

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Born at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Eddy Gibbs was raised in Checotah by his mother. Only 10 when his father passed away, Gibbs felt a strong need to provide for the family. After graduation from high school, he began installing fences in Tulsa, followed by apprenticeships in Kansas City, Missouri and Bakersfield, California to perfect the trade. He returned home to start his own company and, eight years later, began manufacturing fence products.

Ameristar became the largest ornamental fence manufacturer in the world. Upon sale of the company, with terms that the company remain in Oklahoma, Gibbs distributed a portion of the proceeds from the sale to employees as a token of appreciation.

Close to his Owasso home, Gibbs' weekend retreat is northeast Oklahoma's Shangri-La Resort. After it fell into disrepair, he purchased the property and restored the resort's reputation, dramatically increasing tourism to the area and employment opportunities for local residents.

Listen to Eddy talk about his inventions, how 9/11 affected his business, and his huge donation to Rejoice school on the podcast and oral history website VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 12:00

Ancestry

John Erling (JE): Today's date is April 10th, 2018. Eddy, would you state your full name, please?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): It's Edward L. Gibbs. I go by Eddy.

JE: Your date of birth?

EG: 9-9-1947.

JE: September 9th, 1947. That makes your present age...

EG: I'm 70.

JE: 70 years old. Where are we recording this interview?

EG: This is my office in Owasso.

JE: Where were you born?

EG: Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

JE: Let's talk about your family, because it traces back many, many years, I think, to the 16th, 17th century. Was it Giles Gibbs?

EG: Yeah, it was Giles Gibbs, came over in 1631 from South England on a ship called the John and Mary with wife and four kids.

JE: And settled in?

EG: The Connecticut area.

JE: So that would have been in the 1600s...

EG: 1631. They lived in that area. In fact, we had three generations that were there.

JE: Giles was married to Catherine. I have it right here. Had two boys.

EG: Yes, that was his second wife. His first wife was Helen. They had four kids and she passed away.

JE: So then those two boys that Giles and Catherine had would be Samuel and Benjamin.

EG: Yes, the next one in the bloodline was Samuel.

JE: So your grandfather would have been who?

EG: My grandfather was Edward Charles Gibbs.

JE: And where did he live?

EG: He lived in Michigan.

JE: Then they moved.

EG: Then they moved down to Siloam Springs, Arkansas. He was a mechanic for Ford. Ford was setting up mechanic shops around the country.

JE: Your grandfather and grandmother had children.

EG: Actually, they had four kids. They had Robert Everett, Amelia, Alice, Charles Henry—my dad. And they had a baby that was given up for adoption because my grandmother, Julian Anne Welch, had passed away.

JE: This brings us down. Then he was married. Your father's name was Charles Henry Gibbs.

EG: Yes.

JE: Who did he marry?

EG: He married Dorothy Pearl Mann, my mother.

JE: Tell us about her, where she grew up, describe her personality and her background.

EG: Well, Mama was born in '22. Her teenage years was obviously in the Depression years. They were farmers, lived down around Texana by what is called Eufaula Lake today. My grandpa and my grandma had 11 kids. Mom was the 10th kid, so she was next to the youngest.

JE: What did her father do?

EG: He was a farmer and a preacher, a Free Will Baptist preacher down Texana.

JE: And then isn't there a story of a man and a \$20 gold piece?

EG: Yeah. As I said, they were just poor farmers. This was back in the '30s. Mom was like 14, 15, 16, and a guy came by in an old car and wanted to know if they had anything to eat. And my grandpa, being a preacher, invited him in, had dinner, and all the kids are just looking at him. Of course, back then, they invited a lot of strangers to eat. He didn't talk much, but when he left and when Grandma was doing the dishes, she picked up his plate and there was a \$20 gold piece underneath it, which back in the '30s worth \$300 today. And that was Pretty Boy Floyd.

JE: So Pretty Boy Floyd, of course, was a notorious gangster, but had his notoriety about him. Charles Arthur Floyd. Your father, what was he like, his personality?

EG: Well, Dad too grew up in a lot better lifestyle, I guess. My grandpa was a mechanic. They lived in town, in the little towns from Flint, Michigan down to Siloam Springs. But when his mom died, Dad took off and joined the army at... they always said 17, but I think he was 16. Lied about his age, as you've heard a million times back in those days. Dad just had no place to go but joined the army. That's where he spent most of his life—27 years.

JE: Was he an outgoing person?

EG: No. See, I don't remember my dad. I vaguely remember images, but I'll tell you, I'll never forget my dad neither.

JE: So why do you hardly remember your father?

EG: Well, Mom and Dad divorced when I was 7. And we lived in Fort Smith, Arkansas. That was in '55. And Dad had spent three stints in Korea. He went over there three times. So in my early years, he was gone most of the time. When he got back and knew he was stateside, he was home all the time, and I guess that caught up with Mom and Dad—him being in the military and coming back with PTSD, which nobody knew what that was back then. He drank a lot, and they divorced and we loaded up and went to Checotah, Oklahoma. So I never really knew my dad.

JE: How many siblings did you have?

EG: There's five of us. I'm next to the oldest. I have four sisters, no brothers.

JE: OK. So you and your sisters moved to Checotah. And where did you live there?

EG: We lived there in town. It's a small town, had about 1,800 people. Mom grew up in Texana, which is a little old one-store town southeast, about 12 miles southeast of Checotah. So she had relatives in the area,

JE: But not much money.

EG: No, no, no. And just after that, while Dad was alive, we got \$250 a month child support, \$50 a person. Dad, he had retired in the army, so he had a pretty good retirement, about \$750. So we still lived OK, but just within a

year after we moved there, Dad died. He actually retired from the army and he went to University of Arkansas. He was getting a degree in economics after 27 years in the military. Then he died over there. The drinking, I guess, caught up with him, I don't know. But when he died—now this is a pretty good story—the child support stopped. So Mom went to the Veterans Administration, and they said there was no money, no retirement. 27 years in the army. There was a law passed in 1941 called the Dear John Law. You probably already figured that out. There was a lot of soldiers going to the European theater, over in Asia as well, and they didn't go over there for 9 months, 12 months. They went over in '41, '42, they were there. Because of that, there was a lot of divorces. A lot of the ladies back home, they were separated for a long time. And if you got a divorce and the soldier got killed in action—male or female—then the ex didn't get anything. Roosevelt signed that, it was called the Dear John Law. Back then it was a \$10,000 death payment to the widow and kids. But because Mom and Dad divorced while he was still in the military in '54, '55, we fell under the Dear John Law. We got nothing. There were even a couple of attorneys from Muskogee who volunteered to represent Mom. They got some congressmen involved. Anyway, seven months later after he died, we went on welfare. \$144.57. I used to see that check because there was no automatic deposit in those days. So check came in the mail and sometimes I'd take it up to the bank and—or the grocery store—and cash it.

JE: How old would you have been?

EG: I was 9. So we lived, Mom raised five kids—the youngest was 2, and my oldest sister was 11 and a half—raised five kids on a welfare check. No car. We had an old black and white TV that Dad bought in '52 or something, but it played out. So that's the way life was.

JE: Did you live in that civilian conservation camp?

EG: We did. That was the CC camp, they called it. Those were built back in the '30s under the WPA. We lived there and they were just wooden portable buildings up on blocks. But, you know, we lived there probably six to eight months. It was on the southwest part of town and it was a good one mile and a quarter, maybe one and a half to downtown Checotah. That's where Mom got her groceries. So Mom rented a house closer to downtown.

JE: So it was tough. It was tough then, wasn't it? You were probably one of the poorest families in Checotah.

EG: I always thought we were. And I never really gave it a lot of thought because everybody was poor. You know, if you had a nickel in your pocket, you had something. But I think we were. There were other families that were probably worse off, and that would have been in the northeast part of town where the Black neighborhood was at.

JE: Did you ever have a time when you wondered about food the next day?

EG: Oh yeah.

JE: So maybe went without food, maybe, sometimes?

EG: There was always something. Come down to it, there was a neighbor that'd give you a cup of beans, and Mom would make up a pot of beans. What I really remember was having beans or something without salt and things like that. But we got commodities right away, once a month. Mom and I would go to the commodity barn. I had a little wagon and we'd pull our commodities back in that wagon.

JE: You thought probably everybody was struggling like that.

EG: Well, Checotah—this was before integration in '64—Checotah was a lot like Tulsa in the movie that came out here in Tulsa, the... I can't think of the name of it, that had the haves and the have-nots. We were the have-nots, and kids—the haves, I guess you would call them. In the movie, they were the Socs and “the Socials.” You were made fun of if you had holes in your jeans or stuff like that. So, oh yeah, it got pretty bad at times, make you want to fight, which we did. Just so happened us poor guys, we're pretty tough.

JE: You think it's put an attitude in you or a chip on your shoulder that lasted for a long time?

EG: I never had a chip on my shoulder, at least I pray to God that I never did. But being that poor was the driving factor in me wanting to do better when I left Checotah.

JE: Your church—you attended church, I suppose, faithfully.

EG: Back then, well, I don't know about faithfully, but Mama sure made sure you were there.

JE: Oh, they helped you? The church did?

EG: Just about every Wednesday night, that's when they would bring groceries and Mom would sack them up, we'd take them home with us.

Chapter 3 – 10:45

Started Building Fence

John Erling (JE): And you were going to school, and here you were 7, 8, 9 years old?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): Yeah, went to school in Checotah. Checotah, besides just being poor, there were two groups of people there. There were literally—even in the classroom—there would be total separation from the people that had nice clothes versus the people that had clothes bought at a rummage sale.

JE: Carrie Underwood's from Checotah.

EG: The Underwoods are from there. Of course, I never knew her, but I think I dated her aunt. I think I did. I remember Mr. Underwood. He had 9, 10 kids. He lived right down the street from my cousins. Back then, they were very, very poor. And if anybody was poorer than us, it was them. And I remember a very touching moment. One time, a bunch of these kids, the parents loaded them up and took them out to Belle Starr Landing on Eufaula Lake, and one of the Underwood boys drowned. It's very sad. I worked at Bynum's Grocery. I would have been a sophomore or junior then. And every Saturday, Mr. Bynum would send me down to the bank just a couple of blocks away to break up some big bills—you know, \$100 into 5s—and get ready for the big day. Saturday was a big grocery day. I worked for him for two years, 50 cents an hour, but I got a bologna sandwich every day. I went down to the bank. The bank belonged to the Stidhams, and Mr. Underwood was in there. He just had tears in his eyes and, you know, ragged clothes. He was trying to borrow \$180 to bury his son. And Mr. Stidham—and I don't blame Mr. Stidham—they couldn't loan

him the money. No collateral. The guy had nothing. And he worked for the feed barn, and I'm sure that was a 35-cents-an-hour, 50-cents-an-hour job, but he couldn't borrow the money. And I remember a grown man crying. I went back and told Wellesley Bynum. Wellesley was always a good guy. He put a jar together and several jars together and had me take it to all the merchants, and it was donations for the Underwood kid who drowned. They got that \$180 pretty quick. Took about a week.

JE: So when you talk about Mr. Underwood, that would have been the grandfather of Carrie Underwood?

EG: Absolutely, considering her age today of being 30, 35, I guess. Or great-grandfather.

JE: So she knows in her legacy, as the life she's living now, from when she came...

EG: She absolutely should.

JE: Right. And she seems like kind of a down-to-earth kind of person.

EG: Yeah, I never met her.

JE: Well, let's talk about into high school. What kind of a student were you? Did you enjoy high school?

EG: Yeah, I did. I was involved in football, track, but I was a little bitty guy. My senior year when I graduated, I was 5'10½" and weighed 135 pounds. And that was because we didn't eat that well. And being poor, no car, we walked and ran everywhere. So we were pretty thin. It's how everybody ought to be. But to get off skid row, you might say, I got serious with my homework and I made—I can't say straight A's—but I made A's and B's. I was wanting to go to college really, really bad. Never got there, because when I did graduate, I had \$10—not from Mom. Mom didn't have it. But Wellesley Bynum gave me a \$5 bill, and Bud Womack, who owned the pool hall, gave me a \$5 bill. That's because I would go down there and he would have me play all these drunk cowboys that'd come to town. I'd beat them, and, you know, they were betting. I don't know what they were betting, but I never got any of it. So I was his kind of ace in the hole.

JE: What were they betting on?

EG: Pool games. Yeah, I was a pretty good pool player.

JE: Alright.

EG: I could beat anybody around there, and Bud would make a few bucks on me. In return, I got to play all the pool I wanted to play. I think you paid a dime an hour. It wasn't per game. It was a dime an hour. And I'd get a Coke occasionally.

JE: So what did you do with that \$10?

EG: I got a ride to Tulsa. I had already talked to my uncle. He had Ace Fence over here on Pine Street—65, 65 East Pine. I went to work for my uncle building fence. But now, the summer before that, between my junior and senior year, I came up and worked for him for about 10 weeks. That's the first time I ever had any real money in my pocket. I went back home with about \$120 and bought an old car. Didn't last too long. It got me to Muskogee a few times to see Vicky Ehrlich. But when I graduated high school, didn't have the money to go to college—you heard forever, "Well, you can work your way through college." Well, you got to have something. So I started building fences right out of high school.

JE: Did you get your high school diploma?

EG: Yeah. Well, yes and no. In Checotah, if you had perfect attendance during the school year—this is seniors only—the school always ended on a Wednesday at the end of the year. You got off that Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday if you had perfect attendance. Well, I didn't have perfect attendance. I had worked occasionally on farms and stuff, especially early spring. I'd go buck hay. So I took off a few days. I still made A's and B's. But when those three days came around, my uncle wanted me to get to Tulsa and start building fences. So I didn't go to school those three days. The principal got all upset about that and would not give me my diploma unless I came back and sat in that school in the study hall for three days. My mom, she just said—she was just all upset—that, "Son, you went all this time. You need a diploma. You gotta have a diploma." Well, I talked to my uncle Marv, he didn't like it. I went back to Checotah. It was on a Monday. And I met Mr. Latham, the principal. I didn't like him, but I went in that study hall, and I was supposed to sit there for three days before he'd give me my diploma. I didn't make noon—three or four hours—I said to heck with this, and I went home and said, "Mom, I'll get the diploma someday,

don't worry about it." And then I came back to Tulsa, got on the fence wagon and started building fence. I didn't like that—sitting in there all by myself.

JE: And he didn't give you anything to do?

EG: No, no. Well, you know, the study hall was kind of the library. I guess I could have got a book or two, but it was the first time I ever looked authority in the face and said, "I'm not gonna do it." So—probably the last time.

JE: Right. So then you start working for your uncle. What, are you digging post holes and doing the basic work?

EG: Yeah. I was a helper on a fence crew. Back then, it was mostly chain link—the residential. A helper would dig holes, mix concrete, carry stuff. I had worked two and a half months the summer before. I picked it up real quick. Within two months, I had my own crew. I was 19. I stretched the chain link. My helper was 40—twice my age—and made more. After a few months, I went to my uncle and I said, "Marvin, something's wrong here." I said, "Lane"—that was his name—he's from Checotah too. I said, "He's making \$1.50. I was getting \$1.25. It was the law then, minimum wage. And I said, 'Here I'm the crew leader, responsible, and he's making 25 cents more than me.'" He said, "But Eddy, you don't understand. He's married and got three kids. He needs that extra money." That's just the way things were. And Malcolm Harvey was from Texana too. Yeah, he said he needed the extra money because he was married and had three kids. I said, "OK." Well, come the next week, I got a nickel raise.

JE: How long did you stay there working for your uncle in Tulsa?

EG: I'd left once to go to Kansas City. My sister and brother-in-law moved up there, and he was a fence builder too, and I got \$5 an hour up there. I was getting—at the time, this is '69 or so—probably about \$1.80 in Tulsa here working for my uncle. So I was up in Kansas City for six months, but I came back. But I didn't stay long.

JE: Then where did you go?

EG: Bakersfield, California.

JE: Why there?

EG: I had another sister that married a guy and they moved to Bakersfield. A young kid, I wanted to do something, and I got a job in Bakersfield working for American Fence Company. Here's a guy that was making \$140 to \$150 a week. Out there, American Fences—they paid you by the foot, not by the hour. And I was young and fast. I was 19, 20. My first full week was \$400, and I liked it. My second weekend there, I met Sharon Thompson—first love of my life and only love of my life. We moved in within a couple of days and we were together for 22 months.

JE: You lived together for 22 months?

EG: Just about two years.

JE: Two years. All right. In the meantime, you continued working there in Bakersfield. And how long did you stay there?

EG: Well, I was there 22 months total. But see, I met her the second weekend. I was there at the famous Blackboard Lounge. It's where Buck Owens and

JE: Merle Haggard?

EG: Merle Haggard both started—there at the Blackboard Lounge. So there's always good music, and we liked to dance. But if it wasn't for Sharon, I wouldn't have stayed that long. I made really good money, but when I was 19, 20, I wanted to start my own company. In California, it was just hard to do. You had all these laws. You had to put up a \$2,000 bond. You had to get all kinds of insurance. You had to get a building permit from the city of Bakersfield to build fence—like a lot of cities do electricians—and to get the permit, you had to have two years of junior college. Well, I didn't have that. So anyway, it was real hard there to start your own business, and I knew in Tulsa, I could start right away. That's when I came back.

Chapter 4 – 12:00

American Fence

John Erling (JE): Is that when you then started your own fence company when you came back?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): When I came back, Marvin gave me a job and he said, "I know this is temporary. You got a wild hair." And I said, "Yeah." When I came back, I had put my application in with Sears to be their subcontractor for fencing. Back then, Sears built a lot of fence. Six months later, lo and behold, the guy called me and he said, "My contractor died last night—Mr. Beaver." And he said, "You're the best applicant I have here." And so I started contracting for him the next day.

JE: So you were on your own.

EG: Yep, that was the first time.

JE: And so then how did that work out?

EG: Oh, it was great. In Bakersfield, I was making \$400 to \$500 a week. My first full year W-2 out there was \$24,000. And that was in '69. That's a lot of money. When I came back and went to work for Sears, back then, I counted my money by the week. My first full week was \$1,500.

JE: What kind of a money handler were you? Did you spend it all? Were you a saver? What did you do with that?

EG: I saved, because when Sears called me, I had \$1,300 at home. I lived in Flamingo Trailer Park at Pine and Mingo. Me and a new lady I met as soon as I got back—Linda. Actually, we lived together. She got pregnant. She had trouble. I took her to Saint Francis, and she had a miscarriage. Saint Francis wanted me to pay the bill. It was \$1,300. Seriously. Melvin Breckinridge had already called me from Sears. He said, "I need you to start." He told me what I needed, and I needed a truck, tools, but I needed insurance, and insurance was \$500. I bought an old truck and some tools, and I was building fence for Sears in two days. And boy, my uncle—he was mad. But the first full week, my Sears paycheck—and I got paid every Friday—it was \$1,500. Now, I owed my helper, which was Linda's brother. I paid him about \$110. After costs, I cleared about \$1,200.

JE: So then you were a saver.

EG: Yeah, I saved a little bit, but I used to build fence like any construction worker, and I'd go to the bar on Friday night. Spent all my money playing pool and drinking beer. But when I went to Bakersfield and I met Sharon, that pretty much stopped. It was the first time I was in love—and only time.

And that's when I really started thinking about a home and kids and providing for other people. So yeah, I started putting some money back then.

JE: That trailer you lived in—didn't that just float away in a storm?

EG: June 8th, 1974. We lived in the northeast corner of Flamingo Trailer Park. That had nine feet of water. Now, my sister and her husband's trailer was a little bit south, about two blocks over. My mom was up spending the night. The National Guard took them out in a boat. And Linda, the boys—the boy ended up being the boy's mother.

JE: So did your trailer actually float away?

EG: No, it was tied down for tornadoes, but no, it didn't float away. But my car and my fence truck did. They floated against the trailer.

JE: Your fence trucks—what happened?

EG: Well, you know, you grew up back in the age I did. You're always working on your cars. The very next day, I drained the engine, transmission, the rear end. Flushed it out with kerosene and this and that, changed the filters. You know, by then, I had a little bit of cash. It took me a week, but I got my car—I had a '73 Grand Prix. It was the year of my first new car. But boy, it stunk a few months later. The engine, drive line, transmission, and bearings and stuff. I was a good enough mechanic to do that myself.

JE: What do you remember about Tulsa at large—radio stations, TV, entertainment? What did you do?

EG: Well, I liked rock and roll. Back in the day, the '60s and '70s rock was the best era ever, in my opinion. A little bit of country. I listened to you. I don't think that was the '60s.

JE: No, '76 is when I came.

EG: Yeah, the '70s and '80s. When I started my business, when I got in my car and went to work, I never had the radio on. I was thinking about work, what I was gonna do.

JE: Linda and you—then eventually you did have a son?

EG: Yeah, when we lost the trailer, I rented a house up by Pine and Sheridan. We lived there and that's where Eddy was conceived. We got married.

JE: His name is...

EG: His name is Junior. He's a Junior. He goes by Edward. I go by Eddy. We lived there about eight months and there was an old house there at Pine and Mingo, right next to the trailer park—Flamingo Trailer Park—and I rented that from a gentleman. I can't think of his name—Alexander or something—really nice man. He said, "I really need to sell it." And I said, "Well, I don't have any credit." He said, "Let me rent it to you for a while." I rented it for about a year and he came to me. He said, "What if I set you up on making payments and you buy it?" And I said, "Sure." I didn't have any credit. And he said, "I'd trust you." So that was the first property I bought and the guy carried the note himself.

JE: So when you were working for Sears, you had more than one truck eventually?

EG: I did. I bought the second and third truck. I was buying from Dee Wade Ford over here at Skiatook. That's another story. He was a good man. Then I bought a couple of used trucks that we weren't going to be using every day. So I had a fleet of five trucks there for a while and we had about 15 employees. This was in '73, '74.

JE: And so again, the name of your fence company was?

EG: When I started my fence company, I called it American Fence, because I really liked the model that the guy from Phoenix, Arizona had.

JE: But let me go back—when you worked for your uncle Marvin, you worked on the weekends. You were working there at 63rd and Yale, Shell Oil credit card building?

EG: Well, that's when I left my uncle and I contracted for about six months. I didn't make it and I went back to my uncle. That was right before I got the Sears contract. Yeah, I built that fence around Shell Oil. It was big, heavy industrial fence. It's gone now. That was that big building they built across the street from Saint Francis, and it was Shell Oil's credit card center. I guess they needed security on it—big fence with barbed wire. They took it

down a few years later because it just didn't look—it didn't fit the neighborhood.

JE: You had a buddy, David Prince?

EG: Who is still a good friend of mine. We grew up together in Checotah. He was the wild one.

JE: You worked for Sears, then you started your own company?

EG: Yeah, I quit Sears in '73 or '74. And I was making some really good money, but I longed for a long time to start my own fence company. I put an ad in the Yellow Pages, because, you know, back then you thought that was it. And then all of a sudden you were a company. I found out that it was a little harder than that.

JE: What did you learn?

EG: Well, I didn't sell jobs right away. You know, I put an ad in the Yellow Pages, and back then everybody went to the Yellow Pages. So I learned to hustle some work. They called me Doorknob Eddy. I'd put together little flyers and I'd go down the neighborhoods. I would put my little flyer on their doorknob, because you couldn't put it in their mailbox. I'd leave it on houses that didn't have fencing. And I'll be darned—people started calling me. As we grew the company, any time a salesman went to a neighborhood, he had to leave the little flyer on every doorknob on that street that didn't have a fence. That's some of the early marketing experience that I experienced.

JE: The thing is, you were born a worker bee, weren't you? I mean, nobody told you to do any of this. It was just in you to do it.

EG: It's being poor.

JE: Was that part of your drive?

EG: Oh yeah. Yeah, it was everything.

JE: You just did not want to be poor again.

EG: No, that's exactly right. And when I left Checotah—you know, \$10 in my pocket—every young fella's got dreams. I was going to make sure I had more than that to give to my kids when they would leave home.

JE: Didn't you buy a place at Lake Keystone?

EG: Yes, I did. That was in '83. I divorced the boy's mother in '83. I still love Sharon, but Linda was a good woman and she didn't deserve me walking out on her, but I did. First of all, I worked every day. I wasn't a husband to anybody except my kids. And after we divorced, that's when I really became a father. I'd come get them every Wednesday for dinner, and I had them every weekend. Linda enjoyed those weekends. It wasn't two years—they moved in with me. So there was only a two-year span when my boys were not with me. But then their mother, Linda—good gal—she said, "If the boys are gonna live with you, you need to live in Owasso." So that's when I came back to Owasso. It wasn't—it's more than two years. It's about five years.

JE: So that's the reason you're still in Owasso today—because things worked out for you here?

EG: Yeah. She and I wanted them to grow up in Owasso schools, so I moved back here. I've been here since '77.

JE: So the fence company then is going merrily along and growing. And how many employees are you?

EG: American Fence got up to about 22 employees.

JE: What type of fence are you building now?

EG: We were building chain link and wood fencing for residential. But early on, I got into industrial fencing, because that eliminated 90% of all fence companies. Most fence companies built residential, which didn't take a lot of education, didn't take a lot of skill, a lot of experience. When I was in Bakersfield, I built all the heavy industrial work. I built miles and miles of fence up and down the aqueduct that comes right through San Joaquin Valley. I did a lot of tennis courts back in the '70s. Tennis was a big sport. One of the first things I did with American Fence—I noticed in the paper they were building a tennis court complex at 61st and Memorial, Shadow Mountain Racquet Club. It told who was doing that. On Saturday morning, I gave them a call and they said, "Yeah, I was just gonna find me a fence company." So I came down and met the guy, and I built all of his fencing—from Beaver Creek in Colorado, not Aspen-Vail—down in Louisiana. Because most fence companies didn't want to get up 10, 12 feet

tall. So we got into industrial work. I did a bunch of work for Phillips Petroleum for their booster stations. When you send a crew out to a residential yard—this is the '70s, early '80s—you try to clear about \$300 or \$400 a day after the truck expenses and labor. Now, that's not a lot of money, but that was a different time. But I could send the crew up to Osage County for three or four days and build fence around a couple of booster stations and clear \$2,000 a day. That's why I moved into that. And I trained all my guys. I'd take some good, hardworking residential guys, and I'd teach them how to build heavier industrial fencing.

Chapter 5 – 10:00

American Hardware

John Erling (JE): Business is going great and you're making money and you're banking it—are you thinking a vision for greater things at that point?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): My first thought was to expand the fence company, put a fence company in Oklahoma City and in Dallas. It's like I said—kind of like the model of American Fence in Bakersfield, which started American Fence in Phoenix, John Vandenberg. He ended up with 30 fence companies, sold out, got in the pipe business. He did really, really well. So I was going to put in more fence companies, but that industry changed. Especially when I went to Oklahoma City, they were getting 20% less for the same fence that we sold here. It's a real easy business to get into—not a big investment, not a lot of skill. So a lot of people were in the fence business, kind of like people painting houses. Love those guys, but they don't make a lot of money. So I realized that if I put a fence company in Oklahoma City, we were going to struggle.

By accident, I went to a company here in town called Interstate Tool. They were a tool and die company that stamped parts—all kinds of parts. And I went over there and they wanted a fence around the tool crib indoors. So I looked at it and I built the fence for them, but I got to be around those machines for a while. I'd never seen anything like that—boom, boom, boom. And I got thinking, what could I make with that?

At the time—this was '81, '82—the real estate industry for homes was just absolutely booming nationwide. Century 21, Red Carpet. You'd go into neighborhoods and you would see cardboard signs—Century 21, call Jane. They couldn't get enough aluminum or steel signs. That caught my attention. So I thought, you know, those machines over at Interstate Tool, we can stamp those dudes out, do the silk screening and all that. So, as I got into that, and I found out where a lot of them were being made—down in Dallas—after I put everything together, it wasn't enough money there.

So I got to looking at my own industry. We bought hinges and latches for wood fencing from Jamison down in Dallas, and boy, they'd rip you off. My goodness, especially in spring. You couldn't get anything. And after being in business for a while, you'd buy a truckload in the fall, where you had product all year. So I got to tinkering with that latch, and it was a terrible latch. And I designed a better latch—way better. The hinge is a hinge. I later designed a spring-loaded hinge that did real well, but my first latch—all wood gates outside sag—it allowed the gate to sag and still close and latch. It had a lot of things to it that would save the fence because everybody would give a year's warranty on a gate, and you'd go back at least once. Well, my latch—you wouldn't go back at all.

So I came up with this hinge and latch, and by accident, I applied for a patent on that latch. I didn't know what a patent was. I designed that hinge latch, had Interstate Tool make the dies. I bought a press down in Dallas. By the time I got it back to Tulsa, I blew out all four tires. It was a heavy dude. And I started—in the fall of '82—stamping hinges and latches in my fence company shop, American Fence. I built a little 4,000-square-foot building back there in '77, '78 behind the old house that that guy sold to me on credit, which burned down April 10th, 1980. I got a call in the middle of the night and they said, "Your building's on fire." So this is a special day for me, kind of.

But I started stamping hinges and latches, and I'd load them up and I'd got little paint rigs set up. I'd package them. I bought a used Hertz truck—big van, 20-foot van. And because I already called a bunch of people in Dallas, they said, "Yeah, we'll buy them." I went down there with a truckload of stuff and had sold it in one day. Seven fence companies—sold everything I

had. In fact, the last guy said, "Bring me more." And that's when I started manufacturing.

JE: What was the name of that company?

EG: I called it American Hardware.

JE: So it wasn't just for yourself, because you used it too, but then you sold it to all these others. So then you had two things going—you had the fence company going and American Hardware going?

EG: For about a year. I fell in love with manufacturing, and again, by accident, a guy called me—a brokerage company in Tulsa. He said, "You want to sell your fence company? Because I've got a lot of calls for that," because we were successful. I said, "Yeah, I do," because I was going through a divorce. And I thought, you know, here's a way to get the money, put it in a manufacturing company and pay my ex off. So we sold American Fence December 30th, 1982, and left the next day.

Company went broke 22 months later, and he quit paying me. He was paying me a little over \$4,000 a month. I carried the note on a lot of that. Well, let's see, that would put us about '84, '85. I even visited a bankruptcy attorney. He looked at my stuff, he said, "You don't need me. You need to just go back to work." He said, "You're not that much in debt." I said, "Well, I just lost this \$4,000." And he said, "Well, go make it." But anyway, we struggled through '84, '85. I started making an ornamental fence product.

JE: OK, let me stop you. The American Fence went under?

EG: Yeah.

JE: Did you take it over?

EG: I did. There was nothing left.

JE: But did you start rebuilding it again?

EG: No. I got a couple of guys to start building the fence and going on some calls—just some contractors—to keep American Fence afloat because I didn't want it. I was really trying to resell it. And I'll be darned—my cousin, Curtis Hayes, left Pioneer Fence. He said, "I'll buy it." He said, "I don't have any money, but I'll buy it." That was again about '85. He called it Jenks

Fence. He changed the name, because Adams went broke. American Fence had went broke. I really just gave him what was left—a few trucks and stuff.

JE: Along here, didn't you buy some acreage here in Owasso—five acres of land northeast of Owasso?

EG: Well, I bought my house—first house—over here in '77. That's when we moved to Owasso. I don't know where that came from. Now, I bought some land next to that. The house was out in the country—it was then. It sat on five acres. That's what it was. We bought the house and five acres.

JE: OK. And then you also built a big house northeast of...

EG: That was later on. That would have been in '94. I bought altogether 220 acres. 96th Street North, far as you go, and it dead ends. Dover Pond on the left, and I bought that valley there on the right.

JE: You were making some good money. You were going on cruises, taking great vacations.

EG: Started about '88. We turned the business around, selling quite a bit of the ornamental product. From the '90s, we went on a cruise every year. Sometimes I'd take all my sisters—take 20 of us.

JE: This money that you were making—were you investing it in the stock market, or what did you do with your money?

EG: No. During the years of American—American Hardware didn't last six months. And then I got a call—somebody in Pennsylvania says, "Hey, you're up here using our name." And so there was an American Hardware already in business doing doorknobs or something. So I changed it to Ameristar Fence Products. We kept growing the business and, well, where did I put my money? Well, we put it back in the business. My last loan, John, was 1991. And that's when I left Archer. Well, I still had that three acres where my fence company was. I went back there and bought the entire Flamingo Trailer Park for \$80,000. Of course, it was nothing but land—it was flood zone now. But up there in that southwest corner, I built a 100,000-square-foot manufacturing facility. Concrete tilt-up, a great building. And that was my first building. I borrowed \$1.1 million from the bank to build that building, and we were manufacturing product. I had

designed the ornamental fence called the All-Purpose, which could be shipped in a box—ornamental panels, but broke down, shipped in a box—and boy, that took off. We were selling more than we could make, and I was making 40% margins on that product. But that was the last loan that I ever made. In fact, I paid it off in about two and a half, three years.

The Ameristar through the '90s, the first 2000s—well, ever since—it was growing double digits every year from moving into that building in '91. Sitting on probably five, six million dollars in assets. And 2013, I'm sitting on half a billion dollars' worth of assets. So, the money—we just kept building. Well, when I left, we had a million square feet. So the first building was 100,000 feet. And when I left, I sold Austin 980,000 square feet of plant space.

Chapter 6 – 11:04

Patent

John Erling (JE): All right, let's just review a little bit here. It took hard work. You didn't work just 8 hours. You worked probably 12 hours. You were innovative, you had a creative mind. These pieces of hardware—did you go beyond latches and hinges? Did you create other products?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): Yeah, and by '86, '87, we had exhausted the fence industry, because the fence industry is the only people using these hinges and latches. They were designed for a six-foot-tall wood fence that's out in the wind, in the rain—the wood gets wet. That was the size of the market.

So, knowing the fence industry, I also knew in the late '80s that ornamental fencing—that's what we call it, now it's just a steel picket fence—was on the rise. Residential, commercial, even industrial was replacing chain link. So I came up with a system. My first problem is, you build a panel as big as this table—how am I gonna get it to Baltimore? LTL doesn't work—gonna get beat up and everything. So you needed to build a product, and to sell enough of it to ship a whole truckload up there. And that market wasn't ready for that unless you had some big jobs.

So I decided I had to build a product that I could put in a box—components—and you, even a homeowner, could figure out how to put it together. That too is when Lowe's and Home Depot really came on the market in the late '80s and '90s in the do-it-yourself market. We had some pretty good timing there. So the all-purpose ornamental product, it took off pretty good.

Then in '91, I started going into the spec arena.

JE: Spec?

EG: Spec arena is where American Airlines needs to add some security fencing. They will go to an architect first, or design-and-build construction company and say, "This is what we think we want," then a good company will tell you what you really want. And they would spec the product that's going in there.

So I started hitting the architect area and the design firms. Lo and behold, first year was about '91, and I didn't go because I went to Atlanta or someplace—I was visiting some other people. Well, Paul, who's still with me—my brother-in-law—he and Wally Burner went to this architect firm in downtown Tulsa. They were designing all of the Walmarts for Walmart over here in Arkansas. They were doing them all. I'd found those people. I kept calling Walmart and they said, "You need to talk to the people right there where you're at." And I got a meeting to go up and talk to those people. Well, I was out of town, but Paul and Wally—who were very capable—went.

What we were interested in—Walmart, back in the '80s, started building these garden centers on the end of their new buildings. A lot of people don't realize that, but back then they were building three, four hundred stores a year. And most of them were new stores, but a lot of them were replacing the old ones because they kept getting bigger. They were putting these chain link fences on the end of these stores, 20 feet tall. Didn't matter—people were cutting through. It just takes about 15 seconds.

And I knew that. So I wanted to talk to Walmart and say, "You know, we can build you a better fence. Just takes longer to get in, more trouble getting in," because a lot of people were stealing lawnmowers. And they were local kids or something—they weren't professional thieves. Anybody had a pair

of pliers. But it took more to get through my product.

Well, we got Walmart to spec the All-Purpose product. In '92, we sold them \$4 million worth of fence at a 60% gross margin. Boy, that took off. We did about \$5 million with them for about 10 years. And then we started getting some competition. There was a guy down south of Dallas—he figured out what we were doing. By then, in the mid-'90s, the All-Purpose had switched to the Aegis product, which was a product made through automation. Aegis is A-E-G-I-S. It's a Greek word that means "shield."

JE: Let's talk a little bit about—in American Hardware, this is something else that you thought of. The hinges were being painted, and you powdered the hinges instead of painting?

EG: That was the powder coat. When my hardware started really selling in '83, '84, we were painting them in a dip process. We just stirred up some paint and were dipping them. It took two days to dry. I built kind of an oven with big heated bulbs to try to heat them. That was the bottleneck. I could stamp out thousands a day and put them together, but that was the bottleneck.

Well, there was a guy that told me, said, "Have you ever heard of powder coating?" I said, "Well, of course not." Well, there is a powder coating line for sale. I know you remember the company Zipco—made reels, fishing reels. They had bought a powder coating line, which back then just wasn't heard of. It was the first one ever in Oklahoma. They bought it about the time they moved everything overseas.

So I bought that powder coating line for \$80,000. It was an automated line—had a conveyor. You hang your product, it went into dip tanks to clean it—different cleansing products. Then you had a pretreatment dip tank. Then it would go in—you'd heat them up and go through a powder booth, and you just spray on this powder that's applied electrostatically. Man, it would cling on there. Then it'd go through another oven. Thirty feet down, you could take that hinge, go put it on a fence—it was dry. So I was the first one in the fence industry to ever have powder-coated product.

JE: So then, this is when you bought that metal building at West Archer?

EG: Yeah. I had an American Fence company—we were operating together—and I rented the building over in Wolf Point. That's where I first set up this powder coating line. And I sold the fence company, so I wanted to leave this neighborhood, but I also had an opportunity to buy this old building on West Archer. Altogether it was about 8,000 square feet—just old metal buildings. They're still there.

So I moved my powder coating line over there. There were kind of two buildings. I installed it in one building, and the other building is where I stamped the product. So I had the stamping operation, then the coating and packaging. And that's when we—let's see—'84, we sold over a million dollars' worth of hardware in '84.

JE: So what is Aegis?

EG: Oh, it was the name of my second ornamental product.

JE: And what was that?

EG: It's an ornamental product that we rolled up in a roll-form machine. It's really hard to explain it without showing it. That again enabled us to ship an ornamental product across the country in a box and you put it together—but instead of screws, you drop the pickets and the horizontal rails, and a rod shoots through it and ties it all together.

JE: And so this was something you created, too?

EG: Back in '91. I woke up about 3 o'clock at night—couldn't go back to sleep—jumped in the shower, and it hit me right there. How I was gonna tie that together. It was the first patent of any true value. And I'll tell you, right after that, a couple of years, the Chinese sent 50,000 fence panels up into the Northeast to one of those home centers up there. And we got a hold of it. Within months, we agreed to let them sell those out—but they sent me a check for half-a-million dollars.

JE: So Aegis. At a convention, you had a very clever way to present this product that you had designed. How did that work?

EG: Well, Paul—my brother-in-law—and he's the only engineer we've ever had—he said, "It's a great product, Ed, but fence builders aren't going to assemble those panels. They want to go out and get started." Well, I was a

fence builder too. I didn't like any shop work. So I said, "Well, it's just too easy to put together."

And me and my shop foreman—one day, we got all the sales guys out there. I put a panel together in two minutes. My sales manager, Martin Meek, he said, "At the fence convention"—it's a pretty good-sized convention—"let's just set up a jig there and let people come in and have a try at putting this panel together. And let's give them a big prize. Whoever, for those three days, can assemble it in the fastest time."

We were going to give away \$20,000 or a new Harley. I've always been a person that wanted to get your attention. I'd always take my Harley—whether it's Atlanta, Orlando, Houston, or Las Vegas is generally where we'd go—and I'd take my Harley down there. It wasn't a new one, but I'd have it in our booth. We did that for about five years.

And we had a husband and wife from Nevada somewhere that practiced in their room. And they got that down to one minute and thirty seconds. We'd have a whole crowd, so we broke that crap right away—"It's too hard to assemble." And boy, it took off.

And we were selling directly to fence companies at the time. But then the world's largest distributor of fence products, Master Halco—Barry Mars. I was selling my gate hardware in the late '80s. He came to me. He said, "I'll put this product in every branch." He had 50 branches all over the U.S. He said, "I'll put two truckloads in every branch, but you quit selling to all these small fence companies."

Barry Mars, to this day, is one of my best friends ever in the industry. I did that. The first year, he bought \$5 million worth of product. This is all residential, OK? He put it in these branches, and his branch people would assemble it—or fence companies would assemble it. So we finally got the product to New Orleans, to Orlando, to Philadelphia, and smaller. And plus, they distributed by their own trucks to everybody. So all of a sudden, we had the whole country covered. And this product—it was in a box—and it took off.

And then later, Merchants Metals was another national distributor. They were about half as big as Master Halco. They came on board. It took off.

Chapter 7 – 9:40**9/11**

John Erling (JE): September 11, 2001, which has come to be known as 9/11, happened. Nineteen militants associated with the Islamic extremist group Al Qaeda hijacked four airplanes and carried out suicide attacks against targets in the United States. We all know the story, but there are future generations who will learn—two of the planes were flown into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third plane hit the Pentagon just outside Washington, D.C., and the fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. Almost 3,000 people were killed during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Now, that impacted all of us, but personally, it impacted you and business. How did that happen? Where did that start?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): Well, I'll never forget it. My daughter was just a few months old, and I was actually upstairs. The lady who was living with me, helped me—Gina—she buzzed me. She said there have been some planes hit buildings in New York City. So I turned the TV on upstairs. Well, there's a building there on fire, and there were people trying to talk. It had just happened.

If you know a little bit about history, a plane hit the Empire State Building way back in the '30s or '40s—a DC-10, small, you know, propeller engine. So those things happened. So that's what we thought—people on the news and everything. And watching it, here came the second plane. And everybody knew within an instant that we were under attack.

I was glued to that TV for a couple of days. First of all, I'm a very proud American. My dad fought, and I lost some guys in 'Nam. So I'm a, you know, pure-blooded American. I didn't like what was going on.

About a week, ten days later, I get a call from Senator Inhofe. He and I go back to when he was— a lot of people don't realize—he was mayor of Tulsa.

Back in the '90s, I was powder coating parts of airplanes for him. He was always rebuilding something. He found out he needed powder coating—he'd never heard of powder coating—but he found us, and that's how we became friends.

Well, he called me up. He said, "I want to come visit you. I'm going to bring a guy with me. His name is Colonel Bonsal." I'd never heard of Colonel Bonsal, but I found out everybody else knew him. He was head of what you'd call today Homeland Security as far as securing facilities, airports, military bases. Now, I'm not talking about just perimeter, but everything. You know, back then, we were certainly into high-tech—what was high-tech then—perimeter security things.

So he brought Colonel Bonsal by, and I had a couple of people in the office with me. He said, "You've been in the fencing business?" And, yeah, a long time. He said, "OK, what do we have in the States for perimeter security?" I said, "We don't have anything." He said, "Well, we got these steel fences." I said, "That's chain link. You can breach a chain link fence with a pair of pliers that you can buy for \$20 at Ace Hardware and cut through that in 18 seconds." He said, "How do you know?" I said, "We've been testing for a while. I've always thought about a better security product."

And he said, "Well, I need two minutes." I said, "Well, I might be able to get more than that." And he said, "No—two minutes. I'll never forget—he said, 'I can get F-16s in the air in two minutes."

JE: You mean "two minutes...?"

EG: Two minutes breach time—how long it takes an intruder to get through there.

A trained commando-type guy. They eventually had SEALs and Green Berets testing fencing. Give them any tool they want. Generally, most tools that you're going to take to get through a fence need to be quiet—you can't have a torch, draws attention. But either way, they had all kinds of tests, even how long it takes to get over the top. Because anybody can breach a perimeter product. This wall that Trump wants to build—you can still breach it—but it takes longer. And longer means reaction time for the security forces to get there—to hopefully stop the intrusion.

So Colonel Bonsal and I got along real good. And he said, "I need a better product." You know, I wanted to know where this was going, because I know how difficult the government can be with products. And he says, "You're not going to get everything that's out there. And even if you have a patented product, the government is allowed to buy that product from somebody else." When it comes to military security, the government can get around anything.

But I took that to heart, and I left and went to Europe. That's why I asked you a while ago—trip to England. We went to London first and up into the Scotland area, and we were looking at products that they use over there, because they've had terrorist problems back in the '50s. And we're talking about homegrown terrorists with the IRA and this and that.

There was no chain link over there. Most of their product, they call palisades. And palisades is some word that means pale. And they had a lot of it all over Europe. We visited a company north of Milan, Italy—about 80 miles—way up in the mountains, and they made a welded wire mesh.

So anyway, I visited a lot of people. Came back with some good ideas. And we built a product similar to palisades. The palisades was just a tubular product. You buy the tubing from some tube mill—then make it out of a tubular product. That's what we did with our ornamental, until we put in our own tube mills.

You go back to Aegis—we made all of that. We made all the tubing and everything. Through the Aegis product, I learned a lot about roll forming. You can take a piece of steel that's a third the weight of another piece of steel that's rolled into square tubing or round tubing, and I can roll that up into a shape that will have half as much steel—but three times as strong—just with the roll forming technology.

And I came back, and I developed a product. A hundred feet away, it looks just like palisades. But you get up close—the vertical picket is a roll-formed product that adds a lot of strength to it. Then the horizontal rails—same thing. Same thing with the post. We got some patents on that product, and we made it through automation—wasn't handmade. So we took a

product that would give you two and a half minutes of breaching the product, with about 35% less steel, made through automation with about half the labor. So that was the key to manufacturing a very high-quality product that you can sell a whole lot of at some really strong margins. That was the Impasse product.

JE: So you got the government contracts for that?

EG: Yeah.

JE: Well, that was just—

EG: That was pretty good.

JE: More than pretty good, wasn't it?

EG: Well, we got a lot of military bases. They took us first to areas that were of high risk—embassies. We started fencing embassies. You might remember when Iran was raiding our embassy over there. They scaled the wall. And I just talked to Barry Willingham—runs Ameristar now. They just sold \$2.5 million into Saudi—one job. That product's got 60% margins.

JE: So that was beyond anything you'd ever done then—the biggest? Is that true?

EG: Yeah. As far as the biggest seller—the Montage, in between Aegis and Impasse, was the Montage product that we also made through automation. Except here's the key—we made the whole panel.

Up until Montage, Aegis was shipped in a box, which you could ship on common carrier, Yellow Freight, on a full truckload. The Montage was a product I developed in '04. Built a whole plant for it. Impasse today—that we just discussed—is successful. Montage is just as successful. I'm probably more proud of that than anything.

And that was a product—I don't know if I was in the shower—but I was somewhere when it hit me that we can make this through automation, through robotic welding. Because if you go back to the Aegis product that's in a roll form—you lose a lot of strength because the vertical picket is not actually fixed to the horizontal rail. It's just held in place.

The Montage enabled us to roll up this rail, drop a picket in it—vertical picket—then put it through the welding operation, which is all automatic robots. Zap, zap, zap. And that vertical picket is actually welded to the horizontal rail through fusion welding.

I built that plant in '04—\$42 million counting all the equipment in the plant—to build a product that had never been built before. I had prototypes that I tested. But as a \$42 million investment, the first year, we sold \$40 million worth of product. To me, that was the best success we ever had—except the people at Ameristar.

Chapter 8 – 5:45

Ameristar

John Erling (JE): You had this huge campus for AmeriStar. How big was it?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): We had 980,000 square feet of plant space, and we had about 90 acres. But remember, most of that was Flamingo Trailer Park—that's still in the flood zone today.

JE: And then you built an education wing.

EG: That's something I'm really proud of. We added to the initial building several times. This is on the northwest corner—it was right down from my offices. This was early 2000s. It's a huge classroom that could be cordoned off to make four classrooms. You could seat 120 people in there. Everybody could plug up their computer. We had it all rigged up. We had different cameras and TV screens. It was like a teaching facility at some university with some professor talking to 100 people.

It wasn't just for our people, because Six Sigma taught me that we need to train everybody—even the guy making \$10 an hour. Six Sigma teaches you to bring everybody to another level, and all boats will float.

There are two great things that came out of that. The fence industry—they always tried to do well—but they had installation courses in Atlanta every year for 15–20 years. Fence companies would send their fence builders

down there for a week to two weeks. And it cost a lot of money, and there would be volunteers there that would teach you how to set fence, teach you how to stretch chain link or build Montage or other products.

I've always thought, "Why in the hell is this in Atlanta? I've got an extra 80 acres here—bare land you can't build on—but we can get out there and we can build fence." So I approached the AFA, which is American Fence Association. They were on some little university down there in Georgia. I said, "You're paying them all this money. You can come here to Tulsa, and I will put on these training facilities and I will pay these people." And it's going to cost me \$150,000.

There'd be generally 120, 140 people come to Tulsa—made the Tulsa World news about all these people coming to Tulsa. We put them up in a hotel, generally down 169. We set up all these areas out there to teach you how to set fence or stretch fence or install a gate operator—more technical stuff—and we just had a ball.

First of all, I was a fence builder, so I got along with all these guys. They were there Monday through Friday. They left Friday evening. But in return, Friday morning from 7 to noon, I got them. And I took every one of those fence builders through our manufacturing facility. And first of all, we had a closed plant—nobody got to go through the plant. But we took these people through—no cameras. I guarantee every one of those guys were friends of Ameristar forever. They'd never seen a manufacturing facility like that where their product is coming from. And it created a marriage that just lasts forever.

We were always pretty darn good in marketing, but that's the best time and money we ever spent.

JE: And you didn't know you were getting into marketing when you created that education facility—unless you're more of a visionary than I thought you were.

EG: We were. The other thing—after Colonel Bonsal came to see us—we started educating people with Homeland Security. We had—I don't remember his name—the second behind the lady that was the head of Homeland Security for Bush. And we had a lot of high-level people from

D.C. come to Tulsa for two days.

What we did is, we set up examples of our products. In the new warehouse building, I had about 20,000 feet that was vacant. And we set up products just like at a convention or trade show. But we allowed other people to bring theirs in too. It was kind of a little trade show—just government people, U.S. or state. And we would explain our product.

Plus, we used that training facility to teach these people the difference in these products. Because at the time, I got into crash barrier products. And mine stopped the truck—everything else out there didn't.

I designed a crash barrier system that was incorporated into Impasse or Montage. I got it up to where I could stop a 15,000-pound truck going 50 miles an hour in one meter—which is 37 inches. Boom. Colonel Bonsal liked that. I crashed 6,7 trucks before I got there.

I hired an engineer in the very beginning, and we did this down at Texas A&M University. Texas A&M's got an abandoned Air Force airport that wasn't used, so we had a mile-long landing strip. That's where they do all the DOT testing for guardrails and different stuff. Well, they tested our fencing down there.

Very first test, that truck came down through there and went through that fence like a knife through butter and went to the next county—that's the way I put it. The only time I ever hired an engineer in my life—and I had to fire him right there. So I fired him, and through trial and error, we kept coming back, and we got a product. But that training facility was...

JE: That would produce more revenue for you than you ever thought it would.

EG: Yeah, it kept growing the business.

JE: I have to laugh. It's amazing. Yeah, it's amazing. Once you got on a roll, one thing led to another, and an idea spawned, and it was good.

Chapter 9 – 4:22**Gina**

John Erling (JE): So then it was so good that you decided to sell Ameristar in 2013. Talk about that. Was it up for sale or...

Eddy Gibbs (EG): No, no, it wasn't up for sale. And I had a hundred people call over the years, and they would get to Miss Brandman down here. She's been my right-hand person for 27 years. She would just stop them there—say, "Well, you know, Eddy's not a rude person, but he just doesn't take these calls. The business is not for sale." That happened all the time.

Then in '13—about a year before that—my daughter's surgeries were pretty much over. She had been through multiple surgeries. In fact, her last surgery was '08.

JE: And quickly, those were all about what—those surgeries?

EG: Her biological mother was on drugs. Methamphetamines. And if you know a little bit about that, the danger to the unborn is lower extremities. Her left hip didn't exist. Her left foot, from knee down, is half the size of the other. She had no anal passage. So within days, she was given a colostomy bag.

I got her when she was four weeks old. And it was a lady I knew for just a couple of weeks.

JE: Her mother?

EG: Her mother, yeah—but her aunt was my ex-wife. And that's how that happened. Well, my ex-wife called me up and said, "You know, she just had this baby at the Children's Hospital in Oklahoma City, and it's your baby." I said, "No, Lauren, it can't be." Well, I got Ben Faulkner, my attorney, did a DNA—got a court-ordered DNA—and she's mine. And I had her just a few weeks later. She was six weeks when I got Gina—a very sick little girl.

And so, I had a pretty good management team then at AmeriStar. They did a pretty good job because I was gone a lot. I spent 71 days—71 nights—at the Children's Hospital in Oklahoma City, sleeping generally on the floor

because they had rules against you sleeping in beds, even though they had hundreds of empty beds. So, we spent a lot of time over there. It changed my life.

I wasn't married. My sisters all jumped in—really saved my life. Because I was enjoying life in '98 and '99. That's how she came around. I was doing a lot of stuff. No drugs. Never overdid the alcohol, but I had a good time. I chased the ladies. And if there was a golf course on some island—I'm gonna go play it. But I probably wouldn't be here today.

She changed my life. And also, Ameristar was very successful in 2000, 2001, but most of the success came later. When I was back—wasn't married—seeing as I had a little daughter to raise that had a lot of needs, and it put me back to work. Just like sitting there by her baby bed, and I came up with fusion welding.

But she is extremely bright. She never had anything less than an A—ever.

JE: I got to say, it's just hard to believe that the way you described her at birth, that there's a picture of a beautiful young lady standing there on a volleyball court. Legs look fine and all—and a very healthy lady now, is she?

EG: Yeah. She still does what they call the ACE procedure every morning, but she has to do that for the rest of her life. It's normal to her. You can't tell it there, but her left leg's in a brace. She has to have a brace, or as active as she is, she'll break it.

JE: But yet, she is active and in sport. And so we can say...

EG: Say that she's a great volleyball player.

JE: This is what happens. When people do drugs and you leave people behind you—she's lucky she had you to pay attention. But you also had the financial wherewithal to give her whatever she needed. That could be one of your lasting legacies right here—is her.

EG: She's pretty special.

JE: All right, I think we both have tears in our eyes right now.

EG: I—I have to put my mind somewhere else sometimes.

Chapter 10 – 9:00**Cash**

John Erling (JE): We got into that because you were selling Ameristar in 2013.

Eddy Gibbs (EG): Yeah. We had went through 12 years—13 years—of getting Gina where she's at today. Gina is also responsible for Rejoice.

JE: That's the school.

EG: We can talk about that later. But I never really wanted to sell the business because I had a good management team, but I had also bought Shangri-La, mostly because I wanted to do something else.

And before Gina was born, I was going to the Bahamas and the Caribbean. I had already tested an 85-foot Hatteras. Gonna hire me a couple of guys—a captain and a mate—and I was going to spend some time on that boat, playing golf in the Caribbean and all the nice restaurants, being at a different island every night and a different lady. That's where I was going.

Then she pops up. About four months later, I'd been with her every night. My cousin called me up and said, "Listen, we need to get out of the house, go play some golf." So we went up to Shangri-La. I used to go up there occasionally and spend the night and play a little round. We were on the golf course there on the back nine, and there was a house right there on the tee box. Had a for-sale sign, had a little dock down there and stuff. And I told my cousin, "This is what I need to do. I need to get a place up here."

We get on the lake — of course, I was already burned out on the lake when me and the boys lived at Keystone. But I said, "I can play golf, get away from the office, and get my daughter up here." And so I was up there next week. I ended up buying a house at the Chateaus at Shangri-La. The guy that owned it was going downhill. He didn't want to put any money in it, and I bought the place.

Why, I don't know. It'll never make any money. This year, it's gonna make a little bit. Next year, it'll do better. But to pay it back—it's 20 years. So John, it is not a business that I would ever get into. I like to make a profit. But the

family liked it, and I knew I wasn't going to the Caribbean.

Then I got a phone call about this company that was interested. And I said, "Well, I've turned down so many people." "Yeah, but this is different. They've got tons of money, and they've been looking at you for a few years." It's a company called ASSA. Now, their home office is Sweden, but 60% of their business is North America. ASSA ABLOY—now it's ASSA AmeriStar.

So I said, "Well, OK, bring them in here." The CEO from Sweden came over. The president of North America—Nassau from New York—came down. We gave them a walkthrough on a Saturday because I didn't want anybody else to know.

You know, I knew what my business was worth. First of all, it was a very highly profitable business—huge margins that you just don't hear of. And I follow religiously about 80 companies on the stock market. I really want to get rid of this group. So I spent that Saturday with them. At the time, we were doing \$150 million a year. That was 2012. Today, they're about \$230. That's not a real big company, but when you look at the kind of margins we were making—with an EBITDA of 30%—my God. You walk away at 30% every year. That really got their attention.

At the time, I think they were about a \$6 billion company. They make doorknobs—but high-quality doorknobs—all over the world. They manufacture product—kind of steel product—and they put coatings on it and sell it to home centers and contractors. So it was kind of like the same business.

They write off through a multiplier—I think it was 9. A multiplier is the number of times your net dollars after all expenses, depending on what it is. A grocery store might sell for a multiplier of 4. Somebody that just developed a product that cures cancer would be 50. So it's huge. But a manufacturer with proprietary products on the market today—8, 9, 10 multiplier.

Well, we kept talking to them. They kept coming back, coming back, and they ended up with a number that was shocking.

JE: You said they had cash. They wired an enormous amount of money.

EG: Yeah. Never forget that day.

JE: Tell us about that day.

EG: OK. We had finally come to a number. And here again, I didn't want to sell. I didn't have to sell. So I just held out. We even ended up—we were \$30 million apart. One of my top managers, Barry Williams, said, "Why don't we do an earnout?" I thought, "What?" And then it hit me. I knew what he meant.

They said, "No." I said, "Yeah. We told you we're going to do \$200 million in the second year." And we had other goals. I said, "You guys come in here and you think, well, these are unbelievable profits, and, you know, it's a very wealthy company here—but you don't believe that it's going to continue to grow without me. Everybody here is staying. They'll do just fine." So I challenged them for that \$30 million.

The business—Barry Willingham, because he took over as CEO of the company—it was his responsibility to hit that earnout the next two years. Well, they blew it away. So we got the \$30 million. I gave most of that to my employees.

JE: \$20 million? \$30 million?

EG: \$20 million at first—to everybody. You had to be there a year. Then it depended on how long you were there—you would get points up to eight years—and then how much you made. I gave \$20 million to my employees. A lot of guys, ladies, got \$200,000, \$150,000.

One good story—there's a couple who met there. They had been there for a long time and they couldn't have a baby. They got \$80,000 each, went to Oklahoma City, and did the fertilization. Now they've got two babies.

JE: Wow.

EG: Yeah.

JE: That's great. Taking you back again—you had a contract that you wouldn't sign unless the money came in first.

EG: Yeah, let's go back to that day. It was all good, and we set up a closing date. The money was coming from the North America corporate headquarters in New York City, but the accounting firm somehow was in Canada—Toronto, I think. The money was coming from that bank.

So we set up in my classroom up there. The intercom and everything. And we had a representative from BOK in the office. They wired the money from that bank to BOK. Doc Jennings was there. Oh, and he brought two bottles of champagne. The intercom was on, and the representative from BOK says, "The money's here." That's when I took a deep breath and thought, "Did I make a mistake?" You know? Because once the money was there, nothing you can do.

JE: Well, I'm too polite to ask you what that money was, and I'm sure you haven't divulged that publicly—and that's fine with me. But you had enough money to share with your employees, and then you had enough money—you keep talking about Rejoice. Rejoice Christian School.

EG: Well, I gave more than the \$20 million to my employees. My upper management team was about 15 people. They got half of that earnout. I have guys that got a million dollars.

Yeah, so—but you know, Ameristar was debt-free. I was debt-free. By that time, I'd made some investments—pretty good investments—in different places. So Ameristar wasn't all I had. And no, John, I've never revealed how much it was, but it was—it was way up there.

And here's the thing too—I had the business for 32 years. I paid very little tax on that.

JE: Because?

EG: Because I had earned that money all along the way, and I'd already paid tax on all those earnings.

Now, the real estate was a different story. I sold that real estate for \$94 million, and I bought that real estate for pennies back then. But my total tax package was \$62 million. With everything there, we cleared over half a billion.

JE: The real estate—you paid 62...

EG: No, I paid \$62 million in taxes to the federal and state government on the sale of AmeriStar.

JE: Oh, OK. You did pay tax.

EG: Yeah, yeah, you've got to pay some tax on capital gains.

JE: Yeah.

EG: But see, over all those years—you asked me where we put the money. The first many years, I put it right back into the business. But after '04, when I built the Montage plant, I was reinvesting that money elsewhere.

JE: \$62 million in tax?

EG: Yeah. Terry—Terry wrote the check. We still have a copy of that check.

Chapter 11 – 8:30

Rejoice

John Erling (JE): But you gave \$50 million to Rejoice Christian School.

Eddy Gibbs (EG): 54.

JE: The largest personal gift to a school system in the United States.

EG: Yeah.

JE: What brought you to giving that large amount? Because they probably would have settled for a million dollars.

EG: Oh, yeah—or less.

JE: Did they have a big capital drive? Did they have something?

EG: No, no, no.

JE: Why did they need \$50 million?

EG: They didn't. I'll tell you that story real quick. When Gina was born—I told you that story—when she was about four years old, I thought, you know, “I've got to start thinking education.” So I was gonna do homeschooling, but she was just too active. And yeah, she had a big limp, but she was out in public—she didn't care. She'd go out and play volleyball with great athletes, and she'll dive for that ball just as hard as anybody. And she's pretty good. It never phased her one bit.

So I thought, you know, “She'll do pretty good in the classroom.” Somebody told me about Rejoice. That was 13 years ago. I brought her over here—little bitty school. The church started it 25 years ago. They went to the 8th grade then, but back then they were adding a class a year. It wasn't long—they had K3 through 12th grade.

I went over here and I went in and said, “I want to talk to you about getting my daughter enrolled in K4.” And the lady—Reba—she said, “Well, yeah, come on in, we'll do it.” I said, “Well, I need to talk to you first.” I said, “She has some medical needs during the day.” “Oh, no problem. Come on in. Let's get this thing done.” It was \$2,200 a year—something like that. Cheap.

I said, “Well, I'd really like to describe what my daughter has.” Just then, a little old guy walks by. And she said, “Doctor so-and-so, come in here.” That'd be the superintendent. She said, “This is Eddy Gibbs. He wants to get his daughter enrolled in K4.” He said, “Well, great, we want to grow that class.” And I said, “But we need to talk. My daughter needs some help.” He said, “Well, listen, we have Mrs. Hambrick. She's not a nurse, but she is really good with kids.” And anyway, he convinced me that she'd be just fine.

Best damn thing that ever happened to me. Ever.

So I enrolled her in K4 and she had so much fun. She played with other kids. She's been there ever since. But Rejoice—they didn't know me from Adam. But they took my daughter on, and I realized within a few months they were struggling in school.

So Ms. Brandman—always been the wise one—she said, “You know, Ed, you've recently been talking about charity. There's probably no better

place.” So we sent them a check for \$100,000 at the end of the year. We did it again the next year, in K5. When she started the first grade, I increased it to \$200,000. We’ve done that ever since, except about a year and a half ago we stopped because now my foundation supports the entire school.

They took my daughter on and gave her the childhood that she wouldn’t have gotten at an Owasso school. Imagine homeschool—what she would have missed out on.

So when I sold AmeriStar—and this is getting to, I think, your next question—we’re coming into all this money now. I never invested in the stock market, but I started about 10 years ago, and I got pretty good at it, I think. So I was having some fun with it. We had some means of doing some neat things. And I’ve always, I think, given back.

Dr. Shaw had taken over from the other fella about seven or eight years ago. And I really got to liking Dr. Shaw. And they were down there on 86. We ran into one another—he said, “You know, we want to build a new school, maybe just elementary or mid school. We’ve got some land up here behind the church—30 acres.” He said, “Would you be interested in jumping on the list of people here?” I said, “Yeah, I’d be interested.”

So I went down to his office—they were in the old church building down there. He showed me a legal pad that he just wrote names down. There were about 14 names. And from \$50,000 to \$500,000—there were three that had put down five. There’s one that had ten. But anyway, they had \$22 million. And I said, “What are you trying to build?” He said, “It’s \$32.” I said, “So you need \$10 million.” He said, “Yes.”

I went back and talked to Ms. Brandman. You see, I never had a partner, but I do talk to a couple of people. And she said, “You ought to do that. We can handle \$10 million.” She got with Ben Faulkner and Ron [unintelligible]. We always try to do things right. They advised her, “Do up a letter. Notarize it. Take it to him. Even have the bank sign off on it.” So it was basically a \$10 million letter of credit. It wasn’t a soft promise.

So here he had \$32 million. A few months went by. I said, “When are you gonna get this thing going?” And he kept saying, “Well, they’re not coming

through.” Then I told him, I said, “You know, my letter was good for a year. We need to do something.”

I met him underneath the football stadium over here at Rejoice Heights. This would be five years ago. And I said, “Dr. Shaw, where’s this money?” He said, “Ed, it’s not coming.” He said, “They were just soft pledges. Some of them said, well, you know—but we were planning to do that over ten years.”

I had just sold AmeriStar. In fact, we might not even have closed on it yet. This was like October. And underneath that football stadium at halftime—out of the blue—I just said, “Well, I’ll pay for the whole damn thing.” That morning, when I got up out of bed, I had no intentions whatsoever of giving away \$32 million. I just did not. But you talk about—God works in mysterious ways—because that had to come from somebody.

And he just backed up and he said, “Are you kidding?” I said, “No, no. Nobody around here knows it, but I sold AmeriStar.” He had come to my office a few times—he knew it was a sizable company. And I said, “Let’s just do this. Do you have a team put together?” He said, “I’ve got a couple of people—one guy at the church put together a plan for the entire building and all this and that.”

I got to looking at it, and I called my old friend, Ray Miller—Fleming Building Company. He built all my buildings at AmeriStar. But anyway, that’s how this whole thing got going. No other money came forward, and he had his team together—some of the school board, a couple of people volunteering their time—pretty good team. And so I brought Ray Miller in, his top superintendent. I brought in our architect firm, and my attorney.

We sat down there, and the first thing that Ray said was, “Ed, what they’ve put together here—you’re not going to build this for \$32 million. And you’re gonna need more than 30 acres.” Oh, boy.

So anyway, to make a long story short—there were 15 acres north of this 30. I scrambled the owners around—that was difficult. There were six people who inherited that land. I bought that. Then there was 20 acres to the

west—belonged to three brothers. They thought it was worth more than it was. But anyway, we bought 35 acres, which now gives us 65 acres. There was plenty of land to do what we wanted.

We built a school that would easily hold 1,500 students. And we're talking about 18 kids per class—not 30. It was quite a campus. But the number went to 38, and then 40, and then—"Not no more than 40, Ray. You and the architect, you've got to keep it down below that." Well, it went to 47. Plus I paid seven for the property. So that's where you get your \$54 million.

JE: Wow.

EG: But, you know, we weren't ripped off. A lot of it—me and Paul added to it. "You know, listen, we need this." It just—this is better. And one of the gyms has tornado-thick walls, F5. When there's storms in, we have neighbors from those houses come over and crawl in that gym. So it's good for the community. It took three years to build it.

JE: What a story.

Chapter 12 – 10:50

Shangri-La

John Erling (JE): Let me come back to Shangri-La. You built a new clubhouse. You upgraded the golf courses. You bought the marina in 2012. You built upscale homes there. You said it's not a money-making proposition, but what it's done for that area of Grand Lake—and for the entire lake—is absolutely enormous. It's a gift that you're giving to the state, is what you're doing by building and improving.

Eddy Gibbs (EG): Yeah. But all my life, I go to work, manage a business, and try not to make the big mistake, OK? And I've done that. I've made a lot of mistakes, but never made the big one. This would be classified as one of those. But it was more out of love.

I had been there a couple of years. The guy that bought it—I know him pretty well now. He's well known in town. He's just a very conservative guy.

When he bought it, I bid against him, but he beat me out by \$150,000. When the economy went down, he called me up wanting to know if I'd buy it. Well, I did.

JE: Do you want to name him?

EG: Peter Boylan. We always treat each other nicely. He did so much work in the beginning of that property—it's benefited. He, in fact, got a \$24 million TIF that was handed off to us. It's just now coming in because that comes from the land taxes on houses.

But Peter Boylan—I bought it from him. And all I intended to do—I lived in the Chateaus—was rebuild that golf course. I thought, you know, I can cut grass. And I thought, I'm getting a little older—this will be something I'll do for the rest of my life. I found out that grass on the golf course is way different than your backyard. But I lucked out—we got good people.

First of all, Jason Sheffield, who grew up with my son here in town. He was one of my scholarship kids, and he's truly like a son to me. Jason's just real close to me. He's the smartest kid there ever was. At OU, he won all kinds of awards. He was actually working for a builder here in town. I called him up—I said, "I'm up at Shangri-La. You want to come run it for me?" He said, "Right now, I do." But he had three kids. Well, no—Brenda was pregnant with the young one—and he said, "I don't know if she'll move." Well, she jumped all over it.

So anyway, we hired Jason right away. We started the clubhouse. It ended up being about five times as big as what we started out. Then we rebuilt the golf course. It had 36 holes—I rebuilt 27. It's not the same golf course. A lot of times the holes are in the same place, but it's totally different. But it is a really great golf course—the grasses, the greens, white sand in the traps. It's as nice a golf course as Cedar or Southern Hills. And I've got 30 members who are members of Southern Hills—they'll tell you the same thing. My son's a member of Southern Hills.

It's a very high-level golf course. We have members—we're up to 494. We don't charge as much as the nice course here in town, because we're up at the lake. Most members get to play about half the year. We get a pretty penny for a round of golf. Saturday's \$140. There's only one course in

Oklahoma—that's the one over by Edmond—that charges more than that. But we're filled up. We had 18,000 players last year—counting members and people who walk in and pay the \$140.

It's not a private course—probably never will be—because we need that extra revenue. The money just kept adding up. But, you know, I sold Ameristar four and a half years ago, and I had some money. And I thought, you know, I'm going to do this right.

And I was never going to build a hotel. That's just not me. It's not hard to do the math—they had 360 rooms there. But that was their problem—from Davis on to all the other people. It wasn't a bad model. It was just too big. That means in the off-season, you've got 360 rooms empty.

We built 120 rooms—we could add 60 more, but we never will. We need a product that's in big demand. July is completely booked. Weekends through the season—completely booked. The same hotel in Tulsa would get \$90—we get \$250.

It is a business that this year will make money for the first time in 50 years. Davis—I never knew the guy. I heard so much about him. I know his son, daughter-in-law. He was a really good guy. He was a manufacturer like me from Kansas.

JE: His first name?

EG: Charles Davis. They never made money up there. I got all the records. It's just so hard. In September—especially in Oklahoma—when it's football season, nobody goes up there. You've got to have a different model.

Back then, you'd go play that course for \$30 and get a room for \$30. So we've got a little different model. We just need to get the rooms filled—and we are.

There's three markets. There's mom and dad with three kids—go spend the weekend. They generally can't go during the week. Then you've got the golfers—couple of buddies go up, or four buddies go up, or man and wife. That's weekend business.

The business that we thought would be hard to get is corporate businesses that want to go up Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Last year, that was 65% of our business. And those people that used to go up are coming back—plus new people. Nine out of ten of them are rebooking. That is phenomenal.

Now, the mom and pop and kids—they're coming. We do zero advertising. It's strictly social media—Facebook. I'm from a different, you know, different market. I used to knock doors. But I've got some pretty good people, and we're doing a pretty good job. So we'll see how it goes.

We're hoping to get 52% occupancy. It'll make some decent money. But what I got in it—it's 15–17-year payout.

With Shangri-La, I've got a lot of real estate. There's 400 acres there, and we could build homes for the next 10 years. And there is a demand for homes up there now. But I want to tell you—I've got some close friends in the home building business, and I feel sorry for them. Because there's just no money in the home building. Of course, they're better at it than we are. But we're making a little bit on the homes. But every time we sell a home, generally, it is to new people that are moving up there for weekend summer homes.

Well, that is new revenue instantly to the resort. The hotel—it's not like a Holiday Inn Express. It may look like that in some respects, but we have got the amenities.

The pool is designed after a pool at the Turks and Caicos named Beaches, which is put in by the guy who owns all the Sandals resorts. Sandals was just man and wife. All those customers, his last twenty-something years, grew up—they've got kids—and he built Beaches. It's actually got five resorts. And each one's got its own pool. This pool is absolutely incredible. The design that's laid out—you can swim up to a bar, you can go down and play with 100 kids in a spray and splash area and a big bucket dump. It's neat.

We've got that and all the amenities. We've got Sea-Doos, we've got little

sailboats, pontoon boats, we've got fishing guides. Of course, you've got 27 holes of golf course. I'm a walker. I built five miles of walking trail. It really looks like a golf cart track, but it's a walking and jogging trail. The U.S. government pays for part of that. But anyway, we've got five miles of track. You've got a little airport there. If you've got something that can land in 3 to 400 feet. The lake, the fishing, we've got the marina—there's a lot to do, especially for a young family.

So it's a good investment. It's not going to go down.

JE: It's not going to go down?

EG: As far as, you know, bad economic times—most of the people that are in there can withstand a recession. The recession in '08 and '09—nobody really left except Pete Boylan. He was having a hard time getting the money to build what I built. And, you know, I think he's got the money, but he's a smarter businessman than me. He was going to use somebody else's money.

It's a decent investment—very long-term payout. The only thing that I'm concerned about—with AmeriStar, I've sold everything else except these buildings here. And we'll sell that lease within a year or two, I'm pretty sure. Then I've got some land over by AmeriStar. You know, at my age, I want to liquidate everything—make it as clean as possible. My kids are already taken care of. Everything I've got is going into my foundation—my Christian school foundation—which I'm more proud of than anything.

We already have close to 1,000 students getting a scholarship paid for at Christian private schools.

JE: That's great. So what about Shangri-La—you're still glad you did it?

EG: Oh yeah. Yeah.

JE: Well, you said you hadn't made a mistake, and that maybe this was it.

EG: Yeah, because—and I don't mind telling you—I've got \$60 million in that place. But I get a lot of joy out of it.

The first house I bought, I gave it to my brother-in-law and sister. And my other three sisters—they rebuilt that. Each sister's got its own bedroom. So

just a quarter mile away—right down the road in Chateaus from my house—is my sisters. My kids are there. The house I've got—I rebuilt, seven bedrooms. I get all my kids, all my grandkids up there. That's the only time I see them. You know, everybody's working.

Well—I take it back—we all went to Telluride, things like that.

But was it a mistake financially? Yeah. I've had it seven years—I haven't taken a dime out of it. There wasn't a dime to take. We opened—it took quite a bit of money to get through the winter. But everything is there to start pulling out a pretty good chunk every year, starting this year and next.

The numbers are there. It's got to—unless there's a tornado or a fire or something. And of course we're insured. But normally, at AmeriStar, I put in that kind of money—I'm gonna get it back in three or four years. Here—it's gonna take maybe 20. But I don't need the money.

JE: You'll be 90.

EG: Yeah. I won't be around then. But my kids enjoy this place.

Chapter 13 – 11:50

Proud

John Erling (JE): Maybe you've already answered this. Looking back on your life, one or two things that you're the most proud of—and there's a lot that you could be proud of. What are they?

Eddy Gibbs (EG): Oh, my kids. My kids, my family, my sisters. Terry sends out about 28 checks every month to not just family, but friends that I support.

JE: You've had a very generous heart. I don't know that you had a model to follow on that, but you just naturally came by it.

EG: Yeah, it just—you're successful and you got a few bucks in your pocket and somebody needs it—then yeah. The one or two things I'm most proud of is my kids. I really believe—and they tell people this—my best achievement in life is being a father. Maybe that's because I didn't spend all the time

needed to be a husband, because I've been married maybe 20% of my adult life.

So my kids—I've got three great kids. The other is being able to do something at this school. I'll kind of break it down to two things. Building a school like that for middle-income kids—because that's who goes to private schools. There was no fuzzy feeling for that one bit. Why should I take what I've earned and build a facility for kids that come from some pretty up-to-do families? And to me, middle income is rich.

But in the very beginning, I knew that—and I told Dr. Shaw—we need to do something here to afford this great facility to families in this community that can't afford it. Now, Owasso is a middle-income town, they say—I don't think it is—but Collinsville, Skiatook, and over around Claremore—they're not. These are poor communities. And there's kids from families that can't afford to go there. They can't pay the \$7,000 to \$8,000 a year in tuition for high school.

My boys went to school in Owasso. It was good for public school. And I know all of them over there. Nothing like Rejoice. Our teaching level is unbelievable. Our ACT tests are off the chart. They have Bible class every day. And you know, I'm not pushing Christianity on anybody. In fact, only 60% of our kids go to that church. We've got kids from all religions—or some from none. It's just a school. It's a disciplined school.

And here's what I like to say—because I'm now paying scholarships for about 11 different schools throughout Oklahoma. Jason, who runs Shangri-La—he's got a general manager over there, so he manages my foundation. He will indefinitely. And we've got a lady that works here that came from Make-A-Wish. She was over there for multiple years. She knows about the charity world.

We now are paying scholarships—I think we've qualified 11 schools. But my next really exciting thing is Crossover, which has just started in North Tulsa.

JE: Crossover?

EG: Crossover—it just started. They're a Christian group, but they're not involved in the church because I don't do the church and school

involvements anymore.

Crossover is four or five people that's got 27 kids. They're all black kids. They got a couple of sports teams, but it's a private school. They pay no tuition. They're doing all this with charity, and I'm supporting that school now. I'm not ever going to build an entire campus. Four years ago, I thought I was going to build seven or eight of them. But I have matched dollar for dollar at Crossover. I think we've got a good team over there.

Now, the chances of this failing are huge. Chances of success are way down there. But I've spent some time over there. These kids have got no opportunity. None.

JE: Are they white and black?

EG: We got one white student.

JE: One white student and they're all black?

EG: 26 Black kids. Next year, we want to take these kids to the 8th grade, bring in about that many more from the 27. Then the next year—and I asked for this—we need girls. Girls in the Black community have a better chance of getting out of there and succeeding than the boys. They're both there, they're both in the neighborhood—but here's what they consider an opportunity: the gangs. The gangs are drawing the boys. The girls—bad stuff too, but nothing like that.

Chicago—all these people killing one another. They're not killing girls. They're killing boys. So I told them, I said, "You know, we're missing the boat here. We need to be just as aggressive bringing girls in here."

I lived at 56th and Peoria when I was 19 years old, working for my uncle. And that whole community has changed—it's dead. They have no opportunity whatsoever. Even if they finish high school—where are they going? There's no jobs.

Now, Kaiser bought a bunch of land—going to try to put together about...

JE: You're talking about George Kaiser?

EG: Yeah, yeah. He and I are friends.

JE: Have you worked together on projects?

EG: A little bit.

JE: You brought him up because...

EG: Because he bought, what—120 acres over here—about 56th Street North and Peoria. And he's putting in an industrial park. The city and the state are involved.

At AmeriStar, I built a lot of plants. Right now, there's opportunity to go over and have land free, have all the infrastructure already put in. If I build a plant to hire people, you'll generally bring people in from that community.

You know, I want to tell you—and I'm ashamed of it—my place was Pine and Mingo. So we had a few people in North Tulsa apply for jobs. I'll go back to the '80s and '90s. I'll tell you—my people weren't aggressive in hiring those people. It wasn't no direction from me. But it was just human nature, the way people are in this country, of rejecting some people. And I corrected that about 15 years ago.

But anyway—it just ticks me off. But my foundation—Crossover over there—if we could change some things—unbelievable. But a lot of the other schools we're going to in Tulsa and Oklahoma City and different ones...

JE: I think about this kid with \$10—basically didn't get out of high school. They told him to sit in this room for three days...

EG: To get my diploma.

JE: To get your diploma...

EG: I've never had it.

JE: Which you didn't get. And now you are able to come back and do what you're doing. It's got to make you feel really, really good. How would you like to be remembered when you're gone?

EG: Oh, I don't know. I really have no idea. My kids. And now my grandkids—I got four grandkids. They're taken care of. I've had a trust ever since 1986 when the FDIC was trying to take all my money. My kids are OK

now—they're not getting no hundreds of millions of dollars—nothing like that.

But what I'm leaving—the foundation—which, if I live long enough, it's going to be a billion dollars. That will provide scholarships for these kids.

And I go back to Checotah. Checotah was so dadgum poor. And you got the have and the have-nots. And it's just the way it was. But it was like that all over the country. And the teachers as well—they didn't treat you as well as Joe there—his dad owns Bynum's Grocery. Just like in football—I started at right guard as a sophomore. And I would out-hit anybody on the line. I was only 125 pounds. But my junior year—we went through four weeks of practice before getting into the game part of the season—and a kid by the name of Charles Kunes. And I whipped him every day in practice. I could whip him on the line. He's a little bigger than me—but he got the starting job come Friday night.

His dad owned a little hotel plus an accounting business. And I got to play, but didn't get to start. That Monday morning—my senior year—I turned in my pads.

So, are there things during your life that you'll never forget? Yeah, there was. But what that allowed me to do—football's in the fall time of the year. Back in poor Checotah, one of the ways that I made money was picking up pecans. And you've got to walk a mile or two out of town—get into one of those creek areas—and there's pecan trees everywhere.

Me and a couple of buddies—we'd climb those trees and shake them like crazy, get down, pick up 50 pounds of pecans, and go sell them for 20 cents a pound. We'd do that on Saturday. That's \$10.

So getting out of football—I got to make a little bit more money. And Wellesley Bynum—I was back down working for him after school instead of going to football practice.

But one thing that I'll be proud of is this foundation—because it's set. It's all there. And Jason—he'll hand it off to somebody else. And the way I've set it up—it could go on for 100 years. My direction is—there's so much

difference in an education versus a Christian education. Kids don't get the parenting at home.

Like—you know, my mom was very poor, but she always had time.

JE: What advice do you give to young people? Maybe they want to get into business or just plain living in this world. What advice would you give them?

EG: Education. Education. You know, of course, you can go into—work hard and be honest. That's what I used to put on all the birthday cards I'd send kids: "Work hard, be honest." And everything will be just fine.

But education—I never get into any advice as far as politics or anything like that. That's each their own. But that's it, John.

JE: Well, I want to thank you for telling this story—this great story—from rags to riches is what it is. And only in America could it happen. And fortunately it happened in Oklahoma—right here in Owasso and this area—because they're benefactors. So thank you for sharing the story.

EG: Thank you for letting me talk to you. I've seen that list over there—my goodness.

JE: You're talking about the list of people that we've interviewed.

EG: People that you have interviewed.

JE: We want young people to listen to the stories of very successful people. And yours is like so many others—just hard work. Hard work. Be creative. Be invested in your work. And enjoy it. I ask people—what do you tell these young people? "Find something they're going to be happy with. If you enjoy doing it, it won't be work."

EG: Yeah, that's what I tell my daughter. I've told her for a long time. "Well, you need to know what you're gonna major in by your junior year." Started this year—she said, "Dad, I'm kind of getting stressed." I said, "What about?" She said, "Well, you always told me I need to know what I'm going to do in life before my junior year. And I've got no idea."

I said, "Then forget I ever told you that. Doesn't matter. If you go off and

enroll in whatever university and you have no idea then what you want to do—go to school for a year or two and then you'll figure it out.”

JE: Good advice.

EG: Yeah, so...

JE: All right. Thank you, Eddy.

EG: Are we done here?

JE: Yup.

EG: Well, I'll be doggone. That was painless. You know, I haven't thought about this. And then I looked at my calendar yesterday on my phone. I said, “My God, John Erling's coming tomorrow.” And I thought, “What do I need to do to prepare?”

JE: You live your life.

EG: And then I just forgot about it. And this morning I came in and just thought, “Well, we'll just shoot from the hip and take it from there.”

JE: Exactly. And that's what we did—and you did a great job of it. Thank you.

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