

This Week in Saratoga County History

Donald K. Stewart, the Man behind the Ice Cream

Submitted by David Fiske September 16, 2021

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Early Stewarts Advertisement

This summer Brookside opened an exhibit: “Century of Ice Cream! The Dake Family and Stewart’s.” One might wonder why this successful business, with almost 350 convenience stores is named “Stewarts” and not “Dake’s” Actually, the original founder of Stewarts had a strong reputation for high-quality dairy products, long before the Dake family purchased the business.

Technically, Donald K. Stewart was not a Saratoga County native. He was born in Austin, Minnesota on May 26, 1897. However, he lived most of his life in the Ballston Spa area, where his father, Thomas F. Stewart, was in the grocery business. Stewart’s grandfather, A. B. Stewart was a farmer in the Town of Ballston, per the 1880 census. So, the Stewarts had been in Saratoga County for a while. The father of Donald’s mother, Lizzie, was from Minnesota, so Lizzie likely went there to be with her parents during her pregnancy.

Donald, at age 18, was already working as a retailer. The 1915 state census gave his occupation as “Salesman, Tea and Coffee Wagon.” Details of this business can be gleaned from an ad in the *Saratogian* in September, 1915: “Wanted: Man to take the tea and coffee business of D. K.

Stewart, covering Galway, Milton and Greenfield.” Another ad, placed by Stewart, offered for sale a “kind and gentle” horse—perhaps the steed that had hauled him around.

Thomas had left the grocery business by this time. A notice in the *Troy Times* of October 15, 1912 said that he’d moved from Ballston Spa to a farm west of the village. Ill health had induced him to seek an outdoor occupation. Probably his son gave up his tea and coffee route and went to help with the farm. The 1920 census listed the occupation of Thomas as “farmer,” and Donald, living in his father’s Town of Ballston household, was a “milk dealer.” He had been at this for a while, because a 1919 article about increased milk prices mentioned several dairies, including D. K. Stewart’s. In March 1920, his firm, the Milk Depot, had a telephone installed at the store on Bath Street.

About this time, Thomas sold his farm, and moved into the village. The Stewarts, in Ballston Spa, mostly seem to have lived in the Ballston Avenue/McMaster Street neighborhood. Donald earnestly pursued the business of selling dairy products. The 1930 census showed him and his wife, Pearl, in Ballston Spa, with his occupation given as “retail merchant, milk and cream.” Stewart had married Pearl Jones at her parents’ home in Rock City Falls. Their honeymoon plans included touring the Adirondacks.

Cleanliness was important at the Stewart dairy business. The “Kleen Kaps” on the bottles were touted in advertisements, and customers could join the “Kleen Kap Klub.” Reliability of delivery was also a priority: a 1929 ad promised bottles would arrive on porches “regardless of the weather.” In 1932, the firm received an award from a state agency. Stewart’s milk scored high on aspects such as bacteria content, flavor, sediment, odor, butter fat, and temperature.

The year 1934 was eventful. Stewart was appointed justice of the peace, and he also purchased the Westcott garage on Church Avenue, and converted it to “one of the most modern milk dealer’s plants in this vicinity.” This was the first Stewarts shop (though the Milk Depot had been operating for quite a while before this). The site still is the location of a Stewarts store.



First Stewart’s Shop, Church Ave, Ballston Spa

Stewart apparently kept up with developments in the dairy trade, as, in 1936 he graduated from a program at the Massachusetts Agricultural College. This interest in improved techniques for managing a dairy firm characterized his concern for his business. He made a modest expansion by opening a store in Saratoga Springs: an ad from 1944 warned customers that the Stewarts Ice Cream store on Church Street there would be closing for an indefinite period. Pearl Stewart was identified as the proprietor. It seems there were just the two shops then.

That year, a trade publication noted P. W. and C. V. Dake, of Saratoga Springs had acquired Stewart's milk and ice cream business. It stated that he'd started the firm in 1917, and had run it for 27 years. The *Schenectady Gazette* of October 4, 1944 specified that the Ballston Spa and Saratoga Stewarts stores had been purchased by the Dake brothers, but that Stewart would stay on for a short time as an advisor.

His time as an advisor may have been quite short, since in mid-October, employees gave him a surprise farewell party at the Church Avenue shop. Two days after the party, employees visited Donald at his Ballston Avenue home and expressed regret at his departure. But there were refreshments and games, so it was not totally a sad occasion. The Dakes started expanding the business, adding new stores over the years, eventually becoming the chain we know so well today.

After parting ways with the business. Donald took an interest in the Ballston Spa Village Cemetery, which was not far from his house. He was a sales agent for Temple Brothers, Inc. of Rutland, Vermont, who were. "builders and designers of cemetery memorials." In the 1950s and 1960s, he was a director of the nearby cemetery.

Stewart died on October 31, 1971, while visiting his son, Donald K. Stewart, Jr. in Florida. Pearl died the following year, also in Florida. Both are buried in the Village Cemetery, as are their son and daughter-in-law.