

## ALAN HARR

**Wayne:** This is May 5th, 2023. I'm Wayne Summers, along with Julie Peters, and today we are interviewing Alan Harr at his jewelry store in St. Johns. Alan, why don't you start out by talking a little bit about the history of this store?

**Alan:** First of all, it's our 70th year this year so Harr's Jewelry's been 70 years. I am second generation. My son and daughter are floating around here and they're third generation. My father [Roy A. Harr] started the business in 1953 but he worked for a jeweler eleven years in Fowler. He lost his father at age of seven and back then he was forced to go to work because he had to bring money home to the family. So, at fifteen years old, there was a jeweler that was in town and said he was a reliable human being because he delivered the paper, 'cause he had a paper route, and he was there consistently on a daily basis. He offered him a job and he became a watchmaker. He became a horologist and that is part of his history. We had a watch repair facility along with a jewelry store and back then we also had a gift store. I mean, we had silver plate and glassware. You know, Fenton Glass was an American made company. We had a gift store/clock repair/jewelry/watch repair so that's how it all got started.

I came in 1970. I'll back up for just a moment. I worked for my father all through grade school and high school. In 1968, he bought an engraving machine and he took me to a jeweler friend of his and he had him teach me how to engrave. He put the engraving machine in my bedroom, as I was in high school, and I would come home at night and engrave whatever the store had going. ID bracelets were huge back then so I was an engraver all through high school/I started doing watch repairment.

In 1972, I started working full time with my father and we were partners by 1974 and until he retired, we were partners. Then I took over the store at that time, purchased the remaining part of it, the point being I have three children but two of my children are my partners here and they're running it, quite frankly, more than I am.

**Wayne:** When did you move from downtown St. Johns?

**Alan:** Been 20 years next month.

**Julie:** What year did you come to St. Johns?

**Alan:** 1953. I did say that it was March 9, 1953, my dad bought the store. My dad actually wanted to buy Rand's Jewelers the year before and he did not wanna sell it and so my dad opened a store over in Portland. He was there nine months. Then Mr. Rand came over and said, "I'd like to sell you the store." My dad said, "Well, I already have a store now," but he felt St. Johns was the county seat and it would be just more beneficial if he was over here. So he went to the bank and they wouldn't loan him the money because he didn't have enough history. So Mr. Rand went to the bank. We didn't have the disclosure laws back then. He went to the bank and he came back to my dad, said, "Well, they'll loan you the money if your father-in-law signs for it. He's a farmer and he has land." That's an asset. He had land so then my father bought the store in 1953. When I say the store, I'm not talking the building, I'm talking about the jewelry store itself and then, of course, eventually he bought the building.

**Wayne:** So you leased the building originally?

**Alan:** My father did, yes, not very long. I wouldn't be able to give you those dates, but not very long.

**Wayne:** Let's go back in history a little bit. Do you know when the Harr family first came to Clinton County?

**Alan:** Oh boy, yeah! Somebody just gave me some of that information. We're German. It would've been my great-grandfather [Jacob Harr] came from Germany, landed in New York area, married a gal from Westphalia [Elizabeth Schmitt], moved over to this area 'cause Westphalia was a German town, and the rest is history.

**Wayne:** You grew up in Fowler. Is that correct?

**Alan:** That is correct.

**Wayne:** What can you tell us about going to school there or what the town was like?

**Alan:** Always sports oriented. That's first. Good roots!

**Wayne:** Let's go into this [newspaper picture of store on Clinton Ave.] .

**Alan:** So this store, he purchased, I want to say a few years later, and he remodeled it. Actually, if you look at the window that it is today, it is the same framework that he did back somewhere in the sixties.

**Julie:** Are you in agreement that this would be early fifties, with the scallops?

**Alan:** That was in the fifties. That is correct 'cause he bought it that way. He purchased it that way.

**Wayne:** How has the jewelry business changed over the last 70 years?

**Alan:** I started in 1972. There was three jewelers here. There was four in Owosso; there was three in Alma; there was one in Elsie; there was one in Ithaca; there was two in Ionia. We're the only ones standing and it's like the family farm a little bit. The small independent is shrinking. Our circle of customer base is larger. It's just not St. Johns. It's a larger circle but that's 70 years of taking care of people properly so you develop a reputation that goes long.

**Wayne:** So there aren't any left in Owosso even?

**Alan:** No. The last one left.

I went to repair school. I can tell you that story. 1973 or 4, give or take a year, there was four jewelers over there and one jeweler knew my dad and his son was similar in age. We jumped in the car and went off to repair school in the early seventies together and learned to do repair. Well, in 2016, the last store was closed over there and everybody that would ever ask him where to go, now that he was not there, comes this way.

**Wayne:** Just out of curiosity, who was that?

**Alan:** Cerveny jewelers [J. L. Cerveny 110 W. Main]. His name was Joe and the last one standing there was Brian Cerveny

This industry is broader than most industries 'cause you have to wear a lot of different hats. You don't learn it overnight. I have a repair facility in the back, not very normal today in the jewelry industry. A lot of 'em send their work out. He's been with me for 30 years. My wife [Arlene Thelen] said to me, "You can't do it all 'cause you're here--. Seven days a week you're around and you work foolish hours in order to stay up. You're either gonna kill yourself or--. You need to hire somebody to do the work. I wanted the work done in the store so I hired a young man at that time and he's still with me today after 30 years.

**Wayne:** Must have made a good choice.

**Alan:** Yeah. He's a good man. Like him and I say, we're kind of kind of like brothers sometimes.

**Julie:** That's nice.

**Alan:** That's the kind of relationship you should have with your employees.

**Wayne:** If they stuck around this long, it means they're happy to.

**Alan:** Yes. I have another employee that's been 30 years.

**Julie:** My first real watch was purchased at your store downtown. I would've been 16, somewhere in there. I graduated '69.

**Alan:** Two things that have changed the watch industry. Everybody got a graduation watch. I remember when graduations, the mother and dad would walk in or they'd buy it on their own or they'd walk in with the gal or the guy because everybody had a wind-up watch. They were wind-ups. This is an old 1950s watch that I'm wearing but everybody had a wind-up watch and everybody got one for graduation. Even back then they would spend a 100, 200, or \$300 back then on a nice wristwatch.

Over the years that has changed because we got into battery operated. We got into what I call a throwaway watch that you can buy on the market and when you're done, it's done. So that industry changed. My father did say in the seventies: "Do not do watch repair. Don't learn that part of it 'cause it's going to change." I started on the bench in the jewelry. As our term would call it, I was a "benchy." I started engraving and then I started doing jewelry repair. Of course, sales just came on its own when you're in your own business and stuff like that. He even said, "Do not do it." Watch makers today are very hard to find.

**Wayne:** Not too many people have the old style anymore.

**Julie:** I found my old one.

**Alan:** We can repair it. I do have a gentleman that does a nice job. It takes longer than it used to. I have an old tuning fork watch. Accutron made a tuning fork. It was by Bulova. They made it 17 years. I've got three of 'em back there that I have running. I've got a real unusual one, a Spaceview, 14 carat gold. I

mean it's kind of a special piece for me but those repairmen are pretty much in their eighties. They don't need to learn that technology today so I really have to dig hard to get Accutron repaired for you.

**Julie:** I think it was a Bulova.

**Alan:** Bulova or a Wyler 'cause we carried Bulova and Wyler?

**Julie:** Nope, Bulova.

**Wayne:** Now the engraving business that you said you learned, that was all hand engraved, I'm assuming.

**Alan:** No, it was machine engraved using hand technology. If you look right there, the gal over there, she's on the computerized engraving machine over there. You can hear it hum. I bought that five, six years ago. I still have my engraving machine in the back that I had in 19--.

**Wayne:** In high school?

**Alan:** Yeah. I got my dad's workbench from the jeweler in Fowler and that's at my home. He used that bench when he was there. A story that I would rather not have: I was a fairly young man and the jewelry store went outta business there in Fowler and I was in high school. I was in high school. You think like a high schooler. My dad had went and bought all the equipment, all the old crystals. In fact, I just threw them out just recently 'cause who needs a crystal for an old, square, 1950s watch? We bought all that equipment and I hauled it down to the basement. I said, "Dad, what the hell are you gonna do with that stuff? I mean, what are you gonna do with that?" And he goes, "Nothing, but he gave me the start and I owed it to her to buy it from her." That was his reasoning.

**Wayne:** You know what? It was a good reason in my world.

**Alan:** At the end of the day, he felt he owed it to her 'cause that's how he got his start. It didn't matter if it was any value. I have an eye loupe from that store yet that occasionally I dust off and take a look at. I got some hand tools we still use from that because some hand tools, a metal -?- never dies. It's a little nostalgic for me.

**Wayne:** When people ask you to do engraving, did they ask for particular styles or--,

**Alan:** It was fairly basic back then. There was no such thing as computers. Block was a man's engraving look where a script was more of a lady's.

**Wayne:** It was either script or block, basically?

**Alan:** Yeah. There was a few. Monogramming, there was a few variations and things like off of that. I've still got the type sets around here from those. I don't have the heart to throw 'em away. It was basic. I used the example of the ID bracelet. Speidel made an ID bracelet for 7, 8, \$9 and every young lady got an ID bracelet. My dad would bring some days home, a dozen, two dozen, and it said "Debbie" and then "with love always" on the back or whatever. That tarnished with the relationship when you're in high school. It was very popular, engraving.

My dad, back then, when he was a repairman, he would probably repair anywhere from 20 to 40 watches a week, overhaul. The old-fashioned jeweler used to have a board with a hook. Every night we took those off the hook, put 'em in a box 'cause he was fussy. It went into the safe for security reasons. Every morning he hung those watches back up on the board. If you came in and said, "I was here. I had my watch overhauled." You'd look it up and you'd find it up there and you'd take it off the hook. You'd sell it or you would service it. A lot of people had their watches serviced every two years. Molly's husband and my son, 20 years ago, we did all the staining [of wood trim in new store] work in here. We did all our own work. That's how our jewelry has been brought up, to work hard. That's kind of how we did it.

I can give you any other history. I've gotten into stories, but stories sometimes tells how we were, how we became here. By the way, I started at a very young age 'cause I enjoyed it.

[Showing picture of watch board] Here is an example of the board I told you about when you put watches--. Look at all those watches. Those are all ones that are done. I'm not gonna count 'em, but there's probably fifty on that board. This is my dad when he was young. That's me when I was younger.

**Julie:** I remember you when you were younger too.

**Alan:** I still love the business. That's why I'm here. How many people have the ability to work with their family in this day and age? Those are just some things. I actually have the first watch that my dad sold.

**Julie:** Really! They gave it back?

**Alan:** Yes. I'm only telling you what the customer told me, but one day she walked in here---I've got it stored in one of my--[Gets the watch and shows it] She said, "Based on your dad's story, this was the first watch he sold and I want you to have it." Look, it says, "Lady's Elgin." Elgin was a watch company in the U.S.

**Wayne:** A Lady's Elgin.

**Julie:** That looks like my mom's. I have my mom's too.

**Wayne:** I gotta take [a picture of] that. Still had the box and everything!

**Alan:** I was gonna show you an old black eye loupe that I had from the other jeweler years ago. I still have it around here somewhere and the other thing that I always said, and the customer dropped it off years ago. I didn't see it there quickly. There's a pocket watch floating around here that says "St. Johns" on it. I always thought I'd give it to your Museum.

**Julie:** Yeah, they would like that.

**Wayne:** Because it was sold in St. Johns?

**Alan:** It has the St. Johns name on it. My guess it would've been a private label. Actually, it was before my father.

**Julie:** So it might've been someone who made a watch in St. Johns?

**Alan:** No, My guess it was private label. There was a jewelry store on the second block.

**Julie:** Allison's.

**Alan:** Allison's. Yep.

**Julie:** Then [Lester] Lakes bought it.

**Alan:** Lakes moved out in 1968. She's young and she says, "I've seen it around."

[Daughter brings over eye loupe and Alan show how it was used] Yep. That's how you used to do it like this.

**Julie:** If you normally wear glasses, can you see better with that then?

**Alan:** Yeah. This is magnification. It's dirty, so I ain't gonna--

**Julie:** Wow!

**Wayne:** You're gonna try it?

**Alan:** You used to check prongs.

**Julie:** I don't trust my eyeballs to hold it.

**Alan:** You see it?

**Julie:** Oh wow!

**Alan:** See how that magnifies it?

**Julie:** Yeah, yeah, yeah!

**Alan:** You'll see your dirty nails. Put your nails up there. I always gotta bite you because I gotta shove it in your face. You're always miles away from it.

**Julie:** Wow!

**Alan:** That hasn't been cleaned. So just little things like that that came from—

The biggest mistake we make in this world, we forget where we came from and we have never forgotten where we came from. I listened to my dad all the time because of his stories and it wasn't easy for him. He never portrayed to me that it wasn't easy. We were kids. He shouldn't portray it. That was his problem. He's the adult. I never forgot that. That's how we base this store today. My kids have the same philosophy that I had and that my dad had. You just have to be honest with people front and

foremost. It's very important. I think we've lost that so it's too bad. Like I say, sometime if you ever have a question on downtown--. You were graduating in '69 so you remember Durkee's Hat Shop, just as an example.

**Julie:** Yes. We'd take our lunch into the Sugar Bowl. George [Pappas] didn't care as long as we bought something to drink--cherry phosphate.

**Alan:** I can tell you some stories about that. George liked my dad 'cause my dad--Remember Mrs. Pappas [Virginia, Mrs. Nick Pappas]?

**Julie:** Yes. She asked what time the stores closed every day.

**Alan:** In my store every day, she would come. As her mind was getting worse, sometimes it'd be once a day and sometimes it would be 5, 6, 7 times a day. She could almost go back and come in and we had a little bell this far from the door. We didn't have electronics then and when it would barely hit the bell, you know it was Mrs. Pappas 'cause she wouldn't come in. She'd open about this far. "What time did the stores close?" "5:30, Mrs. Pappas." I was a young man and keep in mind 15, 16 year-olds are not always tolerant of older people and I was one of 'em. He'd go over there and he goes—"Old Mrs. Pappas—". Toward the end, her mind was getting bad. In return, that's why George liked my dad because my dad always looked after her a little bit 'cause she worked in the shop and he worked at Federal Mogul. We'd get ready to leave and he would say. "Go over there and lock Mrs. Pappas's door for her," 'cause she couldn't get the key in and couldn't get it locked.

When I was in Fowler, there was a few teachers would give me a ride 'cause they lived in St. Johns. They would drop me off at the store. I'd pay my dollar for the ride carpool. Then I worked with my dad from whatever, 3:30 to 5:30, and then we'd close and then him and I would ride back to Fowler when I was growing up in high school. We had to lock Mrs. Pappas's door all the time and so we kind of looked after them.

That store's [The Sugar Bowl] jinxed by the way. Anybody that buys it never gets it opened.

**Julie:** I know Hanovers are trying to get permit after permit after permit.

**Alan:** I'm not knocking it 'cause I like them. They're good people, but God, let's get that building open because that closed in the sixties, early seventies.

**Julie:** Even the calendar on the wall. I got to go in summer before last. Mrs. Hanover let me in.

**Alan:** They're nice people.

**Julie:** They are very nice people.

**Alan:** Ruth [Nihart] owned it before and didn't get it open and so my point to that is, I'm starting to call it jinxed because it doesn't ever get open.

**Julie:** You can't even walk toward the back anymore because of leaks that Ruth had when she owned it, and the floor is gone. You can still see "Coke" on the pump and "cherry" and "lime" and whatever.

**Alan:** The nephew from Alma--can't think of his name anymore--he contacted us occasionally after it was closed and when he got it from George. You know, they made their own candy.

**Julie:** Oh, cinnamon candy canes at Christmas, to die for!

**Alan:** Quite frankly, the gentleman from Alma, he said a lot of the product wasn't even available to remake the candy recipes that they had.

**Julie:** They were amazing.

**Alan:** But that building can't get open. Whoever gets it, it stalls out.

The heritage: My grandmother never remarried so she was on her own. She lived a block from my dad. The nun, that's Sister Romilda, was in Racine, Wisconsin, which was where the mother house was. So she could come home if she did some work. So she'd come home for the summer months. Me growing up, I made nuns' habits at the time and then we'd box 'em and we'd ship them to different parts of the world. Now this day and age, I'd call it a sweat shop. It was free labor because some of my nieces and nephews, we'd go there. We'd make those. You know how the--was it the Dominican with the higher--?

**Julie:** I think so, yes.

**Alan:** Anyway, we used to put those together, box 'em, and we'd do it for nothing so my aunt could be with her mother in the summertime. So it was a sweat shop.

**Julie:** For family.

**Alan:** You know, you don't forget that stuff. You don't and you shouldn't forget it. When Rodney B. [Wilson] was a high school--

**Julie:** I was the last class out of there.

**Alan:** At lunch, they all walked downtown.

**Julie:** Oh my gosh, yeah! We carried our lunch down to the Sugar Bowl, ate lunch and cherry phosphate; then walked over to Pierce's Bakery for a nickel, buttermilk doughnut; then hit the dime store.

**Alan:** They walked down in droves.

**Julie:** No cafeteria!

**Alan:** The other side of it was, most kids when they had off, they said, "Great!" It was a snow day. They got off. I used to pretend I was sleeping so I didn't have to go to work at the store. School was easier when I was real young. That was my job back right then, is when the kids went down, to stand up front so they wouldn't steal stuff, cause they'd come in and droves.

**Julie:** Security.



**Alan:** Not that they'd steal expensive stuff but just like the young lady, when they had a serious boyfriend back in my era, they got pearls. That was a serious relationship. Those things you don't forget in the industry, pearls right before the engagement.

**Julie:** Yes, it was.

**Wayne:** Don't sell too many of those anymore.

**Alan:** Oh, we sell pearls, but not for the thought process.

The other thing I didn't mention is a lot of times--and I wish some of that would be back because we lose sight of that--is a lot of times when a young lady turned 16, Mom and Dad came in and bought them a birthstone ring. Most of the time it was synthetic.

**Julie:** I got a watch.

**Alan:** Well, that was a graduation, usually in my step in the jewelry business. At 16, they used to buy them a birthstone ring. I just said that to someone else in the last month. There's two things that I do believe in. A dad should give the daughter her first diamond. Doesn't have to be a big one, but a dad should give the daughter her first diamond." The other thing that I think is warm and fuzzy--and I did it for my mine but I was in the industry--is the day before the wedding you pick out a nice quality necklace. I even said to my wife, "It's from both of us," but I said, "You need to get out of the way 'cause it's a daughter-daddy thing." You buy a nice necklace that when Dad does leave the earth--. I bet, if you look at my daughter that's walking around here, you seen a yellow gold, diamond cross. If she's wearing it, if she walked by, she has that on 90% of the time. I gave it to her the night before her wedding. Those are a couple of traditions that shouldn't disappear. The one tradition that's went is the pearl strand that was given before the wedding. Do you remember that? That's a tradition that has lost its flair but I have some old school in me a little bit. In return, I mix the old school with the modern.

The difference that have kept us alive is we did not live in the past with our store, 'cause if you lived in the past, those are the stores that did close. They wouldn't change. I was a gift store. I got rid of the gifts. I was a clock store. I had to get rid of clocks. I moved here because I had a problem with room there. There gets to a point--. I even looked at the J. C. Penney building. I even looked at the bank building, the one on the corner. I thought, ideal place for a jewelry store. It's got its own vault. I looked at it and it just didn't make sense. This one came up and this is the concept today where you have an open store. I thought about doing two stores but then when you have the wall in there, you need twice the employees. You gotta keep track of one side, keep track of the other. This, you get to see the whole thing so there was reasons why I made this move. My granddaughter is 20 this month and she was born one day after I opened this. That's how I keep track of it.

Years ago, in the watch business, my dad would actually take your old watch in on trade towards a new watch and then he used to fix it up and resell it. We had boxes of old watches and I should have had a better appreciation. I did get rid of them.

I have some and I have more than that.

**Julie:** I have one of these at home too.

[Shows a box of old gold pocket watches]

**Wayne:** I would have problems getting rid of something like this.

**Alan:** Most of those, the reason I kept 'em, is because they're carat gold. Those are the real gold. Not all of 'em were. A lot of 'em were gold filled.

**Wayne:** You can tell by the weight. This is real gold.

**Alan:** Yes, but these are carat gold watches and I could probably open them and tell some history on 'em, you know.

**Wayne:** Oh, my goodness. Yes.

**Alan:** What this all boils down to is I didn't forget where I came from. This is an old key-wound one. You wind it with a key. That's carat gold and the only reason I said the carat gold is because those were the more high-end ones.

**Wayne:** Did you have a lot of the cheaper, the dollar watches?

**Alan:** Oh, the Westclox. You remember the Westclox?

**Wayne:** Yeah.

**Alan:** Those were the cheaper ones.

**Julie:** What year do you think these are?

**Alan:** They're a hundred years old. Here's another key-wound. You need a key to wind it.

**Wayne:** Did they all take the same--?

**Alan:** No, there's a series of keys.

**Wayne:** You have to decide which key it is.

**Alan:** I'm a little more nostalgic than most people.

**Wayne:** Well, I'm glad you kept these. I mean, instead of melting them down for the gold.

**Alan:** Money isn't everything. People lose sight of that, I think, and the sad part is this is less than 1% that I wish I'd had done more of it. I mean, I got staking tools around here. Staking tools was when you were re-shafting a balance wheel on an old wind-up. My dad had staking tools and I just never had the heart to throw some of it away. What happened was, when I moved from there to here, I had to get rid of some stuff 'cause I didn't have the storage. My dad, again because of his depression attitudes, never threw anything away. When this display was old, he wouldn't take it to the junk. He'd make me take it to

the second floor. It's long steps when I had some of my buddies help carry that. At the end of the day when I walked outta that store, I paid somebody to haul all that stuff away. I mean they were dinosaurs.

**Julie:** Well, I'll be your file thirteen for any papers you've got, and the Museum, I'm sure. Tell your kids to think of the Museum or the Archives.

**Alan:** The one thing that was always fun--again, I have a love for it. I think sometimes I drive my kids crazy but I grew up in it. We used to sit in front of the TV. We didn't have a computer. We sat in front of the TV at night. We'd buy a ruby ring and the little dumbbell tags, as we call them, because they were dumbbells. So you put 'em on a ring: one ruby, 0.65 carat; three diamonds VS2, H color. Oh yeah, Lawrence Welk's on. We did that when my dad would bring it home and my siblings and my mother, we would tag the merchandise to get it prepared for the store.