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Legacy Business:

Auto shop is Gilbert's longest-running company, since 1934

Paul and David Clement have been mechanics at their shop in Gilbert since they were boys working for their Dad.

Despite the new crop of replacement to the historic buildings sprouting up across downtown, Gilbert's roots as a tiny farming town now get further and further in the rearview mirror every day. Unless, of course, you drive down Gilbert Road, past all the trendy restaurants and chic boutiques, and spy a familiar name painted atop a well-worn auto repair shop

This anonymous auto shop is hiding one large secret—it's Gilbert's longest-running business, operating out of the same location since 1934.

Even more impressive, sons of Thomas W Clement (Paul and David Clement) who took over the business in 2005 from their father. Tom Clement ran it until the ripe old age of 93.

Still it may surprise some to know that this longtime family-run business was originally part of a world-famous chain.

"The shop was actually built in 1919 before my father took it over in 1934," says David Clement, who has worked at the family auto shop his entire life and still lives nearby.

"They" in this case referring to the Continental Oil Company, the pioneering petroleum company famed for building the first-ever filling stations across the western United States, branded with its instantly recognizable red "Conoco" sign.

"My father was only 18 years old at the time, but he had mechanical experience so they offered him a job," David says. "He worked here all summer and his plan was to start at classes that fall at the Arizona Teacher's College, which is now ASU. He'd already put down a \$45 payment to become a woodworking teacher.

"But CONOCOPHILLIPS at the end of the summer offered the shop and land to my father so they could place more focus on the one in Phoenix. They said, 'Don't worry about the \$45, we'll get that back for you.' They also said just give us the profits on the gasoline, which was 3 cents for every gallon sold at the time, and you can have the shop and the property plus what you make there is yours! How could he refuse?"

The Service Station (Standard Oil) and also a Feed and Seed store across the street said that boy won't last! WOW they closed up in the early 1970s before David started working here! Maybe he scared them off! Ha! He said

Tom Clement never did get that \$45 back, his son David says, but his garage soon became a community mainstay. He even moonlighted as Gilbert's mayor from 1949 to 1955, putting his

mechanical background to good use by overseeing the construction of the town's first sewer system, according to the Gilbert Historical Museum.

Aside from his side gig as mayor, Tom Clement spent the next 70-plus years happily turning wrenches from dusk to dawn.

"Dad worked hard, often up to 18 hours a day," David Clement says. "He'd be gone before us six kids were up in the morning, and sometimes came home after we went to bed, so the only way to spend time with him was down at the shop. That's why I ended up working here, to spend time with dad. His dream was for all of us boys to work here."

Today, two of Tom's four sons still work in the shop; Paul, who's been there since the 1960s, and David, the youngster of the group, because he's only been there since the 1970s.

"Since I'm the youngest, I've been the one to learn computers and new technology," David said. "You have to keep up with the times, with computerized cars and all the digital stuff."

One thing that hasn't changed is how Clement's finds customers, and vice-versa.

"Reputation is everything," David says. "We have a website because you have to, but still get almost all our work from word of mouth and loyal repeat customers. We treat everyone the same: first come, first served."

Although the Clement brothers have thought about selling the business and retiring, they seem to be in no hurry to ride off into the sunset.

"My father lived to age 99 because he didn't want to retire," David says. "He always said that all his old teaching buddies retired to their recliners and never woke up from their naps as soon as they retired, so he never really did. He worked full-time until he was 93, and then he was still around as much as he could be for the next few years."

As for David's own thoughts after decades of watching Gilbert grow up outside his garage bay door, he says, "The town sure has changed drastically since then. And we've seen it all up close. Is it too late to go back?"

A Legacy Business

This is the corrected and edited by: 'David Palmer Clement'