

When Suburbia Meant Corn, Cheese, Indians

By W. W. EDGAR

He may have lost some of the spring in his step, and his eyesight is growing just a bit dimmer, but Charles Lute, once renowned as "The Corn King of Livonia," is ready to enjoy another happy birthday when he reaches his 90th milestone on Thursday, March 16.

"Why shouldn't I be happy?" he asked as he leaned back on his favorite lounge in the home on the old farm at 19250 Newburgh Rd. where he has lived for more than eight decades.

"I haven't been sick in more than eight years...I have raised nine children...and I've seen the old farm area change from 'corn country' and the cheese capital of the world to a section of the thriving city of Livonia."

A BROAD SMILE played across his face as he traveled the winding course down Memory Lane to recall the days when he and his five sons operated the 150-acre farm on Newburgh Rd. and it was quite common to dig up bodies in the old Indian cemetery.

"Always be friendly. Never turn down a chance to do a good turn . . . Help anybody in trouble. I'll be 90 years old on Thursday -- that's my reward."

--Charlie Lute

"Right back there," he said, pointing toward Eight Mile Rd., "we dug up more than one Indian close by the gravel pit at what is now the city golf course."

"I know they were Indians because their teeth were so white and their jaws so perfect," he continued, "but it was strange that they were buried so near a gravel pit."

The first time he came across an Indian body, he'll tell you, is when he found a streak of gravel in the soil and dug it up to build the foundation for the old home.

"And up the road a piece," he explained as he pointed again, this time toward Eight Mile and Newburgh Road, "there was the Arthur Power cheese factory."

"Farmers came from miles around with their milk. And would you believe it, the fellows in that cheese factory made about 70 cakes of cheese a day. I mean those big, round cakes that weighed about 70 pounds apiece. You don't see them anymore, but 70 cakes a day took a lot of doing."

OLD CHARLIE'S EYES opened wide as he continued down Memory Lane to tell of the days when the entire area was shaken by the word that "one of the largest snakes you ever saw" was making its home in the area around Six Mile and Farmington Roads, now known as Burton Hollow.

"We came across it one day," he recalled, "when driving over Six Mile Road on the way to market. The horses must have smelled it, for they reared up and ran away. But we caught sight of the snake."

"Would you believe it?" he asked, "but that snake was the length of two sections of farm fence (about 25 feet) and a foot thick."

"I still can see it - yellow and white with dark spots. They called it an Anaconda. Matt Miller and Charles Landau were with me at the time and they tried to catch it-but couldn't."

Memories were coming down through the years like big box cars, and then he said, rather relieved, "We saw that snake leap over the top of the rail fence one day, then race along to a hole, crawl in, and that was the last of it. But I'll never forget it. It was the biggest I ever saw-even on television."

Indians, cheese, snakes...they were all part of his life, but the real sparkle comes to his eyes when he tells of the old farm on which he worked until two years ago.

HE AND THE FIVE sons not only worked the 150 acres of their own farm, but leased six others between Northville and Farmington.

"In those days we raised thousands of bushels of yellow dent corn, along with wheat, oats, barley and quite a lot of soybeans."

"TELL HIM ABOUT the gold," his housekeeper interrupted.

"You mean the time at the Northville bank?"

"I had just sold quite a lot of corn and had gone to Deck Warner's bank in Farmington to get paid. Then I came back to the Northville Bank and had the money in my pockets - all \$20 gold pieces."

"I didn't pay much attention to it until one of my friends stopped me and asked, 'Charlie, what's the matter with you? - Your pants look so funny?'"

"That's gold," I said and it weighted my pockets almost down to my knees."

During the peak days of his farming, Old Charlie also had 101 hogs,

35 milk cows and more than 800 turkeys.

"And there were no milking machines in those days," he commented. "Me and my wife Bertha - she was a city girl, but adapted herself to farm life - milked them all by hand every day. We'd take the milk to the cheese factory at Eight Mile or to another down on Stark Road."

"We came back with the whey - it made good feed and we just thrived here on the farm."

BORN IN 1882 on what was then Deck Warner's farm at Six Mile and Farmington Roads, Charlie explains, "It was right across from that new Stevenson High School. And Deck Warner's son, Fred went on to become governor of Michigan."

He was only 10 years old when the family moved to Seven Mile and Newburgh and has been there ever since.

"The only schooling I got," Charlie confides, "was at the old Briggs school at Six Mile and Newburgh." (That's the one-story brick school house that was considered the oldest school house in the state when it was razed several years ago.)

AS THE MEMORIES continued rolling back, he said, "I guess there's not many of us left who can remember when Grand River was an old plank road - and Botsford Inn was the gathering place for all the folks who enjoyed dancing and attending parties."

Admitting that he was quite a dancer in his young days, he turned the subject aside to point to the deer heads on the wall of the neat little home that is now a Livonia landmark.

"I did quite a bit of hunting in those days, after the crops were in, and the north woods always held a special lure for me. These heads are just a few of the many animals I brought down."

The entire family aside from his wife, who died in 1954, is expected to gather at the old home for the big birthday party, and this will include the five sons and four daughters.

Homer, the oldest, lives in the original farm house with his wife, Viola, now in charge of food services at Schoolcraft College, and two sons, Danny and Mike.

Celeste Van Kellman, the oldest daughter, will be there with her husband, George and sons, Dave, Robert, and Jerry.

Wilbur, the third oldest is the father of two daughters, Dawn and Denise. Then come Jean (Mrs. Wesley Sanders) and son, Russel; William Lute and his wife, Mary, with daughters Cathy, Debbie and Peggy; Thomas, with his wife, Lee, and son, Charles; Donald, and wife Agnes with Gary and Ryan; Bernice Biggett with five children, Darlene, Ronald, Shirley, Terrie and Christine; and Vera (Mrs. Frank Caldwell) with daughters Linda and Melinda.

Asked if he had a message or any advice for the young folks of today, old Charlie rubbed his chin a bit and said,

"I don't see much of today's young people, so I wouldn't know what to tell them."

"But on my 90th birthday, I can give this advice to everybody -

"Always be friendly. Never turn down a chance to do a good turn. . . Help anybody in trouble."

Then, patting his chest to show his healthy condition, he added, "I'll be 90 years old on Thursday-that's my reward."

His message should be one to heed.

So, happy birthday Charlie, and many pleasant memories.



PIONEER CHARLES LUTE: "I did quite a bit of hunting in those days, after the crops were in, and the north woods always held a special lure for me." (Observer photo by Bob Woodring)



DAVID L. DeGRAFF of 36550 Grove, Livonia, has been appointed structural waterproofing specialist in the midwestern area by W. R. Grace & Co.'s construction products division. DeGraff studied engineering at General Motors Institute, served in the U.S. Navy from 1952-54 as an instructor in Officer Candidate School and the Naval War College and was previously with Weyerhaeuser Co. for 14 years.

Kite Flying Contest Set For Saturday

Wonderland Center will host its fourth annual children's kite flying contest at 11:30 a.m. Saturday, March 18.

Assisting will be Livonia Mayor Edward McNamara, who will present the awards; Livonia Councilman Jerry Raymond; and other local dignitaries who will judge the competition, and the Livonia Jaycees who will help run the event.

Although Ben Franklin made kite flying famous, as many girls as boys become experts. All children between the ages of 6 and 11 may participate; the first 300 to register will be eligible.

Registration begins at 11 a.m., weather permitting, in the Plymouth Road parking lot between Gates 5 and 6. The contest will start at 11:30.

Kites and string will be provided by Wonderland. Youngsters will compete in age groups of 6-8 year olds and 9-11 year olds.

Each group of 15 children will be judged on getting and sustaining their kites in the air for two minutes, and the first child to fly their kite the highest in three minutes. Those winners will be re-matched in a final "fly-off" judged on the same criteria. Winning and honorable mention trophies will be presented.

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