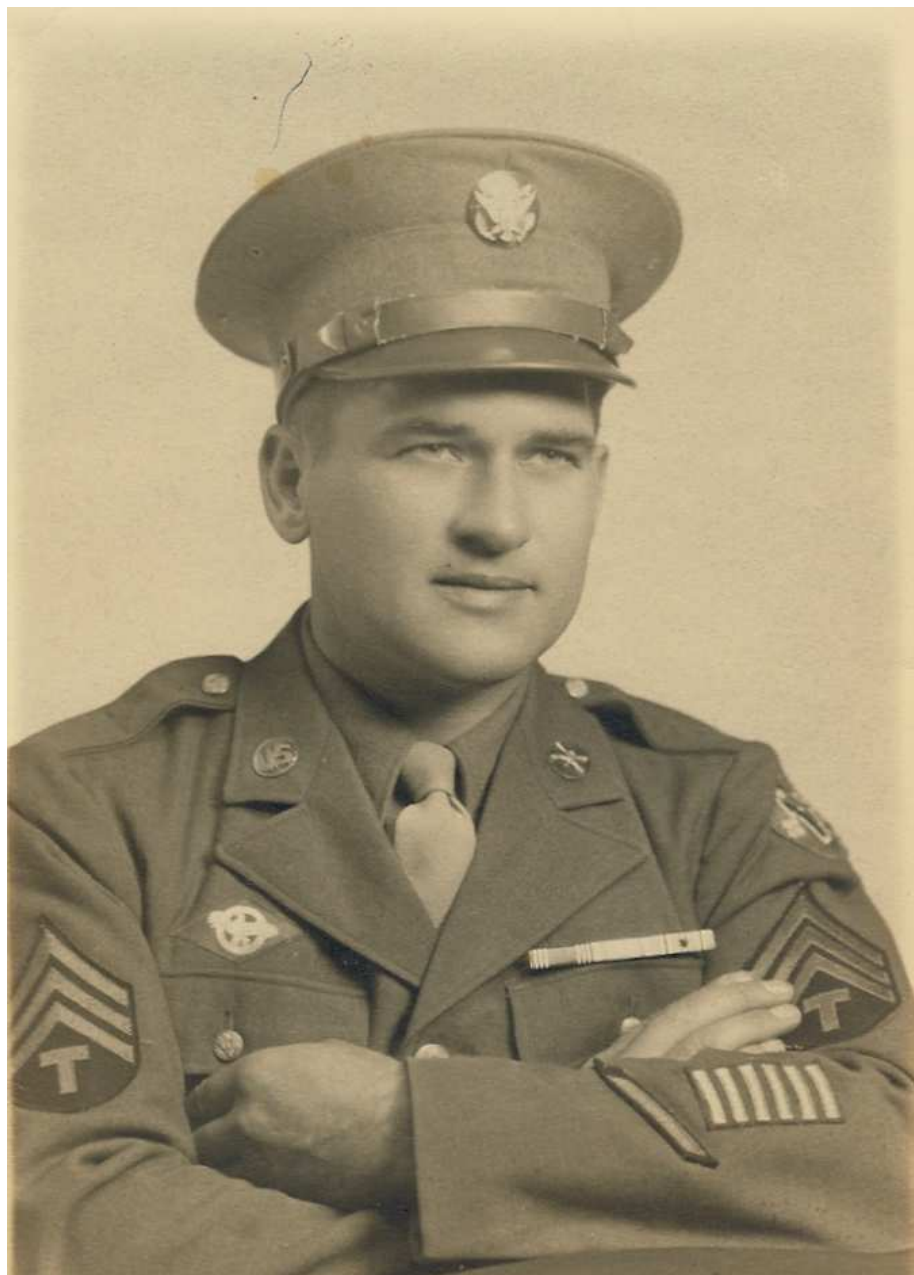


## Clarence Herman Otter



October 16, 1916 - April 05, 2003

## Clarence Herman Otter

Clarence was born the youngest son of Henry Christian and Wilhelmina Otter on October 16, 1916 in the family farmhouse on Otter Road. Henry told anyone who asked that they were the only people living on that road so they named it after them. Clarence was the youngest son, having five older brothers, Ernest, John, Harry, Elwin and Marlin plus three older sisters, Luella, Evelyn and Mildred. Baby sisters, Dorothy and Delphine made up the family of eleven children.



**Henry, Ernest, John, Harry, Elwin, Marlin & Clarence**

In the early 1900s it was traditional for farm families to have a lot of children so they could help with farm chores and housekeeping.

Clarence's grandfather came from Germany barely out of his teens, with a strong farming background, on a boat with his 17 year old sister, first settling in Ohio. Later generations moved to Michigan and Henry Otter continued the tradition, teaching his sons how to farm. By the time Clarence was ready to begin his own farm, Henry and Minnie were retiring to city life in Waltz. Thus, Clarence bought the family farm and went on to bestow upon his land the title of Centennial Farm, continuing the tradition of family farming at that location.



*Picture of Dad, grandchild and Otter Farm Sign*

Clarence attended school at Willow Elementary until graduating from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but he was still expected to help with chores and farming. He remembers having his older brother Ernest's wife, Gladys, as his teacher. She accepted no foolishness and he remembers he and the other boys paid attention when she was teaching.

Although he never went on to high school, the lessons he taught his children, the adventures he took, the way he lived, learned and shared always made us proud and we bestowed on him the earned degree of "Masters"



*Picture of old school house and children – Dad is in the front row in the middle with dark hair and slight frown*

The Henry Otter family, probably as a term of affection or expediency and differentiation, labeled each other with nicknames. Even grandma Wilhelmina was

known as “Minnie Rinne” (maiden). Ernest was “Ern”, John – “Jack”, Harry – “Speed” (because he moved so slowly), Elwin – “Baldy” (with a full head of hair), Marlin – “Burgs”. Sister Luella (?), Evelyn was “Evie”, Mildred was “Silky” because she liked silk stockings, Dorthy – “Do Do” and Delphine was “Bonezie” with a lean silhouette. Clarence was a cute kid and the youngest usually got a lot of teasing from older siblings and older sister’s boyfriends who would visit.

The little guy remembers being teased so much that he would start punching at the older kids to get them away – so was born Clarence’s name of “Punch”. This nickname stuck with him through his life, being known as Punch by friends, neighbors and family. Because of his kindness and generosity, that name lost the physical meaning and took on a different character which belonged only to my dad. Long time neighbor, Howard Kromis wrote words of comfort when he told us, “Your Dad should know that he is a father figure to not only his own children, but his patience in teaching me what I learned of farming came from the only person I had to look up to and learn farming from.” Charles Helwig, who currently farms Clarence’s land knew him as “mentor”. Punch was always willing to teach and help.

Around the age of 16, Punch stuck out his thumb or jumped onto slow moving cabooses and rode the rails down to Florida. He explained to daughter Joan that as a boy it was his job to go out every day in winter and knock down the silage from the silo for the animals to eat. It was mighty cold in the 1930’s and his fingers would freeze, his whole body would be chilled. He would dream of warm places as he was doing the outside work. He knew his parents would say “no” so one day he just took off, enjoying the company of other hobos and living a whole different way of life. Louise remembers him recalling that he did go back to the farm and expected his parents to be angry but instead they were just very happy to see him return.

Eventually he continued his travel adventure to California and other parts, this time riding in his own car.

While he was coping with two years of hospitalization for surgery in 1995 he told this story to his daughter Karen who thought that was really cool. Puzzled as to why he had never revealed this story to her before he responded, “I didn’t want to give the boys any ideas.”



*Picture of San Diego*

In his later teens and early adulthood, he enjoyed many activities with his family and friends. He remembers farming life wasn't easy as his father would sell the good stuff and leave the rest for the family to work with. Punch remembers the difficulty of working with blind mules because the good ones had been sold.

He had a closer relationship with brother Marlin and they enjoyed other activities along with the farm chores together.



*Pictures of dad baling hay with brothers*

Punch loved baseball and reported playing first base, catcher and even pitcher. He told girlfriend Louise one day "Wish me luck, I'm going to pitch."



*Picture of Uncle Marlin, Dad & Speed in baseball uniforms*



**Shelly, Joan, Karen & Clarence**

He continued this love though his later years, sharing this with his children and in particular teaching daughter Karen how to master ground balls. Karen remembers how he would close the big red barn doors, stand in the middle of Otter Road facing the barn and hit ground balls while she tried to intercept them. If they got by, the barn doors would stop them so they didn't have to chase them. He practiced for hours, teaching her how to lay her mitt on the ground and bend the knees. "It is my father I credit for giving me the skills to be part of St Johns 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Girls Champion Soft Ball Team. But what meant more was the loving spirit and willingness he gave me, giving of his time and knowledge, never complaining or making excuses. I cherish those lessons of life.

Before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday Punch worked at the Ford Plant as farming was not always enough to cover everyone still at the farm. Henry had instilled a strong work ethic in his boys and many of the Otter men also worked in the factories while farming.

But at age 20, Punch was drafted into the Army and served 4 ½ years during World War II.



**Punch, World War II**



**Punch, Hawaii, Sept. 1942**

He was assigned to be the Army Cook and he used to joke with us, reporting on how he got to “college”, graduating from Cooks & Bakers School that the Army provided. Stationed in the Pacific, he continued his love for learning new cultures, geography and travel and planned one day to return to visit Hawaii during a safer time.



**Louise & Punch in Hawaii**

Punch and Louise started their wedding plans when he returned from the War.



*Clarence & Louise's Wedding picture*

Times were difficult and Louise remembers worrying that the bridesmaids' gowns wouldn't arrive in time... but the wedding went as scheduled and they were married in the old church building of St. Johns Lutheran, Waltz on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1946. Denise Rutledge and Carol Sanders were the sweetest flower girls and Sister Eve sang for the service. Brother Marlin was best man but, prior to this, he had married Ella Neumann, Louise's sister. Now Sisters Ella and Louise had married brothers Marlin and Clarence. These family groups spent many holidays and events together as the double tie formed a close bond.

The newlyweds settled into the homestead letting "Pa" know that they were ready to take on full responsibility and sent him packing to join Minnie in Waltz. For the few precious days we had to visit with Dad this early April, he would talk about events that only he was seeing. "Did you get all the pickles in?"

Not knowing what he was talking about, Joan, Mahrya and Karen were puzzled but Mom gently answered him, telling him yes, she had taken care of the pickles. Louise explained to us that when they returned from their Honeymoon, Henry announced to his son that the oat crop had failed and there would be no money to be made off that land. Not to be "licked", Clarence decided to plant pickles. Louise recalls how she picked so many pickles, hauled them off to market and then canned the excess so that they had pickles all winter long. She remembers dreaming of picking big pickles and little pickles all night long that year.

Eighteen days after the couple celebrated their first wedding anniversary, baby Karen came along. Two years later brother Alan arrived, then, when Alan was close to four years old, Sister Joan joined the family. Punch loved his family and was very devoted to them. He had a generous and good natured personality which



extended to his mother-in-law, Alvina Neumann. Around three years of age Karen developed rheumatic fever. After recovery, the doctor said some warm weather might help so Punch loaded the whole family up, including Alvina and they spent the January and February in Florida that year.

But the family was not complete and sons Brian and Kevin entered the scene. Punch would teach his children farming and other life lessons even at a young age. Often one of the pre-schoolers would be following papa as he did his chores in the barn, giving Louise a little break from caring for all of the children. He expected the boys to learn farming which was sometimes tedious when they wanted to do other things. But his lessons instilled a love for the land and its bounties. Alan attended Michigan State University in the Agriculture Short Course program and to date plants some of the most beautiful flowers offered by Blocks Stand.

Punch also worked at Blocks after his retirement, forming those connections for his children. Brian would learn to drive the tractor and combine' but his interests also turned to building, and he was very handy when the barn needed repair. Brian, along with his other brothers and later, Punch's grandchildren all learned to bale hay.



*Picture of kids in front of hay wagon*

It was usually during the hottest days of July and August that dad/grandpa would call them up and assign them to either stacking in the barn or loading on the wagon. The straw would pick their skin and get stuck on the sweat but Punch would be there leading the crew.

Father Punch didn't let these farm lessons escape his daughters. Some of Joan's cherished memories were times Dad spent just with her. "We were a team planting

in the garden. As a little girl he would dig the holes, I would put in the seed and he would cover up the seed. I also remember how he would let me drive the combine. The old combine only had room for one in the cab so Dad would hang out the door so I could sit at the steering wheel. We would see rabbits and pheasants running. He explained how we were invading their home.”

As a child, Karen recalls watching her dad carry out kitchen scraps and place them around sickly looking trees. At the time she thought it was kind of messy and ugly looking. Learning later the importance of recycling, composting and fertilization, she realized that her dad was probably one of the first “Master Gardeners” and one of the first conservationists she had ever met.

Punch loved his family and he continually gave to great extents. There are not many fathers who would take their daughters to a Beatles concert and put up with thousands of screaming young people, or transport Karen and her friends to the afternoon matinee theatre to see Elvis. Year after year Punch would rent a cottage at Stony Point just before school began. It was the height of farm work but he would leave the cottage every morning, go back to the farm to work all day, stop and pick up one of our friends and take them to the cottage so we would have play mates. Brian and Alan say some of their best memories were spending those weeks swimming in the lake and spending time with family at the cottage. Kevin says that is where he first learned to fish. We didn’t go to the bait shop though; we went out to the field to dig worms. Dad would then teach us how to thread the worm on the hook and plop the line in the canal. Those six inch catches were a wonder to us. Dad seemed to be a man of many talents. He had a fine eye for composition so you would often see him in pictures holding a bright geranium pot or displaying a grapefruit still on the tree, adding to the interest in the photograph.

Dad had great concern that we learned lessons of compassion and respect for the elderly and those in need. We were frequently lined up, given some type of gift and loaded into the car to visit Uncle Juke, Grandma Otter’s brother and other strangers in the Buena Vista nursing home. When neighbors would move in, he would be the first to head over with one or the other child and offer help and information. Dad taught us business skills. He would help us plant pumpkins, weed them and harvest them. In order to help sell them, he would tell people that they could hunt on his land if they bought some pumpkins from his kids, teaching us advertising and marketing skills. It is perhaps son Kevin though, that continues on the farming heritage the most, caring for the barns and machinery and planting some experimental plots of wheat to this day.

Punch's love for his family extended to his grandchildren. He was always taking them on some project or activity.



**Clarence with his grandchildren**

There was a time when Louise and Punch would plan their yearly vacations to include the grandkids.

One year they took Mahrya and Shelly to Dollywood, Tennessee. Another year Jeremy and Doug went to the Martin Capital of the World in Illinois, Craig got to see South Dakota and Derek and Jason headed for Shipshewana and Goshen for swimming etc. What brave grandparents! His devotion was never questioned as he would have given up his life if it meant taking care of his grandchildren. Karen recalls the countless hours Punch and Louise spent driving her and little Michael to U of M Hospital for his leukemia treatments, sitting for hours watching Shelly and baby Doug waiting for the doctor and then heading for McDonalds to treat Mickey for his bravery.

One summer Punch was helping Shelly learning how to ride her two-wheeler when she fell under the bike. Grandpa was so worried she had broken her leg that he ran carrying her back to the house, risking his own health.

Punch and Louise were blessed with a great grand child, Brianna, four years ago. While "Opa" (as Brianna soon called him) had less patience and energy for this little one, she remains a blessing to him and the family. Brianna and her mother Mahrya have been faithful companions and caretakers of Opa for the past few years. Brianna never fails to be right by his side, brushing her teeth when he does, helping with his shoes and other tasks. Mahrya reports that she really felt she was treated special by Opa and enjoyed her grandpa very much so for her it is a special blessing to be able to care for Opa. Mahrya tells the story of her memories: As

children they would be over playing at the farm. She was allowed to use the bathroom in the house while Opa told the boys to use the outhouse.

She says she always enjoyed grandpa's activities and trips. Many of the grandchildren were taken to the auction to watch him bid on cattle, hay and perhaps some chickens for Jeremy. It probably was because of grandfather's training and love of animals that Shelby exhibits pigs in the 4-H Fair and enjoys other animals. Jeremy, now in the Army, was always involved with animals and pets.

Punch first introduced his own children to 4-H and it is perhaps those experiences that motivate Brother Brian to have his own daughter, Shelby, become a 4-H member.



*Punch, & the kids with the steer*

Clarence had many other loves. After retirement (which was spent in many other "jobs", - monitoring Huron High School locker room, working at Blocks) he had more time to enjoy his membership in the VFW.

He loved his VFW comrades and the activities they were involved with. Clarence and Louise marched in VFW Carleton Branch memorial parade for as long as they could. Dad would always invite the children and grandchildren to the service honoring veterans. We came away with a greater respect for the men who served their country, developed a family tradition, and enjoyed the hot dogs afterwards.



*Pictures of Veterans activities*

One of the greatest loves for Clarence was his church and faith. He was baptized, confirmed and married at St. Johns in Waltz. His confirmation verse is Matthew 24:13. “But he who stands firm to the end will be saved”. His actions and works back up this belief. Every Sunday the whole family would all attend church and he would be in the pew unless some critical farming incident kept him home.

He sent all of his children to St. Johns School and his grandchildren now attend as well. Clarence served as Deacon, Elder and member of the new Building Committee.

He documented in slides the tearing down of the old St. Johns and the building of the new with a skill in picking significant photographs. Punch’s chicken barbeques were famous at church picnics. He designed and made a 10 foot barbeque pit, teaching his family and others how to properly cook the chicken. Clarence was the originator of the student’s truck ride to the park in his big stake truck for the end of school year family picnic. It was so exciting to all jump into that truck, only to jump out into the park, free from school. There Clarence and his family would all enjoy the school picnic along with good friends, the Cook, Giese, Krzyske, Spiecker, Grimm and the Yost families, among others.

Clarence displayed his faith and shared it with others. Many neighbors were visited, brought baskets of vegetables and invited to church. When he was in the hospital in 1995, facing difficult surgery, he felt compelled to comfort his family with the words that he was at peace with God and ready to die. Dad stayed with us

for eight more years, encouraging us to nurture our own faith and be a witness. It is because of this knowledge and God's promises that we release him to his heavenly home, knowing that he will be greeted in heaven with the words: Well done thou good and faithful servant!



**Louise & Clarence Otter**  
**19 June, 1976**

