

## **Lester Fox: From boy driver to big auto dealer**

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on June 24, 2013)

Carolyn Krause finishes her efforts to chronicle the amazing story of my friend, Lester Fox featuring segments of his oral history that can be found at the Center for Oak Ridge Oral History at the Oak Ridge room in the Oak Ridge Public Library or online at <http://www.orpl.org/> (select departments, COROH and "view oral histories") Enjoy Carolyn's excellent concluding article in the *Historically Speaking* series on Lester Fox!

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Wheels, deals and lots of luck have been keys to the prosperous life of former auto dealer Lester Fox.

He started out delivering milk on a bicycle and then, at the age of 13, drove a wrecker, a car and buses in need of repair to support the war effort. He got his first driver's license when he was 14.

In his interview with filmmaker Keith McDaniel, Lester told lots of stories. Once a state trooper stopped him for driving a wrecker that pulled two broken-down buses Lester had chained together. "Don't you know not to pull a train on a road in Tennessee?" the trooper said. "You've got to put the train on a track."

A short man in his 20s who ate with Lester in Lake City where a bus repair shop was asked him if he could borrow a pair of Lester's greasy coveralls. Lester asked why and the man revealed he was an FBI agent. "If you ever tell anybody, this could get me killed," the agent said. "I've got to work in a shop where there is some loose talk going around. The government wants nobody to talk about what they are doing."

At war's end the Fox brothers were operating 103 buses and had a crew of mechanics. Lester learned how to repair and maintain vehicles skillfully from an excellent mechanic who had worked on racecars in North Carolina. Why did he work for the Fox brothers instead of getting a better-paying job with the Manhattan Project?

Lester found out that this North Carolina resident was wanted there for hauling moonshine liquor. If he had applied for a job at an Oak Ridge plant, he would have been investigated and the North Carolina authorities would have found him.

Lester said his interest in the car business likely started when he was 13. He bought for \$15 a car he saw in front of an Oliver Springs house on his newspaper route. It had a bad transmission but his brother bought him a new one for \$5 to pay him for cleaning buses.

When he drove the \$15 car, the brakes screeched, attracting attention. A new hire for the Manhattan Project asked him if he would take \$60 for his car. Lester wanted \$75 but sold it to him for \$60 and walked three miles home with a nice profit.

When he was 16, Lucky Lester won a Jeep from the American Legion after buying a chance on winning it for \$1 at the Clinton fairgrounds. Then he answered an ad from someone offering to trade a 1941 Chevrolet for a Jeep.

Lester had saved his earnings during the war. In the fall of 1946 the government scheduled an auction in Oak Ridge for selling its surplus vehicles. Only veterans could buy them. He convinced six Army veterans, who had returned to his high school so they could receive \$50 a month from the government for graduating, to get Veterans Administration permits so they could buy vehicles at the auction.

"For each vehicle that you buy for me at the auction, I'll give you \$50 and I'll pay for the vehicle," Lester told the boys. He bought the surplus vehicles and resold them for a profit while still in high school.

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He joined the Army after getting married in 1950. (He and his wife had three sons.) Then he worked as a bulldozer operator in the Army Reserve at Elza Gate. Lester got a job at K-25 as a maintenance mechanic and welder. In 1954 K-25 was laying off workers, so Lester convinced the personnel office to save his friend's job and lay off Lester so he could help his brother sell cars.

"I went into the car business and was always at the right place at the right time," Lester told McDaniel. "One day in 1966 my brother was out of town for a week and a guy said, 'I'd like to sign you up for a Toyota franchise.' " So Lester filled out the paperwork and Fox Toyota in Clinton was born. Two years later his brother was killed in an automobile accident.

"Toyota never did really catch on until the energy crunch of '73," Lester said. Earlier in that year his district manager called him, saying, "Well, I've got a bunch of cars that dealers didn't take. How many do you want?" Lester said, "I'll take all of them." Instead of receiving 30 Toyota cars a month, he got 100.

"It was a real lucky move," Lester said. "Gasoline got scarce and people wanted smaller cars like Toyotas. I had all those cars in stock when they were really scarce."

As a member of the Masonic Lodge, Lester annually met with all the car dealers in Anderson County to solicit donations for the Shriners Hospitals for Crippled Children. In 1975 he told the owner of Tri-Co Motors, the Oldsmobile franchise in Oak Ridge, that he would be interested in buying this franchise if the owner wanted to sell it.

The next year the owner, who had developed serious health problems, agreed to sell the franchise to him. Lester noted that, while Toyota approved his franchise in one day, it took six months for General Motors to approve his Oldsmobile dealership.

In 1979 Lester bought the Chrysler and Dodge dealerships; in 1982, the Nissan franchise; in 1991, the Buick and Pontiac franchise, and in 1997, the Chevrolet dealership. By then he owned all the GM franchises in Oak Ridge, as well as Subaru and GMC dealerships in South Clinton.

Seeing that demand for American autos was falling, Lester sold his auto dealerships in 2005, "How did you know that the time was right to sell and that the economy was going to turn down?" people asked him. His answer: "I smelled the air and I didn't smell any cheese in it, so I figured I better sell." Lucky Lester always seemed to know the right time to make a deal.

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Thanks again Carolyn for an excellent treatment on the history of Lester Fox, an extraordinary life indeed.

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By war's end Lester and his brother owned and operated 103 buses – photo by Ed Westcott



Now Lester enjoys the time he gets to spend at the family's new "Fox Bros Ace Hardware" business on the Oak Ridge Turnpike – photo by Carolyn Krause