

THE PANDEMIC

AND THE BIRTH OF A GARAGE DOOR MANUFACTURER

A centennial story about young Ray Neisewander



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Note: On March 21, 2020, the state of Illinois began a 17-day “shelter-in-place” order, an attempt to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The pandemic reminded me of little-known details of the beginnings of Raynor Garage Doors, which I had researched 30 years ago when writing a book about the company’s history.

Ray Neisewander Sr. (1906-1979) is someone you probably don’t know. You might know his son, Ray Neisewander Jr. (1932-2013), or his grandson, Ray Neisewander III (b. 1961), who currently serves as the company’s chairman and CEO. This story is about Ray senior.

Raymond Houston Neisewander was born on March 19, 1906, the first son of William J. and Margaret Neisewander. In the flat farmland of central Illinois, Ray joined a family of three in the Neisewander home just north of the small town of Gibson City, population 2,054.

Will, a 29-year-old farmer, and Margaret, his 23-year-old wife, had been married for three years and had a 2-year-old daughter, Grace. Ray was born in 1906, and his brother, George, followed in 1911.

Ray’s middle name, Houston, was given in honor of his mother’s maiden name, Margaret J. Houston. Ray grew very close to his mother; it was said that he idolized her.

Starting in 1909, a series of tragedies descended on the Neisewander household. The first blow was the death of Margaret and Will’s third child, Marguerite. Born on March 9, 1909, the baby lived only one day and died on March 10.

A horrific fate

A few years later, the family moved to a farm outside Centralia, Mo. On July 5, 1915, when Ray was nine, his sister, Grace, met a horrific fate.

At about 11 o’clock that Monday morning, Grace started to get the cookstove fire ready to make lunch. Since the fire didn’t start quickly, she poured on some coal oil (strong kerosene). When flames immediately leapt up, the 11-year-old girl was startled and spilled more of the flammable oil on her clothes.

“I watched Grace run out of the house on fire,” remembered George, “... worst thing she could’ve done.”



DETERMINATION: Young Ray Neisewander (right) starts his own business, 1929. Left: His father, Will Neisewander.

Her parents, working outdoors in the field, heard her screaming and rushed to her aid. But she was so badly burned—her scorched skin peeling off—there was little they could do.

Her father held her in the rocking chair as the family watched her life fade away. Grace died in her father’s arms about 4:30 that afternoon.

“It tore Mom up,” recalled George. “They wanted to leave there right then.”

And they did. Her body was brought back to Gibson City, Ill., for the funeral and burial only two days later. Then the shattered family moved back to Gibson City.

There, the farming continued with mother, father, and the two remaining children, Ray and George. Ray, now the oldest, had been given an increasing share of farming chores as he grew into a teenager.



Margaret Neisewander

The flu pandemic

For a few years, the Neisewander family seemed to be spared further tragedy. In 1917, America was pulled into World War I, and all men from 21 to 30 years old were required to register for the draft. But Will was too old, and Ray was too young to be affected.

In 1918, an influenza pandemic swept across the globe and throughout the nation. The deadly virus struck fear into the heart of America. After two years of terror, the rural lifestyle of the Neisewanders enabled them to avoid the flu, which claimed the lives of 21 million people—500,000 of those in the United States.

But by 1920, the Neisewanders’ luck had run out. Both George and his mother, Margaret, who was pregnant with her fifth child, contracted the dreaded flu. George survived, but Margaret’s condition worsened.

It’s believed that in an effort to save her, she was forced to give birth prematurely to her baby. But the baby died, and then Margaret herself succumbed to the merciless virus at the age of 36.

Life without mother

The sad day was Feb. 9, 1920. Ray's beloved mother was gone. She was buried with her baby in her arms in a plot next to her daughter, Grace.

After the burial, Will, Ray, and George returned to a home that lacked the warmth of a wife and mother. By now, a toughened 13-year-old Ray had lived through the deaths of four close family members.

At home, work intensified for the three survivors. "Dad made us pull our weight on the farm," said George. "As kids, we were doing the work of a man. Ray got tired of it. He didn't like that farm work, and neither did I."

Fed up with farm life and misfortune, Ray quit school in his freshman year and left home in search of a better life. Driven by fierce determination and hard work, he eventually found that life. But it wasn't easy.

Fast-forward to the future

In 1929, Ray was frustrated with employers who were tightfisted with pay raises. So he quit his job at a lumber mill in Springfield, Ill., and vowed to run his employer out of business.

It was arguably the worst time for a 23-year-old laborer to start

a new business enterprise. The stock market had collapsed only days earlier, and banks were hanging on to every dollar.

But Ray forged ahead anyway. He started his company, Capitol Wood Works, with a \$500 inheritance he had received from his mother.



Ray Neisewander, 1979

Adapt and advance

While other businesses failed in those hard times, Ray's drive and acute business sense helped him succeed. During the depression, he realized that families would still buy toys for kids. So he made Sock-O paddles. At the end of Prohibition in 1933, bars were opening everywhere. So Ray made bar tops.

After the war, hundreds of thousands of soldiers poured back into America, needing housing and cars. So, he started Raynor Mfg. Co. to make garage doors.

In 1960, when America took to the road on the new Eisenhower interstate highway system, he built Holiday Inns. Later, when large meeting rooms became standard in hotels, he invented large operable/moveable wall panels.

Ray eventually did run his former employer out of business, and he never knew financial hardship again. But the emotional seeds of his fierce determination to succeed were sown 100 years ago in the tragic flu pandemic. ■

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