

'Since 1910'

Book captures FTD's 75-year history

By C.L. Rugensteln
special writer

WHEN LIVONIA resident Dan Gilmartin accepted a commission from Florists' Transworld Delivery Association to write a commemorative tome for the Southfield-based company's 75th anniversary, he got more than he bargained for.

For starters, the group's colorful history caught his fancy as he researched for the book.

"It was more like a history of promotion," Gilmartin chuckled, recounting milestones of FTD's history. "They were very conscious of promotion, and always made sure the press was there when they did something big" — like the many successful publicity stunts of the 1920s.

One enterprising New Jersey florist delivered a \$50 order to the state's governor by plane and was duly photographed. Another enterprising florist in Minot, Maine, refused to let snow stop him from delivering flowers to Albany, N.Y. He used a dog sled, stopping at every newspaper office along the way, Gilmartin reported in his book.

The first attempted transatlantic floral delivery was not as successful, however. Gilmartin noted that the plane caught fire shortly after take-off. "The pilot and co-pilot survived, barely. The flowers didn't."

Though this is his first experience with writing books, Gilmartin has enjoyed a newswriting career that has spanned 24 years and encompassed such experiences as political appointments, breeding and racing thoroughbreds, and selling real estate.

HE GOT HIS FIRST taste of journalism in the Navy, while waiting to be shipped home from Subic Bay, in the Philippines, after World War II. A radio man (who could type 80 words per minute), he would record the nightly news from the mainland, edit, summarize and mimeograph it. From there it went to all the ships in the bay.

He returned to Michigan and got his journalism degree from the University of Detroit. From there he went on to literally write his way across Michigan working at various times for The Detroit News, the Livonia Observer, the Ann

Arbor News and the Grand Rapids Herald, until it folded in 1959.

Before that Gilmartin even tried his hand at scriptwriting. "I quit my job at The Detroit News in 1955, took a handful of scripts I'd written, and went out to Hollywood to knock on doors," he recalled. He was sidetracked by a job at Santa Anita race track and "never sold a script." He came back when he got tired of living on a would-be scriptwriter's diet — "bread, cheese, milk and bologna."

The job at Santa Anita was a natural for him. Since 1946 Gilmartin's father had bought, bred and raced thoroughbreds. Gilmartin himself owned and raced several thoroughbreds until after he married and started his family.

He proudly displayed a picture taken in 1960, of his father and himself with one of his horses, Suttie.

Gilmartin's newswriting and horse-racing experience led to another field in his multidimensional life — politics.

WHILE WORKING FOR the Ann Arbor News Gilmartin met then lieutenant governor John Swainson, at a St. Patrick's Day party. "That's when I got out of journalism, in a sense," he recalled. Swainson had decided to run for governor and asked Gilmartin to be his press secretary.

He was present on the memorable whistlestop tour of Michigan by Sen. Patrick McNamara, presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy and Swainson that election year. Gilmartin was appointed official "crowd estimator." One of his fondest reminiscences is of Kennedy kidding him about it. "Kennedy was loose, relaxed," he said. "He'd say, 'How many were at that last stop, now honestly!'"

Swainson won and appointed Gilmartin racing commissioner and chief state steward of harness tracks. But when Romney beat Swainson two years later, Gilmartin resumed his journalistic work.

He served as editor of the Livonia Observer for two years in the late 1960s, he said, "when it was still a little hole-in-the-wall office," on Five Mile across from the City Hall.

Gilmartin's newspaper career ended officially in 1970 when he accepted an appointment as industrial coordinator for Livonia.

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"Then Livonia mayor McNamara (now Wayne County executive) felt my promotional background would help attract business to the city," he said. He was also executive director of Livonia's Economic Development Corporation that, during his 14-year tenure, attracted about 900 new businesses to the city.

Gilmartin retired from that job in 1984 but kept up his real estate connection by selling industrial and commercial property. Now he thinks the real estate business may be a good way to launch a new writing habit. Currently he's a Realtor-associate with the Century 21-ROW office in Livonia.

Writing the FTD book whet his appetite for more books. HE'S ALREADY ACCEPTED a commission for a second book, this one about nuns. The Alabama-based Sisters of Mercy read his FTD book and contacted him about tracing the founding of their order, in 1788, by Irish heiress Catherine Elizabeth McAuley.

Gilmartin remarked that the FTD book, "Since 1910," had been translated into Japanese and serialized over there, where the people are enthusiastic about sending flowers.

"Here I am getting letters from Japan about my book, yet nobody in Livonia knows I wrote one," he laughed.

Now, he says, when the McAuley book is done, he'd like to write something for himself: "I'd like to do fiction, a suspense or intrigue, with politics and racing as background."

With Gilmartin's credentials, that could turn out to be some book.

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"I'd like to do fiction, a suspense or intrigue, with politics and racing as background."

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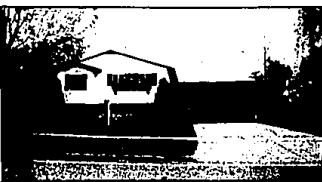
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