

Former police chief once lived with hobos

Arthur Leroy Bechtol, 83, is one interesting guy.

His wife Shirley called me up and said, "you need to talk to my husband. He's got more stories than you can shake a stick at."

She was right.

He started out in the usual fashion by telling me his name.

"I've been called Art, Lee, Roy and Leroy," he said. "Many years ago I worked in a lumber camp near Lewiston. There was a fellow there named Leroy, so they called me Lee. After I left the camp I came to work in Battle Creek at the Lakeview Texaco Service. The man's name who owned it was Lee, so I became Roy. I tell ya, if they switched it up any more they wouldn't know what to call me when it was time to eat!"

Roy is a Battle Creek native. He attended the former Joy Country School as a youngster

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and then his family moved to the Plainwell area when he was 10 years old. That's when he started working.

"When you live in the country, you start working when you're young," he said. "We lived in one of the houses on the Snyder Onion Farm."

From there his family moved to Hastings and then Bedford.

"I went to school in Bedford through the eighth grade," he said. "I then left home as a 15-



Roy Bechtol loves listening to his wife Shirley play the piano. (Shopper News Photo by Doug Allen)

year-old to find work in Joplin, Missouri. I left town with a bus ticket to St. Louis and two and a half dollars in my pocket."

A friend told him there was a lot of work in Joplin and he wouldn't have any trouble finding a job.

"I got into Joplin at five minutes to five o'clock," he said. "I got dropped off at the unemployment office and went right in and filled out an application for an opening at the Lincoln/Mercury garage."

That job wouldn't start for another two weeks so he was looking at no place to live, no income and his cash supply was now down 15 cents (his bus ticket to St. Louis).

"I had to choose between spending 25 cents a day to stay

at the YMCA or eating," he said. "I decided to eat."

On the north end of town, near a small river, was a hobo community.

"For the first three days I slept under a bridge with the hobos," he said. "Every day I bought a loaf of bread and a quart of milk. I dug a hole under the bridge and buried the milk to keep it cold."

He checked in every day at the garage to let them know he was available for work.

The man who would become his boss found out where he was sleeping at night and made arrangements for him to stay at the YMCA.

"I finally started work and I will always remember getting my first paycheck," he said. "It wasn't much, maybe 10 bucks, something like that. Anyway, I bought a ham salad sandwich and grape juice and it was the best meal I'd had in a long time!"

After preparing cars for delivery for a year he returned to Battle Creek and, through family connections, got the job at the lumber camp up north.

While driving a truck for the camp he met Shirley, the love of his life.

"The day I met her was one of the greatest days of my life," he said. "I had a date with another girl and she stood me up. I asked Shirley if she wanted to go and she said, 'sure!'"

We've been going steady ever since."

That now includes 64 years

of marriage, four children (two boys, two girls), eight grand children and five great grand kids.

In 1949 he and Shirley moved back to Battle Creek where he worked a series of jobs, including four at one time.

Kellogg's was the first employer, then several gas stations as a mechanic and at Ft. Custer repairing tanks.

He joined the Civil Defense Auxiliary Police Department in 1950 and started riding with Battle Creek Township police officers and took a real liking to police work.

"I could see so many ways to help people and I really like that," he said. "In 1955 I heard about an opening at the Calhoun County Sheriff's Department and worked there as a deputy until 1963."

On a whim, while driving past the Emmett Township Police Department, he pulled in and said, "Hey, do you need a good police officer?"

He was hired on the spot and worked a 3-11 p.m. shift that night.

In 1966, the chief retired and he was promoted to that post.

On patrol one day he got a radio call about someone firing a shot from a car at a Michigan State Police officer on I-94.

"I got on the highway and spotted the car right away and gave chase," he said. "The suspect wrecked his car in a ditch and bailed out and took off across a plowed field. He finally climbed a tree and refused to come down."

By then the troopers had arrived and one of them volunteered to climb the tree and get the suspect down.

He was kicked in the head for his efforts, so the slightly injured trooper climbed back down.

"The farmer who owned the land came over to see what the fuss was all about and I asked him if he had a chainsaw," he said. "The farmer said 'yes' and I asked him if he minded if we cut this tree down. He said 'no problem, I'll go get the saw.' Well as soon as the suspect heard we were going to cut the tree down he came down by himself right away."

In 1969 an opportunity came along that presented not only a nice wage, but retirement benefits as well, so he left the Emmett Township Police Department and became a detective with the Grand Trunk Railroad.

"They had a \$3 million loss every year with theft from shops and railcars, so they wanted me to work on that," he said. "I worked a lot of that undercover so I can't give you any details there. It was interesting work."

He worked at the railroad

until his legs gave out on him in 1993. Walking upwards of 10 miles a day on the stone surrounding railroad track wore his knees right out.

Even with titanium parts in his right leg and failing eyesight, Roy and Shirley are great hosts and I thoroughly enjoyed visiting with them recently on their 10-acre property north of town.

Knowing my boss is going to yell at me by saying, "it's just Five Questions," I did just that.

What's your most commonly used phrase?

"By Golly" and "Is that right?" When I was on the police department people recognized the fact that if they didn't straighten up and I said "By Golly" they were going to jail!"

What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

"I love spending time with my wife, listening to music (he has an extensive country and gospel collection) and listening to Shirley play the piano."

What's your philosophy for getting along with others?

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And my dad had a bunch of sayings that he'd say all the time, and it took me a while to realize he was trying to brainwash me! Anyway, one of them was, 'if you can't tell the world that she's a nice little girl then don't say anything at all.' He had a bunch of them and I grew up listening to them and they make sense now that he was teaching me how to get along with people."

What's your proudest achievement?

"My family, without a doubt."

What's one thing people don't know about you?

I once arrested a highly sought after fugitive that was staying in a home near Sonoma Lake. After I got him over to Marshall I found a six-inch switchblade knife tucked down behind the back seat. We didn't have glass partitions back then, so I was quite uncomfortable when I found that knife. By Golly, if he had gotten loose back there, whew...!"

If you know of someone who should answer my Five Questions call me at the Shopper at (269) 965-3955 or write dallen@j-adgraphics.com