

Tom Harpool

by Jim Morriss

In the summer of 1936 our country was enduring a difficult period often called “the Great Depression.” But an opportunistic, seventeen year-old school boy in Denton found a way to earn money by providing a unique service that was in great demand. The boy’s name was Tom Harpool and he made a deal with a local businessman named E.W. Morrison to weigh the wheat that was harvested by local farmers. It was important for suppliers and buyers to know exactly how much grain was being bought and sold. Farmers could load about 100 bushels of wheat in a wagon. That would be a load of about 6,000 pounds. Tom had to drive the farmer’s wagon from Morrison’s Mill, about four blocks, to a scale on East Oak St. Then he unhitched the team of horses and weighed the loaded wagon. Young Harpool then hitched the horses and returned to the receiving ramp at the mill. He then returned the empty wagon to the scale, unhitched and weighed the empty wagon. After re-hitching, Tom then drove back to Mr. Morrison with a report on exactly how much wheat had been delivered. For each load the youngster received ten cents which meant much more in those days. It now seems amazing that a successful businessman or a pragmatic farmer would trust a high school boy with that kind of responsibility but it would not seem so amazing if you knew Tom Harpool.

Tom Harpool was born in 1918 in the southeast corner of Denton County in what is now the town of Hebron. He died in 2009 in Denton. In his lifetime of 91 years he earned the friendship and respect of numerous people all over the country. Tom was a successful businessman, and more importantly, a great community leader. When he died he received lavish praise from dozens of institutions and individuals who had benefitted greatly from his help and guidance. Because of his contributions to the Denton Independent School District, the Tom Harpool Middle School is dedicated to his memory. A biography of his

life was written by Nita Thurman*; it is entitled “Tom Harpool, a Life Well Lived.”

Tom’s grandfather was the son of Martin Van Buren Harpole who died in the Civil War. Henry C. Harpole was only nine years old when his father was killed. His mom remarried and soon Henry had several step brothers and sisters. Economic conditions in their home state of Missouri were not good after the war, so in 1873, eighteen year old Henry moved to the more promising conditions in Denton, Texas. Though penniless upon arrival, Henry was able to find work with area farmers and was soon joined by his family from Missouri. He decided to begin using his middle name “Charles” and to change the spelling of his last name to “Harpool.” Probably he wanted to spell the last name more like the way it was pronounced, and using Charles rather than Henry was just to complete the break from his old life in Missouri.

Charles Harpool soon prospered enough to buy a 200 acre farm near Hebron and then married a young lady named Hester Ann Patterson. Charles and Hester had at least six children and Charles became a pillar of the farming community in south east Denton County. Charles was instrumental in forming a “Farmers Alliance” which could control crop prices and the cost of farming equipment. Soon this group was providing banking services to farmers offering a place where they could save money and get loans and mortgages. Eventually the Alliance was able to sponsor local cotton gins, grain mills and storage silos. This gave many local farmers some relief from the predatory practices of some of the early bankers.

One of the sons of Charles and Hester was Robert Thomas Harpool who was born in 1883. Robert worked on his father’s farm and learned every aspect of the agricultural businesses of our county. He was also well acquainted with the

uncertainties of farming. Robert Harpool married a girl named Josephine Soloman and was the father of three sons. He had his own farm but also became the manager of the Burriss Mill and also started a general store in Hebron. The years after WWI were not good years for farming here. The steady encroachment of the boll weevil finally started to affect our cotton harvests. There were also several years of cold wet spring weather which hurt the wheat crop. Furthermore, we had several destructive hail storms which additionally damaged farm crops.

Robert Harpool was sympathetic with the plight of his neighbors and began a practice of accepting crops as payment for goods from his store. As a result he soon had surpluses of wheat, cotton wool and even some cattle to dispose of. He became adept at finding the best places to sell commodities and learned how to utilize the railroads to ship produce quickly and at the best rates. Robert formed a partnership with a man named R. E. Everett. Robert was steadily getting more deeply involved with trading in wheat, cotton and wool futures at a time when these commodities were all becoming more speculative.

Finally in 1928 Robert was completely bankrupt. He had no option but to take his wife and three sons to Denton and look for a job. It seems illogical that Tom, the oldest of the three Harpool kids, would have ever amounted to much at all. The farms that his grandfather and father built were gone. At the age of just ten he was transplanted into an alien environment at the very beginning of the "Great Depression." Even so, the Harpool family pulled themselves back up. Robert got back into business in Denton buying and selling wheat. The three boys went to school and did whatever odd jobs they could to help out.

Soon Young Tom Harpool was able to join Boy Scout Troop 57. There he started several life-long relationships with friends such as Charles Saunders, Deats Headley and Dr. Silvey. At Denton High School Tom was a star player on the basketball team that won the state championship.

He went on to attend North Texas State University where he graduated with a degree in Economics in 1939. While at NTSU Tom met and married Rebecca Moseley. Tom and Rebecca had two daughters and four sons.

Tom Inherited a basic awareness of the farming traditions of Denton County. He had a keen knowledge of the problems and the trends that were developing. He and his father started a retail company in Denton called Harpool Seed Inc. His two brothers joined in the family business but all were aware that it was Tom Harpool who really made Harpool Seed a thriving business. Tom made it a mission to find and sell whatever products that would work best in our locality. He tested seeds fertilizers and farm equipment to find the best ways to help farmers succeed. He also realized that the area was rapidly becoming suburbanized and sought lawn and garden products that would be useful to this new class of customer. Because of his consistent business practices for over fifty years, Tom Harpool became an icon of competence and integrity in this area.

Among the local organizations that benefitted from Tom's guidance and generosity are these: Chamber of Commerce, Kiwanis Club, Boy Scouts of America, United Way, Denton ISD, Public Utility Board, Upper Trinity Regional Water District, Good Samaritan Village, Denton Citizens Water Commission, Denton City Charter Commission, Texas Municipal Power Agency, Men's Garden Club, NTSU Alumni Assoc., and the Denton State School.

*The book, "Tom Harpool, A Life Well Lived," was published in 2008 by Old Alton Press. A limited number of copies were printed. As of January 31, a very small number were still unsold. If you want one and if any are still available you may consult the author at thurmannita@yahoo.com.

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January 2012
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