

## Appendix

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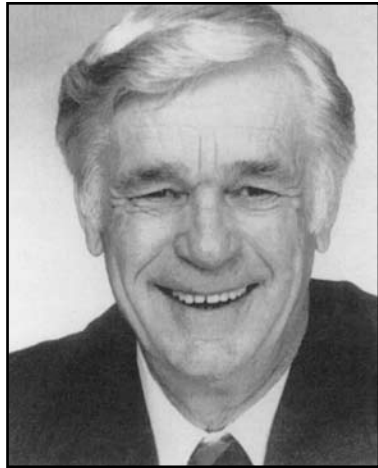
# A Tribute to My Dad, Mack Henson

MAXIE AQUILLA HENSON was born in a tent in Ranger Hill, Texas on July 10, 1920 during the Ranger oil boom. Mack, as his parents called him, was the third of five children born to Claude Jackson Henson and his wife Olive Lutrell Henson. Both C.J.—as he was called—and Olive were born in Texas in the 1800s.

Mack Henson went to school in Seymour, Texas during the lean years of the Great Depression. He dropped out of school at age twelve to help support the family. He sold newspapers, shined shoes and did odd jobs. It was

hard times, but young Mack Henson did pretty well, relying on his natural instincts, charm and street smarts. He was curious and an adventurer. By the time he was fifteen, Mack and his brother Shorty had ridden freight trains several times to California where they worked in construction, picked grapes and worked as kitchen helpers.

In 1936 at age sixteen, Mack went to work for Jake and Troy Wells at their Seymour Café in Seymour, Texas. Mack became a short-order cook and excelled at baking fruit pies. The Wells brothers became his mentors and



*Mack Henson*

Mack was an eager apprentice. For the rest of his life, Mack would be involved in the restaurant business one way or another.

But Mack could never turn down a challenge. In 1938, he joined a crew of door-to-door salesmen peddling magazine subscriptions all over the midwestern United States. He prospered in this business and was soon in charge of the crew even though he was the youngest. Since it was the Dust Bowl era and money was scarce, Mack sometimes promoted payments for his subscriptions from rural farmers in goods rather than cash. Mack particularly liked old gold teeth and live chickens. He even built a chicken cage on top of his car to carry his earnings.

In the late 1930s, C.J. and the entire Henson clan moved to Abilene, Texas. C.J. and Mack's older brother Arthel went to work in the Paymaster Feed Mill. C.J. worked the night shift and ran a small roadside produce stand during the day. C.J. liked to sleep in his chair next to the stand. When a customer wanted something they just woke him up. Times were a little different back then. Eventually, C.J. opened a small grocery store that became an Abilene institution.

In the prewar days of the early 1940s, the military began building army bases around the country. A construction boom came to the Abilene area with the building of Camp Barkly in nearby View, Texas. At age twenty Mack and his partner Bill Bailey borrowed money, purchased an old trailer house and turned it into a small diner. Mack and Bill started serving hamburgers and chili to the hungry hoards of construction workers. Mack lived in a converted chicken coop behind the trailer house diner. Bill hired a local farm girl by the name of Roma Jean Richards as a waitress. When the young waitress met the busy short-order cook, his first words to her were "Get the hell out of my kitchen." Mack and Jean married in the spring of 1941 and stayed married for over sixty years.

I guess Mack said the right thing to her after all.

WHEN the Camp Barkly construction work was finished, Mack closed the trailer house café with no name. He finagled a job as the construction foreman on another military camp to be built in Leadville, Colorado, and the newlyweds moved to Leadville. Mack excelled in the construction business but was drafted into the Army after just a few months in Leadville.

Mack went to Jefferson Barracks Military Post in Missouri for basic training, then on to Spokane, Washington and March Field, California where he waited to be shipped out for combat in the South Pacific. Only hours before



*Mack's First  
Grocery Store  
in North  
Abilene, Texas,  
1946.*

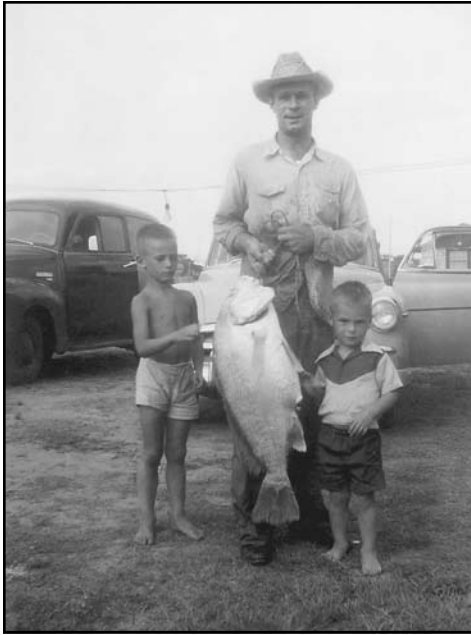
his military unit was to be shipped out, his brother Shorty was in a terrible train accident near Houston. Mack got an emergency furlough to see Shorty, who was in critical condition. When Mack returned to March Field his company had shipped out. Mack learned later that almost all of the soldiers in his outfit were killed in action.

Mack was reassigned to the Army Air Corps bombing range near Tonopah, Nevada where he set up both day and night targets for B-25 bombing practice.

Mack did very well in Tonopah and soon made the rank of sergeant. He and Jean purchased a building on the main street and opened The Quick Way Photo portrait studio where he took and sold portrait photos to soldiers. This was wide open Nevada in the 1940s and it suited Mack just fine. They installed slot machines in the studio. He bought and sold motorcycles, cars and items that were in short supply during war time—gasoline, nylons and other things. Mack also loaned money and operated an informal pawn service. He became a very good poker player, a passion that lasted throughout the rest of his life. Things in Tonopah were good for Mack. He even built a small house using mostly scrap materials from the bombing range. In the war years soldiers inspected and rode on the hoods of people's cars as they drove across Hoover Dam. Mack smuggled untaxed whiskey across the dam by hiding it under the baby crib of his new born son, Dusty.

Mack and Jean Henson would have probably stayed in Nevada if it wasn't for Mack's family back in Texas. Sure enough, in 1945, after the war, Mack and Jean returned to Abilene. Mack opened up a café, ran it for a short time and sold it. He and brother Shorty did cement contracting for a brief time.

In 1946, Mack took the \$600 he had saved up in the Army and used this to open Mack Henson Grocery & Meat, his first small grocery store in North Abilene.



*Mack Henson with Dusty (on left) and Bennie, fishing Fort Phantom Lake, Abilene, Texas, June 6, 1951.*

The postwar era of the late 1940s and early 1950s were prosperous times in America. Mack's family grew as did his business. Son Bennie was born in 1947, and daughter Melba in 1950. Between 1946 and 1954 Mack doubled the size of his grocery about every two years. By 1954, Mack Henson Grocery & Meat was selling clothing and hardware. His store included a jewelry shop and watch repair, a barber shop

and even offered dry cleaning pick-up and delivery. This kind of one stop shopping was the basic concept that Wal-mart and K-mart use today. Mack Henson was doing it fifty years ago in Abilene, Texas. Mack, his sister Louise and her husband Jake Cagle opened a gas station and salvage yard. Dusty had a snow cone stand in the parking lot.

Mack even had his own fifteen-minute TV show that aired every Wednesday. And Mack appeared as the master of ceremonies at many functions in and around Abilene. All the Henson siblings—Mack, Arthel, Shorty, Melvin and sister Louise—did well during this time. The brothers owned neighboring cabins on Fort Phantom Lake. Mack swam two miles across the lake on his thirtieth birthday, July 10, 1950.

Life was good!

**BUT MACK** didn't lay back and take things easy. In 1955 and 1956 he opened three convenience stores, the Quickway Stores, in Abilene. He built a small strip center east of the big store which included Hawkeye's Diner and the latest fad in Abilene—a coin-operated laundry.

In 1957, Mack sold the Quickway Stores and some rent houses, leased the big store to Wooten Grocery Company and retired at age thirty-seven.

Mack hunted, fished, traveled some, managed his properties and piddled in other small business deals. But he got restless. So in 1959, he made a deal with the General Electric Company to open coin-operated laundries featuring GE machines nationwide. It was a sweet deal for Mack. He had the full financial backing of GE and took many trips scouting locations for this promising new business. The first three laundries were scheduled to open in Alamosa, Monte Vista and Del Norte, three small towns in the San Luis Valley of Southern Colorado. On a cold Sunday in February 1959 just before signing the papers for the first new GE coin-operated laundry in Colorado, Mack and Jean drove up to Wolf Creek Pass and passed a beautiful ranch along the banks of the Rio Grande River, five miles west of South Fork, Colorado. They noticed that the ranch was for sale. Instead of signing the papers for the coin-operated laundries, Mack and Jean signed a contract to buy his dream ranch, the ranch that we all know today as Fun Valley.

In May of 1959, the Henson Family and long-time employees Jackie Woods, Jeanie Woods and Cleve Bilbrey left Abilene for Colorado. By the end of that summer, Fun Valley was open for business. The ranch featured a miniature golf course, a commercial trout fishing pond and horse rentals. By the fall of 1959 Mack had his Colorado outfitter guide license and had established a camp in the mountains for hunters.

In 1960 bulldozers were clearing land and building lakes at Fun Valley. Although over one hundred people had previously been turned down, Mack applied for a liquor license. Somehow, Mack got his license, the first liquor license of this type issued in Rio Grande County. Mack and Jean opened the Fun Valley Steakhouse and Bar. The opening was a huge success, featuring Slim Willett, a friend and famous Abilene Western singer who wrote the 1950s smash hit "Don't Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes." During the summer of 1960, other entertainers including Johnnie Lee Wills, the brother of Bob Wills, also performed at the Fun Valley Steakhouse and Bar.

During the 1960s, Mack didn't slow down at all. He got himself elected president of the South Fork Chamber of Commerce. He got together with South Fork restaurant owner Jimmy Minter. Together, Mack and Jimmie organized the Rio Grande World Champion Raft Race, which was a huge success.

Mack built a motel at Fun Valley in the spring of 1961. In the spring of 1962, Mack and Jean constructed a roller skating rink and some rental cabins on the river.

The expansion at Fun Valley was successful but tough. After the winter of

1959–1960, the Hensons moved their base of operations back to Texas and every year opened Fun Valley from May through November. In 1968 Mack bought the Spruce Ski Lodge in South Fork and the El Rio Hotel in Del Norte. He changed the name of the El Rio to The Old West Hotel. In 1970, he transformed the hotel into an Old-West-themed Trading Post Mall, featuring ten stores including the James Richards Pottery Shop. In 1971, Mack bought three more buildings and a small ranch in Del Norte, Colorado.

In the early '70s all the Henson children, Dusty, Bennie and Melba got involved in the family business. And the Henson family continued to grow. Melba had two children, Kyle and Molly. Bennie had two sons, Mack David and Henk. Dusty stayed single until age thirty and had no children.

Throughout the 1970s, Mack continued to expand the Fun Valley RV Park until it reached about five hundred spaces. He built a “Funitorium” that featured live entertainment every night. He changed the skating rink into a square-dance barn and a few years later, Mack built a big new square-dance barn on the river. Fun Valley now included twenty-seven man-made lakes in addition to a mile-and-a-half of the Rio Grande River.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were great times for the Hensons. Having raised up their kids, Mack and Jean ran Fun Valley every summer. In the winter season, they spent much time traveling to Las Vegas and taking fishing trips to Mexico.

Back in Abilene, Mack launched several new careers. He took up oil painting. He specialized in landscapes and quickly sold everything he painted. Mack was flattered when one of his paintings was stolen from Fun Valley.

Mack was always a showman. He performed in several community theater plays in Abilene and had small parts in two different movies that were filmed in Las Vegas. Mack enjoyed going to the disc jockey convention in Nashville to book and promote acts for the Fun Valley Funatorium. He traveled to Europe and South America. He hired an agent and spent some time in Hollywood making the rounds. He had a very hard time accepting the fact that Hollywood was not particularly interested in an actor in his sixties with limited experience. Nevertheless, he somehow got his Screen Actors Guild card.

In 1987 at age sixty-seven, Mack moved from Abilene and bought a new home on Lake Granbury in Granbury, Texas. He bought a store on the Granbury Town Square and some property on Highway 377 where he promptly put in an RV Park and opened the Cowboy Market Place Gift Store and Trading Post. Bennie managed the Granbury property. Melba

managed Fun Valley and the Colorado properties. Dusty left in 1974 to start his own business, the El Paso Saddleblanket Company.

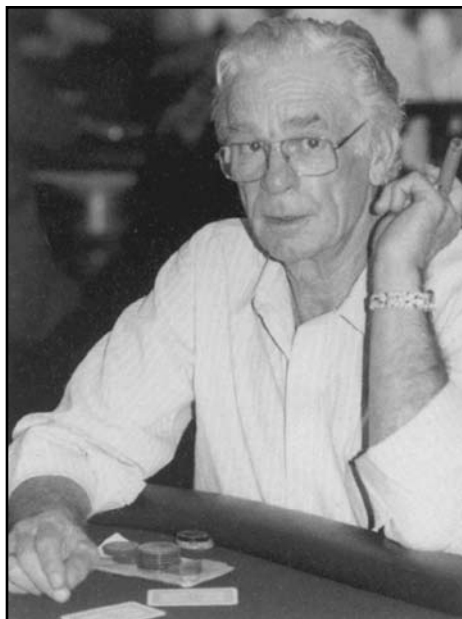
At about this time, Mack took up the game of golf. He played whenever he could, even well into his eighties. He really enjoyed his Fun Valley golfing buddies.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Mack spent more and more time playing poker in Las Vegas. He hung out with “Amarillo Slim” the gambler, some of his Hollywood friends and others. Mack became a well-known and respected gambler at the MGM Grand. He played in the World Series of Poker at Binion’s Horseshoe. Some of his poker games were twenty-four and thirty-six-hour ordeals and he loved them. After age seventy-five, Mack began to slow some but enjoyed Fun Valley, his family, his customers, employees and friends more than ever.

Many of you probably remember the HUGE eightieth birthday party we threw for Mack Henson at Fun Valley on July 10, 2000. We turned off all the lights and over two thousand people lit candles and sang “Happy Birthday” to Mack. It was very moving.

In later years, Mack and Jean liked to cruise Fun Valley in their golf cart greeting customers and children, spreading happiness and joy wherever they went. In fact, you could say Mack spent his whole life spreading happiness and joy wherever he went. Mack Henson was an adventurer, a businessman, a soldier, an entrepreneur, a gambler and a bit of an outlaw who touched the lives of folks from Abilene to Tonopah to Fun Valley to Las Vegas to Granbury to Mexico.

Mack Henson was a fine man who led an amazing life.



*Mack Henson, making a wonderful life out of the cards he was dealt.*

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