

Photo of the Month

Tom McNeil and McNeil Chevrolet
By James Phillips, NWACC Service Learning Student, March 2009



McNeil Chevrolet & Sinclair Gas Station
Corner of 2nd & Elm Streets, Rogers, Arkansas, c.1930
Neg. # N009636

Tom S. McNeil was the son of William A. McNeil and Mollie McNeil, who settled in Rogers, AR in 1890. The McNeil family became well known throughout the community and opened a family business, McNeil Bros. Rexall Drug Store in 1898, located at 106 W. Walnut. Later, McNeil's father constructed a hotel on the corner of Poplar and Fifth Streets in 1907. In 1909, McNeil, pharmacist and manager of McNeil Drug Store, began selling Buick automobiles from behind the counter. He was the pioneer of automotive sales in Rogers as he was the first local dealer and sold his first car to James Grimes in 1909. Cars at that time were sold without windshields, tops or lights. Those were considered accessories and were priced at \$50 a top and \$25 for a windshield.

His first showroom happened to be an old buggy shed at his mother's home. He only ordered one car at a time and would not add another until the previous had been sold. Catalogs were used to show possible additional features for the automobile to potential buyers. The McNeil Auto Company didn't receive its first shipment of cars until 1911 from an auto company in St. Louis. The first factory direct shipment came in 1914. With more cars being offered in the community, the 1920's gave way to the city of Rogers paving streets with brick to modernize the area.

McNeil's pioneering efforts showed often for many years. He was the first to make an overland round trip from Rogers, AR to Kansas City, MO in an automobile and the trip took one week to complete. McNeil's first vehicle, a white Buick, was also well remembered among the citizens of Rogers. In 4th of July parades, that car was always "done up like a 1924 flapper with beautiful women and given a prominent place" in the parade.

Using his car in parades created a desire for automobiles in the Rogers area, which led to a strong growth in his business. By 1924, his business of car and accessory sales garnered more than \$100,000 a year in business. His business growth was so much that in 1930 McNeil Chevrolet moved to a new location on the corner of 2nd and Elm Streets. The new location, on 119 S 2nd St, was constructed by A. O. Clarke, and in September 1930, a Grand Opening event was organized. This event was so large that between 1,500 and 2,000 people attended the celebration and over 500 people were treated to a free picture show at the Victory Theatre, courtesy of the dealership to mark the occasion.

The new dealership had a nice show area and also contained a service and repair shop. McNeil summed up their service best when in a 1936 advertisement he said, "Today, after 27 years of continuous experience in the automobile business, we still regard ourselves as leaders, and in the same spirit of progressiveness that characterized our pioneering days, we are putting our best efforts into bringing to our people the latest and best the world has to offer in our chosen line." He even gave a brand new 1950

Chevrolet Styleline DeLuxe 4-Door Sedan to Clint Pratt, one of his employees that had served him for 30 years.

McNeil was known to play a few practical jokes on his friends in the community. In one instance a joke was turned on him. In 1922, McNeil and a friend William Cane were headed back to Rogers on the No. 5 train from St. Louis. After waking up from sleeping one night, they noticed that they were short of their trousers. They talked with the train conductor but received no sympathy from him. The conductor later found his missing trousers but the culprit was not determined. McNeil and William quickly and thoughtfully worded a Western Union to their wives to bring them some pants at the train station when they arrived. The telegraph was intercepted by Ross Hall, and he decided instead to gather a band to play music, a flatbed truck to parade them around in, and a few barrels for the two to get inside. When McNeil and Cane arrived, McNeil was in some borrowed oversized pajama bottoms and William was pantsless. The two got inside the barrels and were paraded around town being dropped off a short distance from home to walk the remaining way in the barrels. It seems everyone in town had a pleasant sense of humor and Tom and William handled the teasing with good taste.

In addition to his business success, McNeil served his community for many years as a civic leader and was one of the incorporators for Saint Mary's-Rogers Memorial Hospital in 1948. McNeil sold his business in 1954 to Bill Hackler and the business became Hackler Chevrolet-Olds. Jerry Smith (Jerry Smith Chevrolet-Olds) purchased the dealership from Hackler in 1970 and sold the business shortly thereafter to Buddy Sparks (Buddy Sparks Chevrolet-Olds-Geo) in 1973. Buddy Sparks moved the dealership to its present location on 2100 S 71B at this time. Later the business became Kent Rylee Chevrolet-Olds-Geo and the business today is currently named Kent Rylee Chevrolet located at 2100 S 8th St. The old South Second Street location for McNeil Chevrolet is still standing in downtown Rogers, AR. It is currently the home for the law offices of Matthews, Campbell, Rhoads, McClure, Thompson, & Fryauf.