

Lebens Family History

Presented by the Lebens family at a Shakopee Heritage Society General Membership Meeting

LEROY

My Aunt Loretta asked me not to talk about my Uncle LeRoy, but I decided to say a few words about him anyway.

LeRoy was born September 25th, 1917 at 132 Fuller Street. He became an accomplished professional musician playing drums, a prize winning photographer, a marksman, and an expert on handguns and ballistics; even though he left school between the sixth and seventh grades. In the 1930's he toured and played with several road bands including Guy Lombardo's Dance Band and the Lawrence Welk Band at roadhouses and supper clubs throughout the Midwest. After deciding not to join Lawrence Welk in California, he formed the LeRoy Lebens Trio in 1952 and played at the old Saint Paul House and later at the Shakopee House. Later in life when he mentioned he was thinking about retiring, his son Steve said: "Dad, you have been retired all your life – you never did a good day's work in your life – nor anything else that you didn't want to do!"

He died on September 2nd, 1991 at Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park after a long three-year battle with Shy-Drager, a degenerative disorder of the nervous system, similar to Parkinson's disease.

Few people know that he was quite an artist, and as a hobby he painted many canvases in oil.

DOLORES MARY

My mother, Dolores Mary, was born January 3, 1919 to Joseph and Marion Ries on a cattle farm on the eastern rim of Shakopee on the land where the KC Hall now sits. Dolores was the youngest of 12 children and her mother moved the family to town after her father died when she was one year old.

My mother, Dolores, knew my father, Melvin, since grade school at St. Mark's. She once told me that she was not that attracted to him in their early years because he was too short. They started dating at the start of their junior year at Shakopee High School and their favorite hang out was the Pullman Club. They became high school sweethearts and attended the senior prom together and sat next to each other at graduation.

After high school, Dolores went to the Minnesota School of Business and when she completed school she could not find a job as a secretary. She then attended the Lawrence Beauty School and got her beautician's license.

She went to work for Dr. Klein as his secretary until Dr. Klein was called for active duty with the navy.

In 1941 she got a job delivering the U.S. Mail and was the first fulltime woman mail carrier in the nation carrying as much as 70 pounds of mail in her bag.

She was married on May 24th, 1944 and because it was wartime, the couple borrowed a car and gas rations and honeymooned in White Bear Lake and Stillwater. Shortly after the honeymoon, my father returned to California and a few weeks later she joined him there and took a job in the Bethlehem Steel Company's ship building yards in Alameda. After Mel left for Hawaii and then was shipped out to Guam, she returned home to Shakopee to take care of her mother, Marion, who'd had a debilitating stroke and also because she was expecting her first

child. Dolores raised five children and was an awesome cook and baker and won several blue ribbons for her Black Walnut and Lemon Chiffon cakes. Every Saturday the house would fill with the aroma of her famous coffee cake, bread and rolls.

She started running the drapery shop at Lebenscraft in the early 1960's. She spent 14 years on the city council elected in 1973 and re-elected in 1977, 1981 & 1985. She was elected mayor in 1987. She served three terms – nine years – on the Shakopee Recreation Board; that was her proudest and greatest achievement because she was a huge supporter of the Parks and Recreation Programs and she especially supported the building of the skate board park.

Her health started to fail after having arterial bypass surgery for poor circulation in her right leg. She suffered a stroke shortly after having her right leg amputated and died at St. Francis Hospital on April 6th, 2003 at the age of 84.

Her favorite holiday was Thanksgiving because she loved to cook and would make enough food to feed an army; and she loved having the whole family get together. She also loved to travel the United States and she and my Dad would put thousands of miles on their Mini-Winnie crisscrossing the nation. They really enjoyed visiting parks and eating at different restaurants and going to mass at the local Catholic church.

MELVIN PERCY

Melvin Percy Lebens was born on May 23rd, 1919 at 132 Fuller Street with Dr. Fisher attending. He was the fourth child of August and Theresa Lebens but only the second child to survive childbirth. Melvin was considered to be a miracle child – the flu of 1918 had claimed 675,000 lives – five times the U.S. casualties of World War I and he was conceived at the same time the epidemic struck and born right before it ended in June 1919. Most pregnant female flu patients died. But my grandmother was very fortunate to carry my father to full term after she had come down with the flu.

In 1928 Melvin was in fifth grade at St. Mark's school when both he and his sister, Marceline, came down with diphtheria and spent five months in quarantine.

In the same year his father, August, bought Curly Feldman's silver plated York trumpet and had Melvin take a series of lessons from Hubert Stans.

In 1930 when Mel was 11 years old his mother, Theresa, bought him a stationary jig saw and he set up shop in the back shed and made knickknacks, bread boards, bird houses, lawn ornaments and other household items. It was the start of a small enterprise which later would become Lebenscraft Interiors. Also in that year his father, August, taught him to drive the blue Hupmobile.

In 1931 at the age of 12 he had quite a crush on "The prettiest girl in the class" and he carved her initials on the 2" x 6" wooden railing on the walkway of the old iron bridge on Lewis Street. On July 24th this same year his Dad, August, dies at the age of 42 and Mel is devastated. One year later John T. Theis "Gramps" dies and Melvin had to step up and be the man of the house at the age of 13.

In 1933 at the age of 14 he had to give up driving the car for one year because the legislature passed a law that in order to drive, you had to have a driver's license and you had to be 15 years old to get one. In 1935 he was 16 years old when he asked Dolores to the senior carnival and got his first goodnight kiss.

He graduated from Shakopee High School class of 1936 Salutatorian and then attended the U of M studying to be a lawyer. While at the U he played with the U of M marching band and worked as a waiter in a frat house. He would always tell us kids a story about how he went without eating for five days just so that he could save his lunch money to buy his sweetheart Dolores a gold locket for Christmas.

In the spring of 1939 he had to give up his dream and quit the U of M because the money resources had slowly dwindled away. He set up his shop in the little shed at the rear of 132 Fuller and he was always grateful to Bill Engel for teaching him how to make a proper kitchen cabinet. It was only one year later when he and a few of his friends built a bigger cabinet shop on the south end of his mother's lot. In 1941 he upholstered his first piece of furniture. Dr. Buck had brought in a tufted settee to have Mel replace some of the carvings and have the finish retouched. My Dad convinced Dr. Buck to let him reupholster the settee and save Dr. Buck the shipping costs of sending the settee to the cities and back.

On October 29th, 1942 Mel enlisted in the U.S. Navy Seabee's and worked on the carpenter crews and the cabinet shops in Dutch Harbor, Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. He played cornet in the Battalion Band and also spent time carving jewelry boxes for the officer's wives or girlfriends. The remainder of his active duty was spent in California, Hawaii, the Mariana Islands and in Guam with the 3rd Marine Division. While in California he came home on a 30-day leave and married his sweetheart Dolores on May 24th, 1944. After their

honeymoon while still on leave, my mother told him that the city had sold the bridge for scrap iron salvage for demolition. So after it got dark one night, and the night cop went into the Pullman to take his break, they took one of Mel's hand saws and sawed the ML-DR initials out of the bridge railing.

Mel returned from service after 30 months and expanded Lebenscraft to the North Lewis Street Plant.

In 1950 he built the Lebenscraft building at 205 South Atwood and offered custom cabinets, upholstery, draperies and retailed a complete line of interior decorating products.

In the 1950's he served as City Alderman, a member of the Metropolitan Planning Commission, and served on the City Planning Commission.

In 1962 he got his interior design certificate at the U of M. Mel served as Shakopee City Recorder from 1963 to 1969 and during that time won the C.C. Ludwig Award. 1971 he received his Public Administration certificate from the U of M. 1973 Mel suffered his first heart attack at the age of 54. In the following years he served as City Administrator for the City of Montgomery and the City of Milaca. In 1973 Mel had another major heart attack and had to give up his City Administrator job in Milaca. October 1986 he suffered a heart arrest after speaking at a meeting with the Downtown Business Owners. Barry Stock and Butch Notermann saved his life by performing CPR on him.

He spent his retirement years traveling and playing his horn in the U of M Alumni Band, Minnesota Over 60 Band, and the Minnesota Valley Community Band.

After a long battle with colon cancer at the age of 79 he died at home on August 28, 1998 with his entire family present and John Phillip Sousa playing on the phonograph.

He was the proudest of: a) his three years of being chairman for the Scott County March of Dimes exceeding all quotas for those three years; b) for saving Memorial Park from being sold; c) as Shakopee City Recorder for reducing the mill rat of 85.3 mills in 1963 down to 21.8 mills in 1969.

Most people never knew that: 1) His middle name was Percy; 2) he loved roses; 3) loved his horn – and he played his own “Taps” at his funeral. My sister, Suzanne, taped him about two weeks before he died and we played the VCR tape at the cemetery when we buried him.