

A Many-Armed Man

The Jobs of Eddie Bowles

When Eddie Bowles was growing up, his father told him not to be a “one-armed man,” hoping that his son would learn many skills with which he could make a living; Eddie took that lesson to heart and would go on to have many different arms.

Bowles dropped out of school in the fourth grade but eventually returned to a private school, saying he “had the brains” to understand and learn properly then. Later he would attend classes for auto mechanic work.

Bowles played guitar in several different bands in Louisiana, but quickly found that it wasn't enough to support himself and his wife. In his own words, “If you didn't know how to do more than one job, you starved.” Bowles's wide and varied knowledge led him to Cedar Falls in 1914, where he worked to lay the city's original asphalt roads.

Once the roads were paved and his friends had paid for his wife to come to Iowa, Eddie took up a variety of other jobs. Perhaps most notable was his work

as a railroad foreman, laying ties across the state of Iowa. Working with the wooden ties led him to the invention of his celebrated saw, a gas-powered machine that could cut around 1500 ties a day, or 175 per hour. This saw was also used for Eddie's work as a tree trimmer, and he was reportedly a

barrel-maker at one time, too, continuing to work with wood.

Several of the Cedar Falls City Directories that are available list residents' employment status. Eddie Bowles was described in 1923 as a “wood sawer.” In 1940-41, he was called a “foundry man.” From 1950 to 1957, his job title was listed as “tree trimmer.”

Eddie Bowles spoke with pride of his work in the John Deere foundry, a job he held for 22 years. Beyond this, he worked other odd jobs, including selling fruit, repairing cars, cooking, baking in a bakery, building in a bed factory, and gardening for

UNI professor M.B. Smith and his wife, Mary.

In the Cedar Falls City Directory from 1964, Eddie Bowles was described as “retired” for the first time. After more than 50 years of employment, he had earned a rest.

