YELLOW BRICK ROAD TO OKLAHOMA

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 23 November 2014

Bartlesville is a small town in Oklahoma; for many Americans a flyover, drive-through state which rarely makes national headlines. But 90 years ago Bartlesville was the "Houston of America", the energy-industry heart of the country. One of the pioneers who put Bartlesville (pop. 4,147 in 1920) on the global petroleum map was an engineer who had come from distant and troubled lands. He had landed in the United States in 1923 with his wife and year-old daughter…and a device he had invented which he believed would revolutionize the global petroleum industry. The inventor had escaped from Russia and the Bolshevik Revolution to Germany via Istanbul. The crash of the Weimar republic's economy and subsequent bedlam had forced him to try his luck across the ocean. After a brief stay in Detroit (the budding motor industry capital of America), he had headed to Southern California, a region studded by derricks pumping newly-discovered oil wells.

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Seven years earlier, while the world was at war, the emigrant engineer had invented an explosion-proof submersible electric motor/centrifugal pump that could be used in water wells, mines, and ships. In California the inventor had gone around trying to persuade oil industry executives to take a look at his invention. He hadn't had much luck. Hearing about the device, Phillips Petroleum Company of Bartlesville had invited him to the Oklahoma town surrounded by oil fields. Upon settling in Bartlesville, the inventor had modified his pump for oil wells with Phillips financial help.

The device, which was first successfully demonstrated at a Kansas well, began to be manufactured in large volume by the BART Manufacturing Company of Bartlesville. Within a few years the pump became a staple of oil exploration everywhere and its inventor became a millionaire.

People in Bartlesville thought the inventor was Russian. Perhaps because of the "off" in his last name; perhaps because his company literature stated that he was born in the "Mountains of the Caucasus" or because he changed the name of BART Manufacturing Company to REDA (Russian Electrical Dynamo of Arutunoff) Pump.

But the inventor was not Russian. Aramais Arutunoff was an Armenian born in Tbilisi (1893). While living in Tsarist Russia, he had invented his centrifugal pump. The Bolshevik Revolution had made it impossible to test the invention in the oil fields around the Caspian Sea.

Once the pump proved its mettle, REDA Pump began to grow in leaps and bounds and its plant expanded, over the years, to 30 times its original size through 42 additions. The success of the company enabled the Arutunoffs to live like royalty during the Depression. He had a mansion in Bartlesville and second one in the tony Mullholland Drive in Los Angeles where he and the family summered. In 1937 Mrs. Arutunoff (Claudia) gave birth to a second child. They named him Anatoly.

Aramais and Claudia made a bet as to whether Anatoly's first words would be "mama" or "dada". Both parents lost the bet. The baby's first word was "car". The word would foreshadow baby Toly's life and career.

The pump which made him a millionaire wasn't Arutunoff's only invention. He invented dozens of other devices and held the patent for Electrodrill, which assisted scientists in penetrating through the Antarctic ice cap for the first time in 1967.

In recognition of his many contributions to the state, a joint resolution was passed by the Oklahoma House and Senate naming Aramais Arutunoff "Mr. Americanism of Bartlesville."

Arutunoff said: "Try as I may, I cannot perform services of such value to repay this wonderful country for granting me sanctuary and the blessings of freedom and citizenship."

While it was his inventions which made him a celebrity, there was reputedly another facet—a secret dimension—which made him famous in certain circles.

There were unsubstantiated stories that in 1916 he had climbed Mount Ararat as a member of a Russian expedition and that he had the last black-and-white photo of Noah's Ark. According to Von Steve Boggess ("The Search for Noah's Ark"), Arutunoff had told friends that a quarter of the barge/ark was sticking out of the ice pack atop Mount Ararat. The ark was 25 to 30 feet wide and 25 feet high. According to "Arkologists", Arutunoff and the other members of the expedition had even found edible grain and honey inside the ark. To this day no one knows where the Arutunoff's Ark photo has disappeared or whether there really was such a photograph.

Arutunoff died in 1977 in Bartlesville and is buried there. His wife had died seven years earlier. The Arutunoff mansion was sold in 1986. REDA Pump is now part of the Schlumberger-REDA conglomerate.

("Yellow Brick Road…to Oklahoma" continues in the next issue.)