



Oklahoma  
Historical  
Society

# MidAmerica Industrial Park

Oklahoma's Largest Industrial Park

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

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**Announcer:** MidAmerica Industrial Park, which is Oklahoma's largest industrial park, the third largest industrial park in the United States, and the eighth largest industrial park in the world, is located in Pryor, Oklahoma.

In this episode of Voices of Oklahoma, as we share the story of the park, we want you to know the man responsible for its very existence: Gene R. Redden. A bronze plaque outside the entrance to the MidAmerica Industrial Park administrative office reads:

*“GENE R. REDDEN, Founder of the MidAmerica Industrial Park”.*

He was honored by a joint resolution from the Oklahoma Senate and House of Representatives stating: “His courage and enthusiasm knew no limits. This facility is dedicated to his honor.”

Gene was 70 years old when he died June 7th, 1990.

We thank his son, Roger Redden, for being our storyteller on the podcast and website, Voices of Oklahoma.

## Chapter 2 – 9:50

### Gene Redden

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**John Erling (JE):** Today's date is July 2nd, 2025. So Roger, would you state your full name, please?

**Roger Redden (RR):** Yes, Roger Charles Redden.

**JE:** What is your birth date?

**RR:** June 25th, 1950.

**JE:** And your present age?

**RR:** 75.

**JE:** And where are we recording this interview? Where are you?

**RR:** I'm in Muskogee, Oklahoma.

**JE:** And where were you born?

**RR:** Claremore, Oklahoma.

**JE:** We're here to tell the story about your father, but I want to know your mother's name and her maiden name, and where she was born.

**RR:** Mary Janet Harding, and she was born in Pryor, Oklahoma.

**JE:** She grew up in that area?

**RR:** Yes, uh-huh. (In agreement)

**JE:** Then your father's name?

**RR:** Gene Robert Redden.

**JE:** Now we're here to tell the story of MidAmerica Industrial Park in Pryor, Oklahoma. Now your father is recognized as the founder of the MidAmerica Industrial Park. Let's talk about him. Where was he born? And where did he grow up?

**RR:** Well, he was born in Sayre, Oklahoma. That was on July 4th, 1919, but he grew up in Roger Mills County in a little town called Durham. His great-grandfather migrated his family from Willow Springs, Missouri in 1900, and they were able to obtain a section of land at Durham, which is just outside of Cheyenne, Oklahoma. He went to school in Cheyenne.

**JE:** Can you describe the family that had that land? Were they a fairly wealthy family?

**RR:** They raced horses primarily. They sold most of the horses to the U.S. Cavalry, and so they had to drive them up to New Mexico and Colorado and that sort of thing. They made a pretty good living at that. Then my great-grandfather died in 1916. He was about 65 years old, something like that, 65 or 70. They also raised cotton and made money off of that. Somehow our grandfather acquired the cotton gin, so they made money off of that. In turn, he bought the general store in Cheyenne and also the

pool hall. Later, he owned two car dealerships—one in Cheyenne and one in Sayre. Yes, at one point they were quite wealthy. They had acquired more land—I don't know how much more. Then the Depression hit, and just like a lot of people, they bought a lot of stock on margin and made some pretty good money off of that. But then the margin calls came in, and he virtually lost everything. So they had to pay the margin calls. One thing he did do was that he financed a lot of the cars he sold because they were local businessmen, farmers, and such. They carried their notes. When he took bankruptcy, he refused to go after those because he knew that the vehicles they owned were important to their business, and without them, they wouldn't be able to survive. They managed, but lost the homestead too, so they had to move into town.

**JE:** The town was Cheyenne, right?

**RR:** Cheyenne, Oklahoma.

**JE:** Let's jump ahead. He actually went to college.

**RR:** Yes, he was able to get enough money to apply to Oklahoma State, and he had enough money to cover his books and tuition, but he didn't have money for room and board. He tried to find a job in Stillwater, and after a month he wasn't able to find any work at all, so he had to disenroll and move back to Cheyenne. It was during that time that he first saw and met Mary Janet and found out where she lived. That summer, he got a job working for the Oklahoma Highway Department because they were doing work on Highway 69 around Pryor. So he got a little place in Pryor and worked for the highway department and then tried to date her. Her parents didn't like him that much, so that didn't work out too well. But he found out that she was going to apply to Southwestern State College in Weatherford. So he took the money that he earned and applied there and was able to get to school. He had enough money to pay for his books and tuition and for about a month of his room and board, but he still needed to get a job. After looking and not being able to find work, he finally went to the university president and basically told him, "Look, I don't know what you've got, but if there's anything I can do—any job here on campus or whatever." The president looked at him and said, "Well, we'll put you on our groundskeeping. That'll pretty much cover your room and board." So he got that job. Later, he was able to get a job as a soda jerk at the local soda fountain there in Weatherford. He then began courting Mary Janet. She

was very popular. She was a mezzo-soprano in high demand. For every function the university sponsored, she would usually sing. She was in a church choir—Methodist church. They dated, they joined the Young Democrats, and then became officers in the state association. He successfully ran for president of the Young Democrats.

**JE:** Let's bring them to 1941. December 7th, 1941, and that was months before Gene and Mary married, right? And then he enlisted in the Navy, did his basic training, and then after the war, Gene and Mary lived in Cheyenne.

**RR:** He made an appointment with the Government Services Administration and got a job with GSA overseeing what was then North American Rockwell in Tulsa. That was about '47, I think.

**JE:** So that was inland management and assigned to the North American Rockwell Aeronautics facility. Then he heard of an opening at the Army high explosives plant. Tell us about that.

**RR:** That's right. That's the Oklahoma Ordnance Works Authority plant. Part of the Army, it was operated by DuPont Corporation. He heard about that, that they were in need of a general manager. He went and applied and was hired and went to work there. They moved to Pryor. There used to be an area called the Staff House area where all the management people, the supervisors and such, lived. There were like 32 individual homes up on a bluff overlooking what they call the Lower Grand River, which is basically used as an overflow for Grand River Dam. About a year later, the administrator of the gunpowder plant, as they called it, passed away. Dad was then appointed as administrator. That was about '48, I think.

**JE:** Then on June 25th, 1950, the United States entered the Korean conflict to stop communism in the Far...

**RR:** East.

**JE:** And so this meant the munitions plant would be gearing up to support the war effort.

**RR:** Right. During World War II, when they opened the plant, they employed about 15,000 people. Then as it geared down after World War II and before Korea, there was a reduction in force. I don't know how many, but quite a few. I think they just kept enough to maintain operations and fulfill

whatever Army requirements they had—contracts and such. Then the Korean War came, and they had to gear up again. I don't know how many people they had on staff, but there were quite a few during that time.

**JE:** What did they produce there at that place? You say gunpowder place. What was the product?

**RR:** Well, high explosives. Probably made gunpowder, but TNT quality, that type of stuff.

**JE:** And then they sent it to McAlester. What did McAlester do with it?

**RR:** I guess, as I understand, McAlester manufactured the shells—the artillery shells that the Army used.

**JE:** So when the Korean War ended, that ammunition place there in Pryor was shut down?

**RR:** Yes, primarily. It was about 1956 that they decided to mothball the facility. They still had some contracts they had to complete, so it stayed open long enough to do that. Then the Army contracted with a company called NALCO—it was a manufacturing plant just outside the gates of the industrial park—as caretaker. They hired Dad to stay on as administrator to perform the task of putting inventory in the facility and eventually shutting it down completely. By that time, they kept a skeleton maintenance crew and his office staff, which was about four people.

### **Chapter 3 – 5:30**

#### **Gene's Idea**

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**John Erling (JE):** But then somewhere along the line here, he came up with an idea. In about 1958 and 1959, he wrote a proposal about how a large part of the Ordnance Works land could be purchased from the U.S. General Services Administration. And that would turn into what would be the largest industrial park in the United States. So tell us about that.

**Roger Redden (RR):** He'd had that idea in the back of his mind for a couple of years, during that time also talking with the Oklahoma congressional

delegation about it, trying to formulate the idea. Then he put together a little board of directors that consisted of local businessmen in Pryor and hired attorney Tony Jacklin to help determine just how they might be able to operate such a facility and under what conditions. They came up with the idea of a public trust, with the state of Oklahoma as a beneficiary. That's the idea they presented to the Army to find out how much they would want for it. After, I don't know how long a period, they came up with a cost of \$1.7 million.

**JE:** I have it here. The state of Oklahoma would not put up any money for the \$1.7 million purchase price.

**RR:** That's right. They found out from the Army that they would sell the facility for \$1.7 million if they would get a hold-harmless agreement from the trust authority, exempting the federal government from any liabilities that may arise after their acquisition. And so when that was agreed to, they were able to get revenue bonds that covered part of it. They got private loans from First National Bank in Pryor, Oklahoma, and the First National Bank and Trust in Tulsa. So they were able to make the purchase. A lot of this was with the great help of then-U.S. Senator Robert S. Kerr.

They made the acquisition, and the trust indenture was filed by my father on December 29th or 30th at the State Capitol. Then they started operations right after New Year's Eve. Now, in order for the state of Oklahoma to accept being a beneficiary, under state law, they had to pay \$1,000. So basically, when they opened up, they only had \$1,000 in the bank and had to raise money to cover the debt and also pay the salaries of the small staff that they kept.

Luckily, a gentleman showed up about a week after they opened the doors. He was a retired lieutenant colonel. His name was Ray Jennings. His experience was that he had been in charge of all the NCO clubs throughout the world for about 10 years. He walked in, introduced himself, and asked if he could do a job. Dad explained the situation—that they really didn't have any money for salaries unless they could raise it. They needed to raise like \$50,000 in the first month to be able to cover salaries and operating expenses and things of that sort.

Ray's expertise was that he had a lot of contacts in the salvage industry,

and they had a lot of scrap metals, valves, and pumps and things of that sort that were no longer needed. Within two weeks, he managed to sell over \$50,000 worth of surplus material, and that gave them enough operating expenses to continue with the operation.

Within five years, they attracted enough industry, and they had what they called a lease-purchase agreement on the property, which basically stated that for 10 years, they would pay a lease price for the property. They would agree on what the property was valued at to insure their part of the bargain. On the other side, they had to agree that the equipment and the building and all that would be part of the lease. If they defaulted, then the Ordnance Works would get control of everything—all the equipment and facility. So within five years, they raised enough money to pay off the \$1.7 million.

**JE:** And your dad was appointed for life by Oklahoma's Governor J. Howard Edmondson as the trust administrator.

**RR:** Right. He was appointed for life. Russ Hunt, who was vice chairman of the board of the First National Bank of Tulsa, was appointed as chairman of the board. But it had to be approved by both the Speaker of the House and J. Howard Edmondson, the governor, which was done. Then Burke Webb was appointed as secretary-treasurer. Burke Webb owned a bonding company that provided the bond insurance for the loans. He was appointed by the Speaker of the House, with approval of the pro tem and the governor. Those were the three main characters. Then the governor had the ability to appoint—I'm not sure how many board members at that time—about four or five, I think, or three or four anyway.

## **Chapter 4 – 6:25**

### **The Park**

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**John Erling (JE):** What were some of the first businesses that were first attracted to MidAmerica Industrial Park?

**Roger Redden (RR):** One was a company that manufactured ammonium nitrate fertilizer, and they were able to utilize some of the equipment that

was left over from the old Ordnance Works. I can't remember the name of it. They were one of the first ones. There was a company out of Canada that was supposed to be a tool manufacturing company. Unfortunately, they got burned on that one. It just turned out that it was a project company, and the money they managed to borrow on it—they kind of took and ran with it, and so they abandoned their facility. At that time, they didn't have such a strong contract, so they kind of had to eat that one. But anyway, they bounced back, and later on, Gardner Denver built a large foundry there. I wish I could name them all, but all in all, up until his death in 1990, he brought in about 30-some-odd industries, and they were employing about 5,500 to 5,600 people. They had raised the value of the facility from the initial \$1.7 million to over \$80 million.

One of the things they did was that GRDA built a large coal-fired generating plant—the Eastman. So that generated quite a bit of income.

**JE:** Today it is Oklahoma's largest industrial park. It's the third-largest industrial park in the United States, the eighth-largest industrial park in the world. And as of two years ago, over 80 firms are located within the park—such as Google, DuPont, Nordam—employing more than 4,500 people, generating more than \$732 million in salaries and wages each year. To think of what your father did—just came up with this idea—certainly must make you proud. I know the state is. It says here Gene is recognized throughout the state of Oklahoma as the founder of the MidAmerica Industrial Park, as attested to by a joint resolution presented to him in person during a joint meeting of the Oklahoma Senate and House of Representatives in 1989. And there is a bronze plaque outside the entrance to the administrative office that reads:

*"Gene R. Redden, founder of the MidAmerica Industrial Park. A man of vision, insight, and perseverance. Gene Redden recognized the vast potential of the former World War II powder plant located on this site."*

**RR:** That's correct. And the whole thing about all this is that, had what he done not happened, none of this in Pryor, Oklahoma—or the industrial park—would exist. Because the alternative was that the government would put the land up for auction and auction off parcels for ranchers and farmers and home builders and things of that sort. That's not what he



wanted.

One of the reasons he wanted to do what he did was that he saw a lot of college students graduating and leaving Oklahoma because there weren't jobs for them here—or at least not high-enough-paying jobs. They'd go out of state and make better money. So he wanted to try to do whatever he could to reverse that trend. How that holds up, I have no idea, but he prided himself on being able to track those things as he did. He was even given an honorary degree from Southwestern about 1985 or so, I'm not sure.

One of the things that made him successful was the fact that he did his research. He knew what the employment rate was. He knew the skill levels of the people and how many were able to work in semi-skilled and skilled operations. He knew the cost of power. They could deliver 500,000 gallons an hour from their facility. They manufactured 4 and 25-pound steam that a lot of industries used in their manufacturing operations. And of course, they had their own power plant—their own power facility—either coal-fired or natural gas-fired. GRDA owns that now, and they tore it down a few years ago.

**JE:** I can also update you here that in May of this year, 2025, MidAmerica landed CBC Global Ammunition for a facility which can produce centerfire cartridges ranging from 9 millimeter to 12.7 millimeter for law enforcement, military, sports, and hunting use. The investment will be in the range of \$300 million and will provide 350 jobs. They also have their own MidAmerica Industrial Park Airport.

**RR:** They expanded that back in the late '60s or early '70s because it wasn't long enough to handle large commercial aircraft. That was one of the benefits he was able to provide, too.

**JE:** And also, MidAmerica Industrial Park has access to four interstate highways. The park has an on-site Union Pacific Railroad switch yard, and the park is close to the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System, providing large barge transportation to the Mississippi River and beyond.

**RR:** That's right. And let's not forget, too, in 1966, they had Lyndon Baines Johnson come to Pryor, Oklahoma, and they rededicated 69A Highway as

Lyndon Johnson Highway. I was playing in the high school band at the time, so we were there for that.

**JE:** Oh, how great. Just wanted to get a little bit of history of the park, and I knew that you knew it quite well because of your father. Not only you, but your entire family—and others that go beyond you—should be very, very proud of your father, Gene Redden. Well, thanks for helping us preserve this story, Roger. I appreciate it very much for Voices of Oklahoma.

**RR:** You're welcome. Glad to do it.

*Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time, on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com)*