

Jakob Layher

Jakob Layher was born on April 8, 1934, in a German community in Constanza, Rumania. His grandparents, of German origin, were from White Russia (later Belarus). His father, Gotthilf Layher, was born in Lichten Tall, White Russia, where Jakob's grandfather owned and operated a flour mill. Jakob's mother, Frederika Gebhardt, was born in Rumania. After moving to Rumania, Jakob's father owned a factory making clay roofing tiles. Jake has two brothers and three sisters, all of whom immigrated to Winnipeg, Canada, after World War II. One happy memory of Jake's early youth in Rumania is of swimming with his siblings in the Black Sea at Constanza. Even though very young at the time, he well remembers the beauty of the Black Sea.

The coming of World War II brought great changes to the lives of his family. Jakob was five years old in 1939 when the war began with Germany's invasion of Poland and when Russia soon declared war on Germany. By the time he was seven in 1942, the Russians were threatening the Layher home in a German settlement in Rumania. If they had stayed, it would have meant possible death to all of the family. Mrs. Layher and Jakob attested to the fact that some of the Russian soldiers were very uneducated and lived in clay huts and acted much like animals. To avoid the Russians, the Layhers moved to Czechoslovakia where their father worked as a farmer.

For just a short time near the end of the war, Jake's father and older brother served in the German army. At the closing stages of the war, the Russians captured them and held them prisoner.

In 1945, when it became clear that the Layher family were again in danger from the Russians as they advanced into Czechoslovakia, the family took their horses and a wagon and left with all their belongings to escape once again. On their journey, they witnessed scenes of devastation from many battles. The most frightening experience was when the refugee group was detained and threatened by a group of Russian soldiers. A wounded German soldier traveling with the Layhers eluded the Russians and told a German unit in the area of the refugees' plight. Jake heard gun fire and moved to a location where he witnessed the Russian troops being eliminated by machine gun fire. They were always afraid that they would be next to suffer the wrath of the partisans or the Russians. The Layhers saw dead soldiers and destroyed equipment all along their harrowing journey to relative safety. Jake's own words were, "Just horrible!"

On one occasion, Jakob found a pistol lying in a creek. He retrieved it and attempted to fire it several times without success. Another youth offered to trade him a pair of binoculars for the pistol, and Jake, ever the trader, made the deal. Jake had pulled the trigger several times without the gun firing. The young boy snapped the gun a couple of times and then it fired, narrowly missing Jake. Jake realizes this could have easily been the end of the story for him.

The family moved from camp to camp and foraged for food to stay alive. Jake's father had lots of old Rumanian paper money (called Lei) but they were worthless, and there were no places to purchase goods anyway. Jake said, "Hunger came fast." Food was obtained by any means possible for a while, which meant they often took food from the mostly empty potato and vegetable fields whenever and wherever it could be found. They asked farmers for a slice of bread, but most of them had nothing to offer. Very tired and hungry, they arrived at a refugee camp by a convent at Vienna, Austria.

After a while, the family moved to the American side of divided Germany. When matters settled down with the end of the war, Jakob, while only eleven at the time, began working for farmers. He worked at farming in Germany through all his teenage years.

One of Jakob's sisters immigrated to Canada after the war. She wrote home telling how nice it was there, and this made Jake interested in following her. Immigration to the United States was not a choice because the quota system prevented someone born in Rumania from getting permission to enter the U.S. Jake's sister and a Baptist preacher signed papers assuring that he would be taken care of in Canada, and in 1952 at the age of eighteen, Jake was allowed to immigrate to Winnipeg, Canada, where his sister lived. He couldn't speak a word of English. (Larry Morrison says he still can't. Jake said, "Ha, Ha!")

In Winnipeg for a couple of years Jake worked for a farmer, but he soon began working as an apprentice plasterer. This was a job he had been trained for in Germany, but he said the earlier training didn't help much since the methods and tools were quite different in Canada. His career in the construction had begun.

On one occasion in 1953, when Jake and a friend went to see his buddy's girlfriend, Jake soon noticed a girl by the name of Gertrude Gschwentner sitting on the fender of his Hudson automobile. Jake gave her a ride in his Hudson. About a year later, Jake and Gertrude were married. Gertrude had migrated from Austria a few years earlier. She related that when she became interested in leaving Austria, she applied to immigrate to Canada. When she went to the consulate to apply, one of the requirements was that she be able to speak English. She only knew four or five words, but she was given permission to move to Canada anyway. On the trip over on the ship Canberra, she took care of the child of an ill woman from Vienna, Austria, whose husband was already in Winnipeg. When Gertrude arrived in port in Canada and was asked where she would like to live and not knowing other possibilities, she said Winnipeg. At the time she only had eleven cents in her pocket.

During their years in Canada, Jake's mother and father also immigrated to Winnipeg, where they lived out the remainder of their lives. But 1961 after living in Canada for twelve years, Jake, Gertrude, and the two daughters born to them in Winnipeg were able to move to California. When asked why the family moved, Jake summed it up in two words...cold weather. In California, Jake plied his trade as a plasterer for a while and then worked five years in a Firestone recapping factory. While working at full-time jobs, he also operated his own dairy farm for three years. A third daughter was born to the Layhers in California.

In 1967, Jake started working for Don Rey Media, a company with vast newspaper and television holdings. Jake traveled constantly to work on building projects for the company. He worked in California, Texas, Missouri, Nevada, Hawaii, and Arkansas. A usual schedule would be to work two weeks in one of these states and fly back to California for a week. He worked eighty-five hours per week on many occasions. He didn't like the "rat race" of long commutes so the decision was made to move to Northwest Arkansas in 1972. Before moving to Arkansas, Jake and his family lived in Las Vegas, Nevada, and Beaver, Utah, for about a year. In Arkansas, Jake continued to work on major projects for Don Rey. One of his projects was the remodeling and enlarging of an old library building with three foot thick walls to be the headquarters of Channel 5 in Fort Smith. Jake worked for Don Rey for seven years.

About 1974, Jake started his own contracting business, Enterprise Builders. Some of his projects included the building of Waffle Houses in Rogers, Bentonville, and Springdale and the building of post offices in Hiwasse, Royal, and Elm Springs. Jake, with the valuable help of Gertrude, also started building homes. They would build a home and live in it while building another. When a home was finished, they would move into it for a while, sell the original home, and start another. They did this with five homes until they built and stayed in their present home at Layher Circle Drive in Little Flock. Since the property consists of forty acres, it is not a surprise that the Layhers raised chickens, pigs, and cattle for a number of years. They also kept as many as thirty horses. As the construction business

grew, workers were added until as many as fifteen employees would be working at one time. In the years as a builder, Enterprise Builders built about thirty homes in the area. Jake had a woodworking shop at his home in Little Flock, and he started Quality Cabinets to specialize in cabinet building. He was able to do this work with only one employee. This greatly improved his profitability since the need to pay for huge benefits for workers was largely eliminated. With eighteen years in this business and until he sold most of his state-of-the-art woodworking equipment, he built numerous cabinet units for homes and offices. One of the fanciest jobs was a large, curved cabinet unit for an office in Bentonville. A project for local businessman Steve Carter was a beautiful, large inlaid conference table with several types of wood forming an intricate design. It is easy to see Jake's skill as an artisan in all the work he did as a home builder and as a cabinet maker.

In 1998, Jake started collecting Maytag engines. He liked these engines because they are light and easy to work on. He owns about sixty Maytags in various stages of restoration, but over twenty are as beautiful and serviceable as when new. Jake's trailer display of ten Maytags with an original, working, Maytag washing machine is a huge hit wherever he takes it. Several larger hit and miss engines are included in the collection. He has bought, traded, and restored antique engines for about ten years now and continues to pursue this great hobby. Jake's former cabinet shop is now a well-equipped engine restoration shop.

Not everyone knows that Jake also has a collection of model trains and clocks. He was also an avid fisherman. One of the reasons he moved to Northwest Arkansas was the presence of Beaver Lake. For years, Jake fished two or three times a week, especially for white bass. Presently, he fishes only a few times a year.

Just how important it is for us as members of Tired Iron to participate in opportunities to show our tractors and engines at special events is illustrated by the fact that both Jakob Layher and Dale Crawford became interested in our club because of a few of us taking exhibits to Lakeland Marina near Springdale in about 2000. We only had three or four tractors, a trailer of engines, and Robert Patton's outboard motors, but the exhibits were of interest to Jake and Dale, and they joined Tired Iron on the spot. Tired Iron is the winner to have such great people among our membership. Jake is indeed a much liked and admired member of Tired Iron. We send a big "Thank You" to Mrs. Layher for letting him come out to play with us.

