

George Barta - Leaves of Gold

For those who did not know him, George Barta was a long-time horseman and businessman in our area. (He owned the Saddle & Leather Shop for 59 years). George passed away last year. Through the recollections of many friends, there are some good mottos that illustrate the way George lived his life.

"It's the happy man who discovers what he loves to do and figures out how to make a living at it."

George was born in 1913 to a large (horse-less) family in the Czech area of Cedar Rapids. He recalled, as a lad, earning a penny or two from the teamsters by throwing sand on the icy cobblestones to help the teams pull their loads up Bowling Street. When he was old enough, he went to work in the packing house where he met his sweetheart, Mary, who worked there too. They were married in 1939.

In World War II, George served in India, where he was able to work with the elephants on a construction crew building air strips on the Burma Road. After the War, George returned to the packing house, but also got a chance to work at The Saddle & Leather Shop, and in time to own it. George learned to make and repair all manner of tack. He made a lifelong study of the history of horsepower. The Shop still is a working museum of antique horse equipment that George accumulated. He never, ever tired of learning what some old piece of equipment was used for!

In his spare time, George rode his horses at Verne Upmier's Stable. He loved the long trail rides of the time: 30-40 miles being common. When his daughters were little, they got ponies and rode with Dad. George and Verne made monthly trips to the Kalona Horse Sale, which they rarely missed in over 50 years. George was grateful for his blessings, and he pitched in by helping to form the Cedar Rapids Horsemen's Club: in doing what was needed over the years, from clearing brush, to serving as ring steward, to cleaning up. In his later years, he helped adapt tack for Miracles in Motion - a program for riders with disabilities. One of George's favorite sayings was:

"The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man."

Over time, the Shop's rear workroom became a place for horsemen to gather. Into the 1950's, horsemen and farmers would bring their harness to be dipped in the neatsfoot oil tank on Saturday mornings with much coffee and conversation. The work teams are long gone, but the Saturday morning group continues. George loved meeting with "the choir" as it was sometimes called. He heard the news of his friends and customers while he worked on leather. George was fond of telling about overhearing a boy who came in the Shop retail area one day ask the clerk, "Is that old man still in the back?" He was, and glad to be there. Until the last months of his life, when he let go of his work, with grace.

Some of our old horsemen have cut good trails for us to follow. The familiar anthology, "Leaves of Gold" begins with:



Sermons We See

I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day.
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely show the way.

The best of all the teachers are the men who live their creeds,
For to see the good in action is what everybody needs.

For I may misunderstand you and the good advice you give,
But there's no misunderstanding how you act and how you live.

-Edgar Guest-