

## **ALBERT HUGH CRANE 1916-**

### **The Peach Orchard History and the WWII German POW Camp**

Now in his mid nineties, Albert Crane is still both physically and mentally active despite being retired from full-time farming. He continues to run his large bulldozer-tractor with the claw he invented (but not patented) to assist in local tasks. His memory of family history details as well as current events would be remarkable for a person half his age. His home, the former Harrison Hutchins house, was purchased from his father, H. Blakeslee, along with three acres. Albert lived there with his wife, Letha (Hicks), until her passing in 2007.

Albert is the eldest child of H. Blakeslee and Muriel E. (Smith) Crane and grandson of John H. and Hattie Blakeslee Crane. Brothers Edward and John Calvin were deceased at young ages, but sisters Shirley, Emily, and Elizabeth are still living. Albert and Robert (Bob) Crane are the primary Crane family fruit orchard farmers.

Albert's grandparents, John and Hattie began the Crane farm with the purchase of 63 acres to which he eventually added 120 acres he rented from his parents, 50 of which he turned to a fruit orchard. He studied the cultivation and marketing of fruit to pass down the family generations, becoming one of the largest shippers in Allegan County. He is reputed to have bought a 165 acre tract of land in Cuba before the revolution. Subsequently Blakeslee and Muriel Crane added most of their current acreage including the Harrison Hutchins farm in 1916 and continued expanding their products.

While young brother Bob served in the Navy (USS Kearsarge) from 1948-51, Albert remained on the farm during WWII to produce food for the country and war effort. He has many happy memories and delightful stories of farm life. One special memory is of the German POWs who were interned at Camp Lakewood near Allegan and transported to the area orchards to help pick fruit. Albert befriended one of the POWs whom he later had as a house guest and visited in Tasmania. This history is recounted by Albert in the 2nd Movie in his DVD.

In this videod oral history interview's first episode, Albert explains tells the story of the rise peach orchards in the area from the time of his grandparents. In the second video episode he provides interesting stories of farm life in the 1930-60 era.

Pictured at right is the team that conducted the Interview with Albert. Albert's nephew



Charles Carlson and SDHS landscape designer, Ruth Johnson along with Ruth's daughters.

Regarding the Peach orchard history, Albert takes us back several generations. His grandfather was instrumental in discovering both the value of the glacier produced moraine hills and valleys, fertile soil and proximity to both Lake Michigan and Hutchins Lake cool breezes.

These conditions served as a perfect location for growing

peaches. He also remembers how the family came to use a mechanical auger to dig the holes for the tree planting, greatly reducing the previous manual shoveling time and cost. Albert is known for his large tractor to which he added a claw many years ago to move large trees. The claw predated the ones later used by the bulldozer industry.



Albert was interviewed in his home and the photos below give some exposure to the interior and exterior of this now 24 room home that he shares with his daughter and son-in-law. The surrounding gardens are ezquisite. Albert, at age 95, was a gracious and most informative host.

J.Shack

