

Bergie's Boys

He taught them more than how to fix a car.

By Kim Hinson

The hooky-playing, hot rod-loving bad boys in our town of Spring Valley, Minn., hung around our place: Berg's Gas Station. Daddy's father built the station in 1931 to look like an old-timey Wild West saloon with a tall, squared-off false front with attached bunkhouse-style living quarters. Daddy didn't change a thing when he took over the station in 1960.

Those rough, tough boys called my dad Bergie. His real name was Arlen Berg, and he grew up a gas station kid, with a backyard junkyard to boot. Daddy had fixed up, bought and traded cars more



Berg's Gas Station as it looked in 1961.

often than some people change their socks. He started smoking when he was 9 and got his driver's license when he was 13. The license cost three bits down at the bank. The cigarettes were free.

Daddy's language was pretty rough, and he had no grammar to speak of. The boys called him Bergie even at ages 31, 51 and 81 because he gave them more than just good old-fashioned customer service. Without even knowing it, he gave them a role model.

Those wild boys had names like Tommy Kuehn, David Boyd and Dennis Rippentroff. Daddy called them by their last names or some cooler variation.

Almost 50 years have passed since I last saw any of those boys, yet these days, I remember more and more about Daddy, those hot summer days, the wild boys who hung around Daddy, and the gas station with living quarters where

I grew up. I see them clearly, feel the heat of a Minnesota summer, and hear their voices like it was yesterday.

"Hey, Bergie!" The driveway bell dinged as an old Ford pickup, screeching like nails on a chalkboard and jam-packed with teenage farm boys, pulled into our gas station one hot summer day in 1966. Wearing faded Levi's and beat-up work boots, they hopped out of the truck.

"Hey, boys!" Daddy called from the garage, his voice raspy from 23-plus years of smoking. "Sounds like you've got a loose belt!"

Daddy popped the hood and told the boys a story they'd heard a million times.

"I got an eighth-grade education, and that was more than enough." Daddy grunted a little, tugging at the alternator belt; then his voice went falsetto as he imitated his no-nonsense, heavy-handed teacher, Miss Markson. "You'll learn this stuff to pass eighth grade if I have to unscrew the top of your head and pour it in!"

The boys grinned and hooted, watching Daddy tug at the belt and itching to make it big in life like Bergie, with as little schooling as possible. They all figured Bergie could teach them everything they really needed to know.

"Well, ain't that somethin'," Daddy said, holding up the frayed alternator belt held together by two little strings of rubber. "Looks like it lasted just long enough to get you boys into the station. OK, lemme see what I've got for a belt."

Daddy gazed through the half-inch-thick glasses he'd worn since he was 5 to correct his crossed eyes, studying the belts and other various car parts hanging from rusty nails on the garage wall.

"Grab me that there belt," Daddy said to Ripp. He pointed and then held out his hand, so black

from grease and engine oil that even Lava, the gritty soap of the mechanic trade, couldn't get it clean.

Daddy talked David Boyd through the job, and then David said, "Hey Bergie, we've got one more thing. The temperature light came on as we pulled in." He paused and then asked, "Can you show us what to do about that?"

Wiping both hands on the seat of his pants, Daddy said, "Pull 'er over the pit, and we'll take a look."

Daddy headed past the tire changer to the narrow stairway leading down to the greasy, black pit where he checked out cars from underneath. The boys ganged down after him, crowding the narrow stairs.

"I only lived in one other house my whole life, back when I got married," Daddy said over his shoulder. "Little house that didn't have no electricity or running water. First thing I did at that house was dig a pit to work on cars."

Dipping his head to avoid hitting it in the low-ceilinged stairwell, Daddy adjusted the red bandanna he tied around his forehead, motorcycle-gang style. Daddy wore steel-toed boots and Wranglers so tough they could sit and stand on their own. His gold-capped tooth flashed behind his mustache-beard combo, and a deep scar tracked across his nose, a reminder of the 50 stitches that held his nose on after a battle with a junk car. He'd wanted one diamond stud earring, but Mama had said no.

Daddy hung a banged-up, 100-watt automotive shop light from the truck frame by its hook and said, "Looky right here." He pointed to the clamp holding the radiator hose. Green, sticky antifreeze dripped from the hose to the floor, mixing and shimmering with oil and other car fluids that never, ever got mopped up.

"First thing," said Daddy, "we gotta tighten that clamp. If it ain't dripping after that, you're good. Grab one a them flathead screwdrivers."

Daddy nodded at David Boyd and then gestured toward a jumble of tools and what-have-you on the grease-blackened workbench in the corner of the pit. You didn't ask Daddy why he kept stuff, because he kept everything. His favorite saying was "You never know."

"Now tighten this here screw." Daddy pointed a callused finger at the screw on the clamp.

The work light played on the dark walls of the pit, the earthy smell of old oil filled the air, and every boy watched that radiator hose quit leaking like it was the newest blockbuster movie at the drive-in theater.

"Now if it still leaked," Daddy continued, "we'd check the hose ends for cracks, which would mean replacing the whole hose."

Daddy would charge for the belt if the boys had money, or they could work it off running the pumps if they didn't. No charge for the labor, the lesson or the stories.

Some years later, the driveway bell dinged as a late-model Ford Mustang pulled into the station.

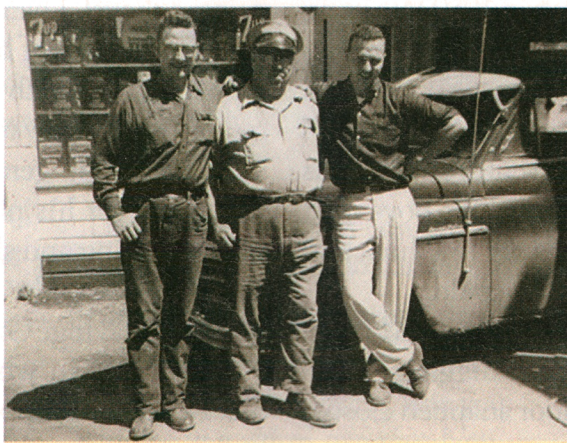
"Hey Bergie!" A well-dressed young man jumped out and grinned at Daddy.

"Well, I'll be!" Daddy's gold tooth flashed a grin, recognizing an older, cleaned-up David Boyd.

"I studied auto mechanics at Rochester Tech," David Boyd told Daddy. "And I write about fixing car problems for the *Rochester Post Bulletin*," he continued. "But I have to tell you, I learned more from you at this old station than in any class I ever took."

David grinned at Daddy. "I wanted to tell you that."

"Well." Daddy blinked, and there was a glitter behind the two moons of his Coke-bottle glasses. "Well, ain't that somethin'." ♦



Kim's dad, Arlen "Bergie" Berg, bought his service station from his father (middle). His younger brother is on the right.