PIONEER SPIRIT
Lee Hartley helped build Palmer through hard work and strong family business

BY GREG JOHNSON
Frontiersman

The three most important things in business are location, location, location, a close second is recognizing potential.

Acting on that potential is what defined Lee Hartley, the 95-year-old patriarch of one of the Valley's most prominent businesses and families. Hartley's Aug. 5 death brought the family together again at their 40-acre Springmont system spread — all 50 of them, except for one who has a commitment for military basic training.

Hartley's life is more than an example of a successful businessman as founder and owner of Hartley Brothers and later the Valley's first Ford dealership. It's also a story of achieving the American Dream while colonizing the Matanuska Valley with his wife of nearly 70 years, Marilyn.

In fact, if it weren't for her, there may not have been Hartley Brothers.

"Lee and I were going together and his folks lived at the Butte," Maralyn said. That courtship took them past the familiar location of Hartley Brothers at the corner of Arctic Avenue and Valley Way.

"He would pass that corner every day and say, 'What an ideal place for a service station,'" she said.

Lee and Maralyn Vannoord would marry Oct. 30, 1940, and in 1947, he teamed up with his brothers and father to open Hartley Brothers, a fuel service and repair station in Palmer. It's a partnership that continues today. The family still owns the property, now a Harley Davidson dealership, with the familiar "Hartley Brothers" on the building.

Although Lee never finished high school and spent time during the Valley's colonization in 1935 and 1936 digging ditches, being a business owner was in his blood, Maralyn said.

"He was just born that way," she said. "His dad was a businessman, so he was born into that. His dad said if he wasn't going to finish school he had to work. His dream was to always have a service station."

As the years went by, Hartley Brothers became a key business in the growth of Palmer, she said. "I know a lot of kids in Palmer grew up selling gas at the gas station. Lots and lots of them, that was their first job," she said, adding there was always a humble pride in being part of the town's progress. "We were just amazed (at the growth), because we grew with it. We helped it grow. Lee never said, 'I did that, I did this.' He never bragged about things that happened. It amazes me now (when) driving to Wasilla or even to the hospital," she said.

Lee went on to build Hartley Motors Inc., the first Ford dealership in the Valley, but sold the dealership to Harold Nye in 1984 after the Ford Corp. continued to pressure him to become bigger than he wanted to be.

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