

THE DODGE INTERVIEW



CHESTER AND IRENE DODGE AT HOME

One of the first sounds that Chester Dodge remembers hearing in his early childhood was the rumble of the now-extinct steam engines that roared through Stuarts Draft in the early years. That sound stayed with him over his 80 years and accounts for his membership in the Railway Historical Society even today. I'm sure that Chester got a firsthand look at those great engines because of the location of his family home. His home just happened to be the Dodge Hotel, a popular landmark in the Draft area. The old Hotel bordered the tracks of the Norfolk and Western railway to its left. Chester said the house would rumble and shake everytime a train would roll through. Stuarts Draft was a meal stop for the trains and the Dodge Hotel was famous for serving a mouth-watering noonday meal. The passengers of the Norfolk & Western railroad would get off at the depot and walk the short distance to the Hotel for their lunch.

In those days, four trains came through everyday. They didn't have names; just numbers. There were the morning trains, #1 and #2, and the evening trains, #13 and #14.

Chester's mother ran the hotel/boardinghouse and his dad was the town and railroad physician. "My father's office was attached right to the side of the hotel and that's where he practiced medicine for so many years", recalled Chester. When Chester asked me where I was from and I told him, Love, he just laughed and rolled his eyes. "I can remember when I was about 9 or 10 years old and someone rode down from the mountain on a horse to get my father. One of the Everette's was sick and needed medical attention quickly. My dad said that I could go so I jumped in our buggy and away we went. We seemed to be on the road for hours getting up to that place and the further we rode up the mountain, the scarier it got. The dirt road narrowed down and the rocks and ruts were awful. When we finally got there, it was dark out and there was no moon out that night. My father told me to stay in the buggy and believe me, I was plenty scared sitting out there all alone. It took us forever to get home that night because all the mountain people saw us go up and were waiting to hail us down on the return trip. A doctor in those parts was a rare sight so anyone who had any ailments tried to get help whenever they could. But I sure can remember that trip up to Love!

Chester's family also owned four large cranberry bogs out near where Shenandoah Acres Swimming Resort is now located. He was the first person to harvest cranberries on a large scale operation. Chester remembers people coming to the bogs to pick the berries and they each got a pink ticket for every peck of cranberries they picked. At the end of the day they'd turn in all their tickets and collected a dime for each one. The women used to pick berries on their knees, right off the vines, while the men would come along with huge wooden scoops and harvest them that way. I could tell

cont. on page 12.

just by the way that Chester talked about those cranberries that he was not too crazy about picking them! They turned one of the bogs into a swimming/recreation area and it fast became a favorite picnic spot for alot of people over near Charlottesville.

Chester met his wife Irene when she came to Stuarts Draft with her family seeking employment for her father in the Koalin mines (commonly known as the chalk mines.) They used the Koalin in the manufacturing of eyeglasses in the large cities.

The Dodge's remember the big 4th of July festivities that were held in Stuarts Draft years ago. Like the front cover shows, booths of all kinds were set up along Main Street and you could try your hand at knocking over the milk bottles or breaking balloons with a dart. Usually a men's baseball game was held at the elementary school, which was located up near Findley Memorial Presbyterian Church. That night a huge fireworks display was put on and everyone seemed to have a great time.

Irene said that when she came to the Draft, she remembers the big old maple trees that stood out front of the hotel. And again, the front cover shows the beautiful old trees that lined the entire street.

The Dodge's have remained faithful to the Calvary United Methodist Church all these years and still remain active today.

Chester's biggest disappointment in life was that he could never work for his beloved railroad. In those days, railroad men had to be big and brawny to handle the coal shovel or guide the massive engines. It was Chesters lot in life to be small of frame so even tho' he passed his physical with flying colors, he didnt quite make the 150 pound requirement that the Norfolk and Western line had set up for their workers. For a little while he tried banking but really found his niche in life as Stuarts Draft's mail clerk for 34 years. But Chester still remains active in the Railway Historical Society I mentioned beforehand and

cont. this page

his photo album is packed with beautifully restored steam engines that he has gone to see over the years. Some of the old trains still make "commemorative runs" every now and then and Chester knows all their schedules ahead of time. Recently, he lost a good friend and railway buddy when Mr. Homer Lee Hinkle passed away suddenly at his home. Homer Lee worked for the Stuarts Draft post office too and they made many trips together looking at the giant engines.

Chester and Irene Dodge are a wonderful couple who opened their home and their lives up to me and graciously allowed me to write this interview for everyone's enjoyment. I'd like to thank them now for letting me see the Draft through their eyes so many years ago.

Lynn Barrett



Jason Weaver cont...

neighborhood children years ago.

This month both Mr. and Mrs. Weaver will celebrate birthdays. He will be 89 years old on the 10th and she'll be 81 on the last day of the month.

God has surely blessed this wonderful couple throughout their lives and as they sit holding hands on the front porch swing, I know that I in turn have been blessed by meeting them. Thanks Jason and Marie Weaver and a very happy birthday to you both!

Lynn Barrett