

## **Driven to Success – The Story of Newman W. Benson**

To have met Wysox Township resident Newman Benson any time after he and his family moved from Mosherville in northwestern Bradford County to Towanda in 1928 is to wonder which one many personal passions best defines his character. At times seeming equally energized by aviation, building design, entrepreneurship, financing, reading, real estate investment, and automobiles, Benson maintains that his years as a car salesman and the many road trips associated with the profession provided him with the greatest satisfaction.

“I grew up in business,” Benson explained in an October 2014 interview, attributing his penchant for hard work to his father, Newman E. Benson, who was Sheriff of Bradford County in the late 1930s. “My dad was the most important person in my life.”

His father's knack for business motivated the younger Benson to find work at businesses along Main Street and throughout Towanda during the years that he attended the Third Ward School and Towanda High School. Among other tasks, he was known for selling newspapers, distributing Sears catalogs, and “sweeping floors or whatever else was needed” at the W.P. Fitzgerald Buick Dealership and Dewey Dennis's men's clothing store.

In 1935, Benson, along with his sisters and mother, Ethel, campaigned vigorously to propel the elder Benson to the office of Bradford County Sheriff. At the time, the Sheriff and his family routinely took up residence in a comfortably-outfitted apartment in the prison. The younger Benson has fond memories of the living quarters he and his family shared at the old Bradford County Jail on Pine Street. “I had the greatest bedroom on the top floor,” Benson recalled. “I could see everything on Main Street.”

Sheriffs were only permitted to serve a single term at the time. In 1939, father and son started an Oldsmobile franchise in Towanda that they moved across the Susquehanna River into Wysox in 1940. “We were probably one of the first businesses on the Golden Mile,” Benson said of the car dealership that his father designed.

The sudden passing of the elder Benson in 1941 and the onset of World War II brought dramatic changes to the family and to the automobile business. Owning a new car was suddenly not in fashion, and Benson would soon be leaving Wysox for the first of two stints with the US Army in France. As soon as war broke out, the young man made two bold investments that helped keep the family in business while he was gone.

He purchased more than 100 used vehicles and crammed them into the garage behind the dealership on Route 6. Then he went to Philadelphia and bought every tire that he could find on Broad Street, having the foresight to know that rubber would soon be rationed. The tractor trailer load of tires and the stockpile of cars no doubt proved valuable to many area drivers for the next four years.

Though Benson was spared front line action, he was close enough to the conflict to gain a great distaste for war, as well as for the mundane duties that he was generally assigned. “I did a lot of KP and guard duty. It was boring,” he remarked. “When I got out in 1945, I got back into my business as fast as I could.”

One of the first things that he did upon his return was to provide financing for many military veterans to allow them to purchase vehicles when they got home. His commitment to helping local residents and fellow entrepreneurs flourish into the 1950s led to a second career and professional relationships with financial institutions. He helped form the merger between Citizens Bank of Towanda and Northern National Bank of Wellsboro in the early 1960s and served as director of the new C&N Bank for many years. Benson remains its largest

shareholder.

"I helped a lot of businesses get started," Benson explained, noting that he'd often leverage loans against his own stock if he felt strongly enough about the potential success of a new venture. He and fellow Golden Mile business man Budd Clark, Sr., began the Wysox Chamber of Commerce, and Benson served as its president for a number of years.

In March 1954, Benson was in Florida when he got the call that there had been a fire at the dealership. The employee told him that it had started in the heating system.

"I thought that it was just the furnace and we'd have to replace it," Benson related. He returned to Wysox to find that his auto showroom and offices and about 20 cars inside the building were a total loss. He quickly rebuilt, designing the second Benson Olds-Buick-GMC dealership, the facade of which remained the same until 2013, when it was remodeled as part of the current Ferrario car dealership.

In addition to cars, Benson found a passion for airplanes, learning to fly from then Towanda Airport manager Oliver Goodrich and owning a series of Piper Cubs that he routinely flew to GM headquarters in Buffalo, NY, to see new models and order supplies; to Penn State to watch football games; and to Harrisburg to enjoy sprint car races.

After owning several cottages on Lake Wesauking, a place that he had fallen in love with while playing there as a child, Benson designed a new house there in 1960 in which he still resides with his wife, Patricia. Patricia first met him more than 30 years ago when she went to the dealership to buy a car.

"I bought two," she chuckles. "He was a good salesman." Together, they raised sons Thomas, Ronald, and Robert at the lake.

Benson lost his eyesight quite suddenly to macular degeneration in 1990. He is grateful to have seen so much of the world while he was able but laments that he hasn't been behind the wheel of an automobile since then. Even more so, he wishes that he could fly again.

Regardless of where he has traveled and lived, however, Benson maintains that his favorite place on Earth is Lake Wesauking. He has owned and rented as many as two dozen cottages and houses on the lake and is president of the Lake Wesauking Association. He routinely swam in the lake from spring to fall, logging as many as 103 swims in one season.

Benson has also served as president of the Towanda Rotary and the Oak Hill Cemetery Association and was a charter member of the Progress Authority.

Being vision impaired, Benson admits that he has not actually seen the changes brought to Wysox Township by the natural gas industry. What he misses most about the Wysox of yesteryear is "talking to smart business people."

He cited among his business buddies over the years furniture salesman Clark, florescent X-ray screen inventor Carl Patterson, Bloss Bootery owner and fellow tennis player Beverly Bloss, insurance mogul Henry Dunn, Sr., Penelec director David Smith, clothier Eddy Hoffman, and Tunkhannock businessman Bill VanDuzer, who sold hardware supplies to Towanda merchants.

Photos and captions:



Newman Benson's auto dealership had grown large enough by the 1970s to require the purchase of a rig and trailer to haul vehicles.



Benson sold Oldsmobiles for many years, but the vehicles had already come along way by 1938 from this 1901 model.



**Newman in his Army dress uniform with mother, Ethel, after the start of World War II.**



**Family patriarch and former Bradford County Sheriff Newman W. Benson.**



**Newman with mother, Ethel, and sisters, Beverly Ann and Martha moved to Towanda from Mosherville in 1928.**



**The trees around lake Wesauking in Wysox Township were often already showing color when Newman would go for his final swim of the year.**



**The Lake Wesauking home of Newman and Patricia Benson was built in 1960.**



**Newman Benson redesigned the Oldsmobile dealership along Route 6 in 1954 and designed the house in which he still resides in Lake Wesauking in 1960.**