

This Week in Saratoga County History

Chip's Hall – A Family Legacy

Submitted by Sandy McBride, February 14, 2024

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Bill and Mona Ciepiela McBride at Chips Hall

Development in northern Halfmoon is rapidly transforming this once expansive area of productive farmland into an area of winding streets and attractive homes, where landscaped lawns are replacing the hay fields, pastures and woodlands of years gone by. There in the middle of new neighborhoods called Fairway Meadows, Adams Pointe and Howland Park, at the corner of Johnson and Staniak Roads, is an old building, a remnant of the town's farming days known as Chip's Hall. Let me tell you a bit about Chip's Hall.

Back in the early 20th century, there was a wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, with people looking for a chance to make better lives for their families in this land of opportunity, the United States of America. Many took that courageous step, packed whatever they could carry in a steamer trunk, boarded a ship and crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

Ludwig Ciepiela sailed from Austria about the time World War I was coming to an end, arriving in Rhode Island. He wanted to buy a farm. So in 1918, he and his young wife, Sophie, parents of two small children, Willie and Wanda, bought a 160 acre farm in the Town of Halfmoon in upstate New York. They bought cows and began their dairy farm. They planted gardens and crops. And they had a second son, Teddy.

Farmers in those days helped each other in harvest season. At the Ciepiela farm in 1923, the wagons were loaded with corn to be chopped and stored away for winter feed for the cattle. Teddy, unbeknownst to the man driving the team of horses, had crawled under the wagon. As the wagon moved forward, Teddy was run over and died from his injuries the next day.

Sophie gave birth to daughter Anna just two months after Teddy's tragic death. Three more children would be born to Ludwig and Sophie – daughter Mona and sons Edwin and Chester. As they became old enough, all of the children worked alongside their parents. It was the way farming was.

The Ciepielas had settled in the midst of many other immigrant families working hard to achieve a better life for themselves and their families. The farms of Halfmoon back in the middle of the 20th century thrived under these new Americans. With their predominantly Polish heritage as a unifying factor, they joined the Polish National Alliance. They needed a place to meet, socialize and discuss the latest innovations in farming. Ludwig had a hall built in 1939 across the road from his house. Its upper floor was wide open for dancing. In the basement he had a bar built, and added tables and chairs, dart boards and a pool table. It became known as Chip's Hall, and it was a fine place for get-togethers. They had meetings, dances and wedding receptions. After working in the fields all day, the men would come to relax, play pool and shoot darts.

In 1942, with World War II in process, eldest son Willie enlisted in the US Army and was stationed at Fort Benning in Georgia. Ludwig, always known as a giving and kind-hearted man, went out on the night of September 28, 1942 with a friend whose automobile had slid off the road on a curve near the Noradki farm a half mile away. Ludwig drove his tractor to the site and hooked it up to the vehicle to try and pull it back out onto the road. The tractor tipped over, pinning Ludwig under it and killing him.

Sophie was devastated. She had a farm to run, and only herself and two daughters still living at home to run it. Edwin and Chester were still young children, so the daily work of milking, feeding and cleaning was left to teenage daughters Anna and Mona. They quit school so they could get all the days' work done. The Red Cross endeavored to get Willie discharged from the Army to come home to support his family, and he did come home on New Year's Eve to take over the farm. He ran the farm for the rest of his life, and the family endured. Together with his siblings they maintained not only their livelihood, but their father's hall as well. The dances, parties and gatherings continued. In 1948 Mona married Bill McBride and held their reception in the hall her

father had built almost 10 years before. They bought a farm to the south of her family homestead and lived there for the rest of their lives.

In 1962, the cow barn on the farm caught fire and was badly damaged. That area of Halfmoon had no designated fire protection at that time, and the Ciepiela fire was just one of several serious fires in that area of the town that spurred the people to establish their own fire district. In 1964, Hillcrest Volunteer Fire Department came into being. With fund-raising efforts needed to supply the department with its amenities, it was Chip's Hall that became the go-to place to hold dances to help out. Polish cuisine, Polish music and Polish dancing . . . it was what Chip's Hall was all about - community unity.

But time is relentless. Over the past half century, the neighbors ceased farming. The Polish families have grown and scattered. New neighbors have moved in. That solid core of immigrant determination and desire has dissipated and blended.

In Chip's Hall, the music plays no more. No dancing feet rumble on the wood plank floor. No more great Polish food is served in the dining room. Today the remains of the building still stand at the corner of Johnson and Staniak Roads, a mere shadow of what it used to be. The Ciepiela farmhouse and rebuilt barn are still there, but the pastures, the fields and the woodlands are now known as Howland Park, and new houses are fast being built in this neighborhood-to-be.

One can only hope that with homes springing up where cattle used to graze and crops used to grow, that the influx of people seeking to make a better life for themselves and their families will find their own center, their own community unity. Their own spirit of Chip's Hall, you might say.