

## DAWSONS PUT 'SERVICE' INTO SERVICE STATION

by Nancy Wilstach, writer and retired journalist of Montevallo, Alabama

Remember the "good old days" when you drove into a service station, pulled up to the pumps and said: "Fill 'er up, please, and check the oil"? If you had that experience in the last decade in Montevallo, then you were doing business with Stanley and Jo Dawson at the Citgo station on Main Street. Many local drivers ran an account there to keep their cars running between paydays.

The Dawsons bought the station in 1985 from Franklin Lucas, for whom Stan had worked less than a year. "In 1973, I came to work at Watson Shell (now a convenience store at Valley and Middle streets) and ran the wrecker," Dawson recalled. "They taught me how to drive a wrecker." Although he went on to work at a factory in Calera, the skill of manipulating a wrecker is one that served the Dawsons well in years to come. After being laid off, his subsequent job search landed Dawson in the place where he and his wife Jo Dawson, would wind up spending the rest of their working life. When he talked to Lucas about needing a job, "he told me: 'I can use you.'" Less than a year after hiring Dawson, Lucas said he wanted to sell the station to him. "I didn't have any money, and I didn't see how I could do it," Dawson said. He was temporarily forgetting the advantages of having a local bank and a local banker. The late Pat Kelly, then an owner of Merchants & Planters Bank on Main Street a few blocks from the station, knew Dawson and was well aware that the community depended on the Citgo station. "I had bought cars and paid them off," Dawson said. Those transactions apparently served as his credit check.

For more than 37 years, husband and wife worked and lived together. People marveled at how a marriage could thrive in such constant togetherness. "I just tell them that I always have the last word," Stan says with a slight smile. "I just say 'Yes, ma'am.' The pair got married at 17, and they now have two grown children. On May 25, 1970, Jo Dawson recalled: We got married at 5 in the afternoon, and I graduated at 7 that evening." In addition to working in the station which was open 12 hours a day for six days a week, Jo Dawson drove a school bus for 26 years.

The pumps are gone now as the Dawsons finish clearing out the station. There's not much left but the big desk beside the front windows, some battered chairs, a puzzling baggage cart possibly from a long-gone bus station and a lot of memories.

Nathan Stamps, a Montevallo Realtor, worked for the Dawsons when he was a teen: "An awesome boss. I can't think of a time when I ever had a conflict with Stanley or Jo." Stamps said that he learned the basics of car maintenance there, something which has come in handy over the years. "We used to get calls for bad batteries from the college, and I always wanted to make those runs."

One thing about the wrecker business that holds a special place in Jo's heart: "We have always had a wonderful relationship with the Montevallo Police." Before Stan became the go-to guy for everything from fixing a flat to hauling a car out of a ditch at midnight during a rainstorm, he



worked as a teen for the Cunningham dairy farm on Spring Creek Road. He had moved to Montevallo from Calera and walked to the farm before the sun came up to milk cows. "You have to milk them twice a day, every day," he said. That schedule made the idea of hauling disabled cars in the middle of the night feel like a walk in the park. Incidentally, the expansion of Orr Park to Spring Creek Road in the 1980's is on the former Cunningham farm. Where residents now walk for exercise, children play soccer and families gather for birthday parties and reunions, there once was the pasture that fed the Cunningham cows. That's not all that has changed while the Dawsons kept air in the tires, oil in the crankcases and gasoline in the tanks of Montevallo's motor vehicles. Sure, the Montevallo Post Office is still across Vine Street, but the opposite side of Main Street has almost completely changed. The blocks between Main and Middle is a strip of shops for everything from pizza to pedicures. Don Lovelady's hardware store has been supplanted by a variety store, and a McDonald's replaced a building that had housed a car dealership.

Soon the Montevallo vista will change yet again. The University of Montevallo has bought the Dawsons' station for the land on which it sits--directly adjacent to Dr. Wilson Fallin Jr. Hall (UMOM). In itself, Dr. Wilson Fallin Jr. Hall (UMOM) represents another change of scenery for Main Street. The building previously was an Alabama Power office.

The Dawsons will keep busy in retirement with their grandchildren and Stan's position as the pastor of Marvel Baptist Church in Bibb County.

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