

Mile 146

July - September 2012



Volume 5

Topeka Area Historical Society

Number 3

“Hochstetler & Sons ” Topeka Seed & Stove

Omer Hochstetler was a man who knew how to get things done and he wasn't afraid of trying something new. He wouldn't hesitate to tell you what he thought, but when he got a hold of an idea there was no stopping. It was full speed ahead. Today if you were to ask most people in Topeka about Omer Hochstetler or his family, they only know about Topeka Seed & Stove. But when you talk to people over the age of sixty who knew him, everyone has an “Omer story” to tell. The agricultural sales and service business Omer started served not only the needs of area farmers, but the entire community.

Omer J. Hochstetler was born in on July 10, 1910, and raised among the corn fields of Kalona, Iowa . Following his school days he got himself a feed grinder which he took from farm to farm grinding feed. In between times he worked at the local turkey processing plant.

It was in the heart of the Depression when Elizabeth Ringler came into his life. Elizabeth's family was originally from northeast Indiana, but had moved to the Dakotas. Crop failures, drought and her family's desperate financial condition forced Elizabeth to look for work. She accepted a position in Colorado Springs, Colorado, working for a wealthy family. Most of the money she earned was sent home to her family.

On a stop in Kalona to visit relatives Elizabeth met Omer. On June 2, 1935, they were married in Kalona. One year later their first son Calvin was born. Within two years the couple left Iowa, moving east to Indiana. At first they lived on US 20 west of LaGrange. Omer's youngest son James says, “Yeah, Dad always said that he moved one county too far because Elkhart County was so much farther ahead of LaGrange.” But a “rent free” offer enticed them to move to the Mast Farm in Honeyville. The only condition was that Omer had to take care of the cattle. Evidently he did a good job because area farmers wanted to know why the cattle looked so good. Omer's secret to success was the salt blocks he put out for the cattle.



Elizabeth, Cal, James, Bill and Omer



The marl truck and spreader

The original family business was started in 1937. Omer started by spreading marl on fields in LaGrange County, Indiana. He hired his brother Earl , who everyone called Abe, to help shovel marl by hand from the edge of Emma Lake which is located four miles north of Topeka. Years later Abe owned and operated a very popular donut shop in Ligonier. Omer paid his brother \$2.00 per day even though his previous employer, Cleo Lambright (Lambright Hatchery) complained to Omer he was wrecking the labor market. Apparently Cleo was only paying 50 cents per day.

The Hochstetler brothers would spread marl on the fields by pulling a fifty-five gallon barrel spreader behind a truck. Omer had rigged up a spreader that was little more than a barrel mounted over a spinner fan that was run by an old axle with the shaft turned upward.

By the early 1940's, Omer had purchased a single axle tractor trailer semi and started hauling shelled corn from Illinois back to D.A. Hostetler's feed mill north and east

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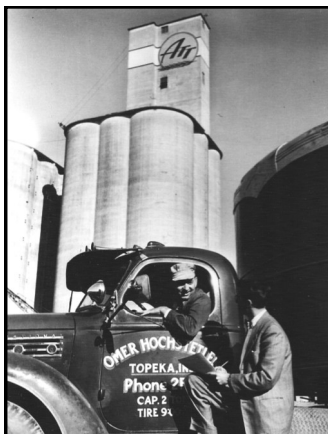
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of Topeka. The corn yields at that time were around forty bushel per acre and there was not enough corn grown locally for the demand. Omer also started trucking in coal from Ohio because most homes were heated by either coal or wood.



In 1945, a new government farm program offered to help pay for lime and marl spread on fields. Omer got the contract for LaGrange County to spread lime for farmers.



The first semi into Anderson's

Lime was shipped by rail from Woodville, Ohio, to stock piles in Topeka, Wolcottville, LaGrange, and Howe.

In 1948, Anderson Grain Elevator opened in Maumee, Ohio. That meant that more grain was now being shipped on the Great Lakes which began to open new global markets to local farmers. Omer was the first semi operator to deliver grain to Andersons.

On the way home the truck would be loaded with either fertilizer or bagged lime.

Over the years the family's farm services continued to grow. In 1964, Omer installed the grain elevator and a scale large enough to handle semis. Now along with selling coal, trucking, and the custom field application of fertilizer, lime, and liquid nitrogen the family business began to buy grain.

Unfortunately on Friday, February 19, 1965, Omer passed away at age 53 in the LaGrange County Hospital from a heart attack. The following Monday his funeral was held at the Topeka Mennonite Church where the family were members. Burial was in the Eden Cemetery.

Since Cal had his own excavating business, the operation of the family business fell to Bill and James. At the ages of 27 and 26, along with their mother Elizabeth, continued with business as usual. At one time the business had one million bushels of government grain stored in a number of locations.

TAHS Quiz

1. When and where did Omer and Elizabeth Hochstetler get married?
2. Where does former coach Richard Burgess live?
3. Who started the Candle Choir?
4. Name the team captions for the 1964 Topeka Bears?
5. What pro organization did Larry Stout play for?

The family business would suffer another blow in 1976, when fire almost completely destroyed the business. While the exact origin of the fire was never fully discovered, the Hochstetler brothers are pretty sure of what happened. At some point in time the truck drivers for Hochstetler & Sons had become unionized. When the drivers sent a de-certification letter to the union, Bill and James believe that retaliation came in the form of arson by the union.



After the fire

James tells a funny story about himself and the Blizzard of 1978.

Millers IGA agreed to open their store on Sunday after noon so people could get food. So James takes Hochstetler's pay loader and opens a path for people. Only thing was he forgot to open the street to his own house.

In the early 1980's new challenges threatened the family business. Topeka's railroad was no longer in operation; the tracks were being removed. And with the opening of several other rail car grain terminals within 35 miles of Topeka, it made it impossible to compete in the grain market.

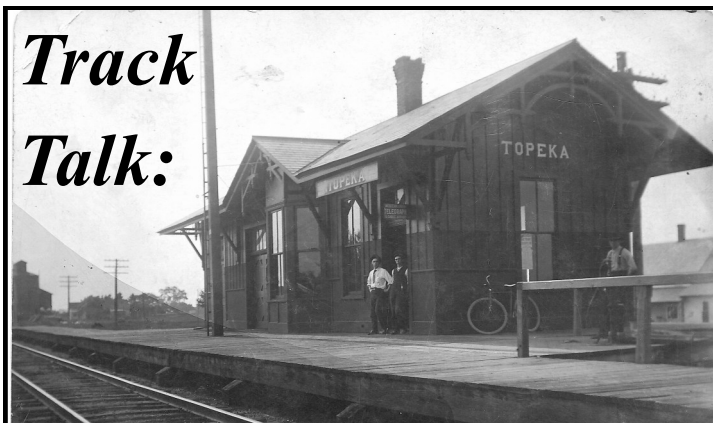
That's when Topeka Seed & Feed across from Topeka Livestock came up for sale. James says, "We had been selling bituminous (soft coal) and anthracite (hard coal) since the early 1940's and had a lot of experience in home heating. We purchased it for a second business. In 1984 Topeka Seed & Stove was formed and, along with farm supplies, we began selling wood & coal stoves as well."

Then along came the invention of outdoor wood furnaces. But it wasn't until they attended the National Stove Show in Orlando, Florida, in 1986 that the Hochstetlers came upon the Central Boiler Outdoor Woodstoves. Bill says, "We were impressed by their design and became a dealer." Today they are one of the oldest and largest Central Boiler dealers. Topeka Seed & Stove offers 17 different models of corn stoves and furnaces. They have over 100 stoves and furnaces on display.

Cal Hochstetler died the day after Thanksgiving in 1973. Elizabeth, who seemed to always remember everyone's birthday, passed away in 2001. Both were buried in the Eden Cemetery west of Topeka.

Today the family business is being carried on by the third generation of Hochstetlers. In theory, Bill and James are semi-retired. But like their hard working father, the brothers are still very active in the business when they are not enjoying winters in Florida.

Track Talk:



IN MEMORIAL

Genevieve Lehman, longtime Topeka resident and great friend to the Topeka Area Historical Society, passed away at the age of 90 on August 5, 2012, at her home in Indianapolis.

A memorial service was held for her at the Topeka United Methodist Church. Former members of the Candle Choir, which she started, sang for that service.

Genevieve was always interested in this community's rich history. It is amazing that we received a letter of encouragement from her that had been written and mailed only days before her passing.



Genevieve Lehman

BARROW BRINGS \$7 PER POUND AT SALE

Tying the world's record of \$7 a pound on the hoof, the grand champion barrow of the Indiana State Fair's 4-H Club show brought Robert Miller of Lagrange County a check for \$1,890. The winning barrow, a Duroc Jersey, is shown with young Miller. The world's record of \$7 a pound was established at the International Livestock Exposition in Chicago. Robert, the son of Mrs. and Mrs. Roy Miller of Topeka, is 16 and a high school senior. His winning barrow weighed 270 pounds. Only the grand champion and the reserve grand champion in the 4-H Club barrow show at the State Fair were sold. OPA ceilings were waived for the sale.

Topeka's Bob Miller was only a sophomore at Topeka High School in 1946 when his Duroc barrow took Grand Champion honors at the Indiana State Fair.



Schedule of Events:



November 13, 2012

"An Evening With Maggie"

at

Tiffany's in Topeka

Annual Dinner Meeting

Elections of Officers for 2013



With the exception of one, these local 4-H winners look excited about displaying their award winning animals. The photo was most likely taken between 1934 -1940 at the old sale barn which was located half a block southeast of the center of town.

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- Answers:*
- 1) June 2, 1935 in Kalona, IA
 - 2) Hawaii
 - 3) Genevieve Lehman
 - 4) Lowell Schrock and Barry Oesch
 - 5) Pittsburg Pirates



Hawpatch History Detectives Investigative Report

Periodically the Goshen News prints some wonderful pictures from out of the past. Here is a picture of two outstanding athletes from the THS Class of 1963.

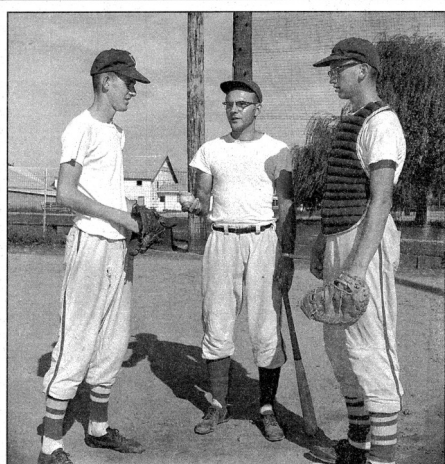
Larry Stout (left) played professional baseball in the Pittsburgh Pirate organization before becoming as very successful teacher and high school baseball coach in southern Michigan. Stout is now retired.

Dave Miller (right) has lived in the Goshen area and continued to play ball for many years.

Coach Richard Burgess (center) left Topeka for sunny Hawaii where he taught school for many years before retiring. Burgess and his wife live on the island of Kawai and have three children. This past summer they made a stop in the area to relive some old memories by touring the Honeyville School building where Topeka played their home basketball games.

E-6 • Sunday, September 18, 2005 • The Goshen News

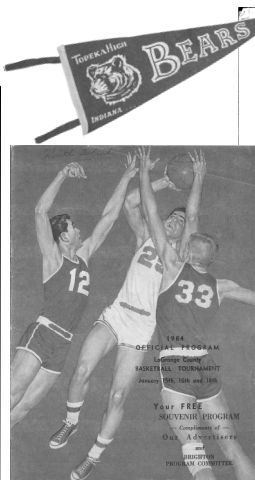
SENIOR



Snapshot: Sept. 18, 1961

Topeka Coach Richard Burgess is pictured here giving last minute instructions to his starting battery, pitcher Larry Stout, left, and catcher Dave Miller, before yesterday's baseball opener at Topeka. The Bears opened play in the LaGrange County baseball league Friday by nipping Wolcottville, 2-1.

Goshen News file photo



Team captains Lowell Schrock and Barry Oesch are shown accepting the runner's up trophy in the 1964 LaGrange County basketball tourney. The tournament was played at Brighton High School.

We're Always Looking for Photos

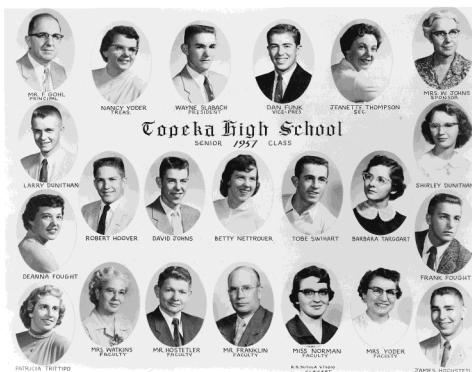
We are looking for old "Topeka" and T.H.S. Senior Class photos. Here are the years we still need to find: 1897

-1919; 1921-35; 1937, 1940-1944.

If you don't have a scanner, we will lovingly scan them for you and see that the originals are safely returned.

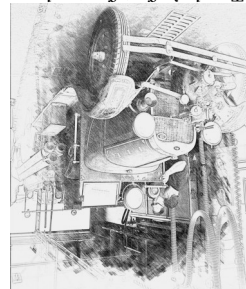
Please send

them to P.O. Box 33, Topeka, Indiana 46571 or you can email them to: harjan68@hotmail.com.



Visit Us Online: www.topekahistoricalociety.com

Topeka's first fire truck, a 1929 Ford Model A.



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