



Ken McKee

Salmon Arm resident Ken McKee is one of the Shuswap Community Foundation founders and a strong supporter of the Foundation's philanthropic work. "I've always been a home town booster," he states.

He and his wife, Lillian, now reside in Bastion Place. Ken struggles daily with post-polio syndrome.

Ken was born in Chicago in 1925 while his father was studying in Bible School. His mother became ill—with what was later diagnosed as Multiple Sclerosis—so the family returned to Alberta where his father tried in vain to find a cure for MS.

It was just before the Great Depression when his father bought a half-section farm in the Barrhead area. Poor weather conditions and a 9 percent interest rate tell the sad tale that broke so many farmers at that time.

When he was 14, Ken attended a school in Three Hills, Alberta. He recalls one day talking to a girl. The strict Bible school was shocked when this was reported and suggested he leave school. Ken says to this day he does not know if he ever obtained his grade 11 status.

Like many young people he sought work in the city. He found a job delivering typewriters by bicycle in Calgary. The pay was \$11/week and from that sum he had to pay room & board plus payments on the bicycle. One day, he remembers, a truck ran a red light and hit Ken on his bike. "The bike was a mess! I was okay and the typewriter was okay but the bike was not paid for!"

He hitched a ride to High River where he found work on a big farm hauling grain (he learned how to drive the truck on the job). He also worked with the combine in the fall. "We combined when the weather was dry and I got \$5 a day. We worked from August 20 to the end of October." However, when the harvest ended so did Ken's job and his next adventure involved working for a poultry farm in Calgary. In a story reminiscent of Dickens, Ken worked for one dollar a day plus board putting in a 15-hour day, delivering eggs to the Hudson's Bay store, grading eggs and monitoring the incubators. He says the owner basically retired when Ken arrived on the farm.

The year was 1942 and Ken opted to join the Canadian Airforce after convincing his father he needed "to get out of that chicken farm" and "permission to join up at age 17 and-a-half."

Ken McKee cont'd. page 2

Ken McKee cont'd

At trade selection, Ken became an armourer, working with guns and bombs. This trade was to become his wartime and peacetime career. Although the military was not easy, Ken smiles when he compares it to the terrible chicken farm and comments, "it was not a bad life!"

During the Second World War, Ken was stationed near Cambridge, England working in the "bomb dump" where bombs were fused and delivered to aircraft.

Returning to peacetime life, Ken wanted to farm and worked for his father at the Barrhead farm. In 1946 he met Lillian and they married in 1947—they will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary in January 2007. Conflicts at the farm prompted Ken to travel to Edmonton where he was recruited back into the Airforce and worked in Canada's north winter-testing airplanes for British and Canadian forces "We had to wait until it was 60 below to test."

In 1952 Ken was assigned to work in aircraft exercises in Alberta and Whitehorse returning to base at Rivers, Manitoba, a very exhausted man. Rivers was in the midst of a polio epidemic and Ken became one of its victims.

Ken went through 21 months of treatment in four different hospitals but, in the end, never regained use of his left arm. He wanted to remain in the Airforce but was discharged.

He and his family moved to Edson where he got a job as a Forestry clerk and also dabbled in reporting sports for the Edson Leader.

In 1958, the McKee's sold their house, bought a travel trailer and drove to British Columbia looking around the Kootenays and the interior before settling in Salmon Arm. "The summer of 1958 was hot but Salmon Arm looked green," says Ken. Local realtor Les Greaves suggested Ken become a realtor and, for the next 10 years, Ken sold real estate in Salmon Arm. During this time he served as a council member for the District of Salmon Arm (1962-63) and later became Reeve (1964-65). Ken was one of the moving forces to bring about amalgamation between the District and Village of Salmon Arm.

He left real estate in 1969 to become the only employee of the CSRD first as secretary/treasurer and later, administrator. He was involved in setting up the referendum to build the Revelstoke Hospital. After nine years the board wanted to make some changes and Ken questioned some of the proposed moves. "It was a lead-up to getting rid of me," he says sadly and it has remained as a cloud over him because he was never told why he was let go.

Until recently, Ken lived in his own home in Salmon Arm where he had a garden, orchard and walnut trees. He was also a volunteer with junior golfers.

Notes by: Marg Shand
Fall, 2006