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Owsley keeps history alive

By SETH DUKES THE NEWS-ENTERPRISE
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Bob Owsley stands outside The Cecilian Bank in Cecilia on Thursday.
PHOTOS BY SETH DUKES/The News-Enterprise

Getting to know Bob Owsley

Family: Children are Lou Ann Allen and Laura Owsley.

Grandchildren: Matthew Allen (Beth) and Jenna Colson (Jon). Great grandchildren: Jase, Clay and Lily Colson Lucy and Annelise Allen.

Favorite pie: Coconut pie.

Favorite television shows: "Gunsmoke" and "Maine Cabin Masters."

Hobbies: Collecting knives, historic cars like his 1952 Chevrolet pickup and Model A Coupe and trains.

Bob Owsley knows all there is to know about The Cecilian Bank.

And he should. He has worked there since Sept. 2, 1958, and has done nearly every job there is to do there.

After growing up in Rineville on a dairy farm, he attended Western Kentucky University, initially to become a pharmacist. Three semesters in, he was drafted into the U.S. Army.

While serving in the military, he married his late wife, Martha Jean. He said his father-in-law suggested Owsley take banking classes at what was then Bowling Green Business University, which preceded WKU's Gordon Ford College of Business.

Owsley liked it, so he and his wife moved to Cecilia after Earl Templeman offered him a job at The Cecilian Bank.

At first, Owsley was confined to filing canceled checks and dreaming of interacting with the customers.

"I could see the people come through the drive-thru and at the teller's window, and I would wave at them," he said. "I just couldn't wait to get up there and do it myself."

He did, and he went on to do much more. He was a loan officer, vice president, executive vice president, president and chief executive officer. Owsley, who will turn 90 Oct. 12, now is chairman of the board and he still frequently comes into the office to work.

"I haven't even thought about retiring yet," he said.

Owsley said he doesn't feel like he's ever worked.

"We had two weeks of vacation, and sometimes, I didn't even take it all," he said. "Sometimes we had three weeks, and I surely didn't take all that."

The Kentucky Bankers Association holds an annual conference and Owsley hasn't missed it in 65 years.

Upstairs at the bank, a room is dedicated to the businesses' history. Machines used for banking decades ago, old records, artifacts and pictures are displayed, showing how much has changed in the bank's history of more than a century.

Trains also are a motif of the bank, and Owsley said he's responsible for bringing the Illinois Central Railroad caboose to Cecilia where it serves as a landmark.

"I wrote to Chicago, and 15 years later, a man from the company came down and asked where I wanted my caboose," he said.

In addition to trains, Owsley loves collecting knives. He has more than 3,000 and loves to match them to whatever shirt he's wearing for the day. His love for knives stretches back almost as far as his entrepreneurial spirit.

"We sold knives at school in the sixth grade," he said about he and a cohort. "I bought brand new ones wholesale and sold them at school. We bought them at 45 cents each and sold them for 75 cents. They sold at the store for \$1.25, so we gave them a bargain."

His hobby grew, and he got the go-ahead from his wife to keep it growing.

"I didn't play golf and I didn't drink beer, so my wife said it was OK to buy knives," he said.

He doesn't source any of his knives online, instead dealing face to face with people, forming relationships just like he has in his tenure at the bank.

Owsley has been recognized with many awards and accolades both locally and beyond. A library in WKU's alumni center is named after he and his wife and Sept. 4 has been "Bob Owsley Day" since 2018.

He said if he could go it back and do it all over again, he wouldn't change anything.

"I had a lot of great friends and a lot of good opportunities," he said.

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