

Arvel L. CASEY Had Diverse Role as Teacher, Mail Carrier, Sawyer and Storekeeper

by Ruth Wilson

From The Observer Record, January 15, 1981

For 32-years Arvel CASEY of Boxley has been bidding farewell to customers at Casey's Grocery with a "Hurry Back!" That era closes January 26, (1981), with the closing of the store. Arvel sold the property to the National Park Service and, although he has leased it back, he can no longer maintain a business on the premises.

Arvel was born in 1902, at Parthenon. He was raised in the big two story farmhouse about 3 miles southwest of Parthenon that is still known locally as "the old Casey place." He is a fourth generation Newton Countian, the son of Levi CASEY, who farmed near Parthenon all his life, and the great-grandson of Anthony CASEY, who came to the county from Morgan County, Tennessee. Arvel remembers Anthony, who took up a wide expanse of land between Parthenon and Murray and laboriously cleared it by hand. He recalls that Anthony Casey was a slave owner in Tennessee before moving on to the Ozarks.

Arvel attended the old Parthenon Academy and helped with the building of it. He, and his brother, Elmer, hauled rocks for the building with mule-drawn wagons. The huge square stones were hewn from a quarry just "across the holler and up the hill" to the north and east of the school. He remembers that the Academy building was erected about 1918.

He and his brothers got up about 4:00 a.m. to do the milking and feed the stock before leaving home, still before daylight, to walk the three miles to school.

The Parthenon academy was the only high school in Newton County for a number of years. Students came from all over the county to live in the dormitory or board with neighboring families.

The Baptist Church helped to fund the building and furnish staff. Arvel remembers that one of his teachers, a Mrs. CROCKER, came from Amarillo, Texas.

There were eight CASEY children raised on the farm. Arvel's brother Ray served two terms as County Treasurer. Elmer, who still lives at Parthenon, taught school at Jasper for many years. Two of Arvel's sisters, Eula KILGORE and Ava THOMAS, also still live in the county. Another sister, Dorothy Bess CARLTON, lives at Batavia and Laura HAM is now in Kansas City.

Arvel says the farm was self-sufficient. "My dad had a bottom field below the house where he raised his feed. He never bought a bushel of corn in his life and he raised mules and pigs and all kind of livestock," he says.

Arvel taught school for two years before he married in 1924. The second year he taught the Buffalo School near his home where he had 84 students enrolled in 8 grades and an average attendance of 82.

Arvel and his wife Elsie moved on up Little Buffalo closer to Murray after they married. Their one daughter, Eul Dean CLARK, was born there.

Elsie is the granddaughter of Uncle Sammie HUDSON, another of Parthenon's earliest settlers and the discoverer of Diamond Cave. The story is that Sammie went into the cave tracking a bear.

Arvel laughingly recalls that Uncle Sammie once traded the cave for a burrow. He remembers, too, exploring the cave as a boy. "We took lanterns and a picnic and spent all day. I

went with some of the PHILLIPS boys and we were bound we were going to find the end of the cave, but we never did.”

In 1935, Arvel bid on the star mail route from Harrison to Ponca and moved from Parthenon. “Actually what I did was bought myself a job,” he says. “I carried the mail for nothing and hauled freight and passengers to make my money.” He bought a big truck and covered the back to serve his route and for the next 20 years, he carried the mail from Harrison.

In 1948, he and Elsie opened A. L. CASEY’s Store at Boxley in one room of their house. Two years earlier, in 1946, they had opened a sawmill behind the house which was to operate nearly as long as the store. The mill closed about three years ago.

With the opening of the mill and store, Arvel found himself swamped with work. “I didn’t have a secretary, I worked all day then stayed up until 10 or 11 o’clock to do the bookkeeping.” He kept meticulous records, all still boxed and labeled and on hand at the store.

About 1961, when the road to Ponca was being built, Arvel added a café to the store building and furnished it with bar stools made from cherry wood sawed at his mill.

The mill turned out all kinds of furniture squares and handle blanks and Arvel shipped car loads of wood from the railroad depots first at Harrison then later at Bergman.

During World War II, the mill employed 25 men and turned out thousands of walnut blanks for gun stocks. Later the U.S. Government bought enormous amounts of ash and hickory which were shipped to France and Germany as part of the lend lease program to rebuild war-torn nations.

Arvel’s mill was steam operated, all but the last year of operation, and the steam whistle could be heard as far away as Parthenon. He says it was quite an attraction and he had numerous visitors who wanted to watch the mill at work and walk on the adjacent swinging bridge across the Buffalo. Arvel says he finally closed the mill because increased competition and high wages were cutting the profit too much.

When he first started the mill, hands were paid \$5 a day. “Some of them came to me and said it was too much. They didn’t want to take it. They were afraid I’d go broke. I had good help. We went to work at 8:00, but men like Roy KEETON and Roy WISHON would be there at 7:30 sharpening their saws and getting ready. Everybody worked hard and still enjoyed themselves and they stood by you.”

At the corner of Arvel’s place is the stump of the big walnut tree mentioned in LACKEY’s History of Newton County because it was topped by Civil War Cannon fire. Just up the road is the cave where saltpeter was mined for bullets and he used to own the place where the bullets were made. Some of the enormous kettles used can still be found at homes up and down the Boxley Valley.

Arvel feels deeply his ties to the community, but he says he wouldn’t have stayed after the Park Service bought his land if he was younger. “We’re too old now to move,” he says.

So, what will he do when the store closes? He says he will be full time farmer. He raises a large herd of Cattle in the fields along the river and plans to continue that.

Arvel and Elsie have five grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. Most of their family is nearby and some of the great-grandchildren are seventh generation Newton Countians. Their family has played an important role in the settlement and growth of Newton County, a role they can all be proud of.

Editor’s note: Arvil L. CASEY, died 30 July 1986 and is buried in the Walnut Grove Cemetery at Boxley.