

Bob turned twenty-one years old just after the family arrived in Baker City. With the recent bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's declaration of war on both Japan and Germany, Bob felt it was just a matter of time until the draft caught up with him. Having acquired an aversion to Army life when in the CCC at Fort Riley, Bob took the initiative and enlisted in the Navy in June 1942. After training as signalman and quartermaster at Great Lakes Naval Station near Chicago, Bob served on a coastal minesweeper patrolling the Boston Harbor area. Later he was transferred to a fleet minesweeper patrolling from Boston all the way to the North Atlantic off Nova Scotia. In 1944 Bob was transferred to the South Pacific theater where he served on the fresh and frozen foods supply ship U. S. S. Arctic AF-7.

Integration of the U. S. military took place gradually during WW II. Although Bob trained with an all-black recruit unit, there was no mandatory segregation on the ships Bob served on, although in the mess hall and sleeping quarters blacks and whites typically segregated themselves. Although Bob personally experienced no racial problems in the Navy, he decided against a Navy career, because he had no confidence the Navy would stick to integration during peace time. So, after almost four years of service, he was mustered out of the Navy in March 1946. But the Korean War was not far off.

Bob returned to Baker City, where his mother and step-father had been sinking roots. After working a short time at the lumber company of his mother's employer, G. P. Lilley, Bob was off to get a college education on the G. I. Bill at Portland University in the fall of 1946. He majored in liberal arts with the goal of possibly going into math or psychiatry. But, after a year of successful study, a different opportunity came knocking in the form of a job offer from the U. S. Postal Service.

After getting out of the Navy, Bob had taken the Postal Service qualifying exam at the suggestion of a black railway mail clerk from Portland, whom he had met through his step-father. Bob passed the exam, putting his name on the hiring list. On the application for employment, Bob had indicated he would serve anywhere, "except in the South for obvious reasons." The job offer, promising a U. S. government job with good pay and retirement benefits, was too tempting to pass up. So, in September 1947, instead of returning to college, Bob began his career as a mailman in Baker City.

The year 1947 was a turning point for Bob in another important area of his life. He married Lillian Agnus Sherman. He had met Lillian in Detroit in 1942 through the girlfriend of a Navy buddy while on leave after recruit training. Their first home was at 1837 East St. until 1964, when they moved into Bob's current home on 2nd St. Even though she came from a large city, Lillian liked living in a small town. She was active in the American Legion Auxiliary and worked many years with KBKR radio announcer Ken Holden on the yearly March of Dimes drive. Bob and Lillian had no children. Lillian died on January 14, 1970. She is buried in Mt. Hope Cemetery next to Bob's parents in a family plot bought years ago by his parents.

During those early years in Baker City, Bob was also active in the American Legion as well as in the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He played on the American Legion's baseball and basketball teams back when there were organized leagues. Bob would even like to play basketball today if there were a team of his age peers in town. But Bob's first love is tennis.

Bob's athletic skill on the tennis courts is common knowledge to many Bakerites. Just after arriving in Baker City in the early 40's Bob played tennis with Claude Hines, who was living and working at the YMCA at the southwest corner of First and Valley streets (now the VFW Building). In his middle years Bob played with friends Leo Palumbo and the late Orville Cary at a level that belied their chronological ages. And for years Bob taught tennis classes for the Baker Family YMCA. Now, just shy of his eightieth birthday, Bob is still playing recreational tennis, but usually with opponents a couple decades younger. He'd like to compete in tennis matches, but no one even close to his

age ever signs up. Match organizers try to talk him into competing in younger age brackets, but he declines quoting the adage, "Old guys can't dance all night with a twenty-five-year-old."

In spite of his nearly four years of service during World War II, the Navy wasn't through with Bob. In December 1950, seven months after the outbreak of the Korean War, Bob was recalled to active duty. For the first few months he served on the landing craft LST-825, then spent the remainder of his tour aboard the troop transport ship U. S. S. Montague AKA-98. After a thirteen-months hiatus serving his country in war a second time, Bob was back delivering mail in Baker City.

Bob feels his career as a mailman in a small town was a good match. He was able to get to know the town and its people. Plus, he was outdoors and pretty much his own boss, which he appreciated since "most of my life I've been pretty much of a loner." Of course, everyone who encountered Bob on his job was in for a treat because he was always whistling. Bob says he's always whistled. He thinks he started whistling to himself at an early age when he was left alone while his mother was working. "Whistling was my company." Also, on his mail delivery route it was a way of announcing that he was coming, so he wouldn't surprise anyone. "I'm glad I did [whistle] and glad I still do."

Bob delivered mail for twenty-three years, until his lifelong ailment, asthma, forced him into early retirement. When he was a child asthma caused him from time to time to miss a week or ten days of school. "You just suffered with it in those days," Bob says, because there was no medicine or inhalers available. Sometimes, when an attack comes on fast, modern inhalers don't do the job either. Bob says an attack "is like getting hit in the stomach; you can't get your breath." After numerous attacks on the job, Bob took disability retirement from the Postal Service in 1970.

Not one to just sit around, Bob got a part-time job as a janitor at Western Bank. That's where he caught the eye of developer John Bootsma, who promptly hired Bob away from the bank to work for him. The job was part time and afforded Bob the ability to work around his asthma, which he still suffers from today. Thirty years later Bob's still on the job for Bootsma.

"I've enjoyed my life in Baker so much," Bob says. "I've learned more in Baker than I would have in a large community. I'm not bothered by [racial discrimination] in Baker. I don't see it here. It's a good town to live in. You have a better chance to get involved. We don't have big growth and I think that's to our advantage." Has he ever thought of moving somewhere else? "I've never had a desire to move. I can't think of any reason to want to leave Baker."

[Editor's note: Armstrong told his life story to Dielman in several interviews conducted in December 2000. Dielman's first memories of Armstrong go back to the late 1940's, when he delivered mail to Dielman's home. When reminded by Dielman, Armstrong responded with "3195 N. 2nd Street," the second of Dielman's boyhood addresses.]