JOE BURDMAN,
A HUMANITARIAN

"America has been good to me beyond my fondest dreams and because it has, I have a deep sense of gratitude and duty toward my nation, my state, and my community. It is easy to forget the precious things we have in America but when I look back over my life, I thank God I've had the privilege of living in the greatest country of all," Joe Burdman was quoted to have said in Joe Burdman’s Golden Year 1971.

Before World War I, Joseph Burdman left Russia and the Czar's army behind and entered the United States at Galveston, Texas, in December, 1913. He brought with him only a few possessions. "When I arrived in the United States I didn't have a cockeyed thing!" said Mr. Burdman. He did have a ticket to Burlington, Iowa, where his fiancée Esther Belgrodsky, had immigrated with her parents earlier that year. Joe Burdman married Esther on March 1, 1914.

Four days before Christmas, 1913, Joe Burdman found a job making baskets in a factory in Burlington, Iowa. For 60 hours work, his salary was $9. Joe supplemented his income by working overtime. When he realized that he was doing the work of two men, he quit his job to go into business for himself. From his total savings of $95, he took out $27 and bought a horse and wagon in 1917. He started buying and selling scrap metal for a living. This first business was known as J. Burdman Iron and Metal Company.

Mr. Bernard Burdman, his son, explained that his father was told that a "veritable gold mine" was to be found in Kirksville, Missouri, because no one was in the scrap metal business there. Joe Burdman, his wife, and their two small sons, Bernard and Louis, moved to Kirksville in 1921.

Mr. Burdman expanded his scrap metal business by buying wrecked cars and selling the used parts, which led to his new business, J. Burdman Auto Parts, which started on March 1, 1921. It was located on the same block as the present Kirksville warehouse and distribution complex at 801 North Franklin. J. Burdman Auto Parts, Inc. has now expanded with 29 branch stores in Missouri and Iowa. Joe Burdman's son, Bernard, is currently president of the company.

By Molly Upton
Tina Campbell
Top photo (far left): "I admire anyone who believes in what he believes—just as long as he believes in something," Joe Burdman was quoted to have said in Joe Burdman's Golden Year 1971. Bottom photo (far left): The first J. Burdman Auto Parts store in 1921 was located in the same block of North Franklin as it is today. Top photo: The J. Burdman Auto Parts store as it looked in 1934 and (middle photo) as it looks in 1984. Bottom photo: The J. Burdman Auto Parts store was located for a short period of time uptown on the west side of the square.
Mr. Joseph Crabtree, an employee of the Kirksville store for 28 years, considered Joe Burdman to be “very kind, hard-working, and a shrewd businessman.” Mr. Crabtree also felt Mr. Burdman was a workaholic because he spent his entire time learning from his working experiences. “Joe Burdman was a good citizen and a close friend,” said Mr. Crabtree.

Along with his business, Mr. Burdman enriched the Kirksville community with his many civic contributions. The Bell Wall, located on the Northeast Missouri State University campus, was donated by Mr. Burdman. The bells stand for liberty, justice, religion, and education. He had collected the bells through the years from an old school house, churches, and courthouses in North Missouri. Mr. Burdman also established a scholarship at Northeast Missouri State University for two students. Joe Burdman was also a community fundraiser. He helped raise $100,000 for the Kirksville College of Osteopathy and Surgery’s campaign for a new clinic building.

Responding to continuing suggestions from the community that he should run for mayor of Kirksville, Mr. Burdman decided to run for mayor and was elected in 1960. Mayor Burdman’s first priority, once in office, was the improvement of the inadequate public services. He had problems dealing with those public service issues because the state would not provide financial assistance for the improvement of Kirksville’s water and sewer facilities until the voters approved certain bond issues. Thus, he turned his attention to the improvement of Kirksville streets and stricter enforcement of traffic safety laws. Before Joseph Burdman’s term as mayor ended, he initiated action to have a new city hall built in Kirksville.

After his term as mayor, Mr. Burdman continued to work with his company and with his many civic activities until his death. On August 31, 1974, Kirksville lost a citizen, businessman, and humanitarian. He was preceded in death by his wife, Esther, who died one month earlier. Joe Burdman’s philosophy was, “I cannot live in a community merely to take. I’ve got to put something back into it. My community has been good to me and is entitled to something in return.”