

BerryPeppers, Purple Pigs and Better Lives

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN J. BARTELS

CREIGHTON



Bruce Park, named for Creighton's early founders, is the center point of many community events.





Coach Jeff Jensen's Creighton Bulldogs High School football team has made it to the state playoffs 10 years running.

WHAT HAPPENS AT Dave's Feed Service stays at Dave's Feed Service. At least that's what owner Dave Geiger, and customer, Jeff Wagner, said in unison when we busted them leaning on a pallet of seed while Dave's wife, Patty, was doing all of the heavy lifting on a hot day in Creighton during the height of the historic summer drought. Sorry, guys, the secret is out of the bag.

The business that has been a seed company for more than 50 years, started as a John Deere dealer that sold Model A tractors to hardworking farmers within 100 miles of Creighton.

Many of those same farm families still work the Knox County land, but on this day, dry conditions and a solar inferno continued to wither the 2012 corn crop. It weighs heavily on Geiger, who purchased the business 18 years ago and has worked here for 28.

Wagner has a dryland farm west of Creighton and lost his entire crop. He's

still in good spirits, and doesn't hesitate on jokingly pointing Patty toward his pickup. But the joke stops there as Patty leaves the seed for the men to load and re-treats to her air-conditioned office.

"There's nothing I can do about the weather," laments Wagner, who isn't the only farmer dreaming of rain at Dave's Feed this toasty morning. "If we had a good rain tonight, we'd have 30 happy farmers standing around here tomorrow morning," Geiger said. But the rains didn't come.

Downtown, another crowd gathers around dozens of varieties of coffee, java, go-juice, grounds and teas at Grand Central.

Doug Joseph owns Grand Central and says the shop's offering are endless. "We can make whatever is in our customer's imagination." He scoots up and down the counter helping other early risers with cupfuls to fuel their day, and whips up our Almond Joy latte with a double shot of espresso.

Now wide-eyed with a Creightonian caffeine rush, we notice that Grand Central's range of offerings don't end at specialty drinks. With about 2,000 titles on hand, this is Creighton's only book store. There is also a meeting room, and Nebraska-made artwork and other products. In the kitchen, Jennifer Cooper's 12 varieties of pies are baked fresh each morning, their fruitful aroma complementing that of roasted beans. Regular customer Lyle Larson believes the lemon meringue and the regular roast to be Creighton's best.

In one corner, four of the eight members of Keep Creighton Beautiful, including Larson, who was born and raised in nearby Winnetoon, plan future projects over breakfast and coffee in this city of about 1,150 souls. They also raise their mugs in celebration of a recent award for the "Welcome to Creighton" sign they raised funds for and installed near the highways 59 and 13 intersection.

At another table, Lois Franek is finish-

ing breakfast before heading out to deliver ice and bananas to an Amish family that farms north of town.

"They speak Dutch until age 8," Franek says of the Amish friends she looks out for. "Then, they learn English. They don't have air conditioners or even electricity. But they've got a phone out on the pole, and with a little goat milk and some sugar, they make a pretty good banana soup."

That fruity stew isn't on Joseph's menu, but the town raves over his muffins and sandwiches. He spent three decades in California, but moved to Creighton with his wife, Milano, whose second career as a Lutheran minister delivered them here in 1998.

He remembers a picture of a coffee shop/bookstore combination in a newspaper 30 years ago. Something about that unique business stayed with him. Decades later, when he found himself in tranquil Creighton, the former software engineer

eager for a less stressful second career of his own, copied that high-resolution image from his memory and pasted it onto 715 Main St. The two combined buildings that Grand Central now occupies have served Creighton as a variety store, dry-cleaning business and hardware store. The deed dates back to 1896. Creighton can trace its origins a quarter-century earlier to the 1871 Bruce Colony. Several dozen founding settlers, including Orin A.H. Bruce, Miner W. Bruce, and Joseph H. Bruce, selected the townsite after leaving Omaha. Sod houses, mills and shops popped up, and settlers from Connecticut and Rhode Island poured in.

Creighton's coffee visionary envisioned his coffee kingdom long before Creighton's new city administrator was even born. At just 23, Allison Bentley is the youngest person to hold the position in Creighton's history, according to Rita Johnson, who has served as deputy city

clerk for the past 14 years. Bentley – who grew up in neighboring Antelope County – does triple duty, also serving as city clerk and treasurer.

She'd only been on the job three weeks when we caught up with her. Water issues were flooding her office on two fronts: Some residents were questioning their water bills, and she's feverishly soliciting bids to upgrade Creighton's aging water treatment plant.

The young and energetic administrator takes the surge in stride, keeping her head above water through sheer determination to improve the already high quality of life in the community she loves. She also relies heavily on experienced city employees, and Creighton's caring citizens. But Bentley employs one other method of getting things done.

"I make a ton of lists. I have sticky notes all over," Bentley said. "This is a very detail-oriented job."



Rain or shine, Dave's Feed Service, owned by Dave and Patty Geiger, has been a gathering place for area farmers for decades. Despite losing his 2012 crop to the recent drought, Jeff Wagner, center, like the Creighton residents who established the community, is optimistic about the future of farming in Knox County.

Her father, Allan Bentley, who is a livestock buyer at Tyson Foods' Creighton location, heard about the job opening and encouraged his daughter to apply. Getting the job was a dream come true for Bentley. She attended the University of Nebraska in Lincoln for four years and majored in business administration and hoped to return to her rural Nebraska roots.

"The great thing is that I get to talk to small-town people every day, listening to their needs and then doing what I can to help them," Bentley said. "I'm not just at work from 8 to 4. In a sense, I'm at work 24/7. It's important for me to be involved in economic development, and

go to football games on Friday nights to support the community.

"Those kinds of things are important so that I can raise my kids in Creighton and they can raise their kids here," Bentley stressed. "I really like being in a position where I can directly affect the future of small-town Nebraska. I'm a farm kid at heart. There's no better job for me than where I get to help make that livelihood possible for others."

There is almost always something going on in Creighton. Residents recently gathered for "Paint the Town Purple," an event to raise funds for and awareness of

Alzheimer's disease. Purple ribbons were painted around manhole covers and tied to electric poles. The town's mascot, the BerryPepper, a sweet concoction invented in 1966 by then swimming pool manager Dennis Smith, received a purple ribbon too. But long before volunteers cleared the shelves of every gallon of purple paint at Salmen Hardware and Furniture, one Creighton man had already set a purple paint precedent.

Animal tales have been told and retold of Creighton's famous purple pig.

On Halloween, and other times when area youth found themselves bored, the 250-pound purple porker would mysteriously escape from its well-manicured lawn on Creighton's south side and end up other places, like the 50-yard line of the Creighton Bulldog's football field, or on a teacher's front steps. One time, the statue even made a night migration to Crofton.

"It was heavy, but no challenge for a couple teenage boys," said Marjorie Rice, who endured the coming and goings of the adventurous swine for many years.

Rice's late husband, Richard, once saw a similar animal on a postcard. "I don't know what it was about that postcard, but the pig sure caught his eye," Rice said. "He bought a concrete pig, matched the paint, and painted that pig."

"When the sun would come up, I'd glance out to see if it was there," Rice said. "When it was gone, we didn't worry, it always made it back. Someone would bring it home, no questions asked. Or, the police would return it. Sometimes we'd go get it. It was never any worse for the wear, but the older we got the less fun that became."

The July 29, 1992, issue of the *Creighton News* reported, "Creighton's Purple Pig who has a habit of getting around town was joined by some of his friends to greet motorists at the intersection of Redick and Main Street on Thursday morning." The pig was parading across Main in a procession



Jennifer Cooper is known for the pies she bakes at Grand Central, and for warming the mornings of early risers like Catherine Dion, who was in Creighton visiting her mother.



According to Ryan Creamer, co-owner of Creighton Livestock Market, the facility is known as one of the cleanest in the country. Long before the market was regularly rated in the top 10 in Nebraska in feeder-cattle sales, it was a feeder-pig powerhouse for many years.

that included an ornamental squirrel, a donkey, deer and other concrete critters.

“One year, on Senior Skip-Day, the pig disappeared forever,” Rice said. “They had a hog roast and burned it, or so we heard.”

Where is the pig today? Some rooting around with local residents uncoiled a possible answer to the riddle of this twisted pig tale. Local lore suggests that students from Creighton’s class of 2000 did indeed incinerate the ornament, in a bonfire on nearby farm. Select cuts of the burnt beast supposedly remain in an abandoned barn. When we asked members of the class about the incident, we couldn’t get a snort out of them.

Although an aluminum arrow was recently found near Rice’s other pig, a 2,000-pound potbellied pork chop that Richard hauled from North Platte, it hasn’t moved. “My grandsons are repainting it this weekend,” Rice said. “I still have some purple paint.”

During his 2008 Presidential campaign, Barack Obama uttered the now famous phrase, “You can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.” He got into a little trouble for that one, and normally peaceful Creighton, which rarely deals with hullabaloo more severe than misplaced lawn ornaments, had some recent political trouble of its own.

The city’s first female mayor, Janet Booth, was the subject of a recall effort in 2011. She gained the office through a petition the previous year, and according to Knox County Clerk Joann Fisher, the recall attempt ended when the principal circulator of the petition failed to return necessary paperwork to the clerk’s office.

Creighton resident Bill Stokes, who lives a few blocks from the purple pig with his wife of 58 years, Jean, served a term as Creighton mayor from 2002 to 2006.

“I didn’t go to the meetings, but what I

heard is that she didn’t get along with some people, and that she spent too much time at the office,” Stokes said. “But when you’re mayor, things come up. There are things that come up that the mayor is blamed for, and there are things that she probably couldn’t have done any different.”

Booth resigned in February after a second recall effort was initiated.

Residents encouraged Stokes, now 84, to seek his former office, but his ongoing battle against a tricky carcinoma has left him unwilling to take on a political fight.

“When I was mayor we didn’t have any big problems,” Stokes said from his quiet backyard. “This is a good town and it’s growing.”

“We’ve got newer businesses such as Bomgaars, Subway and Dollar General,” Stokes added. “And our old standbys — the Creighton Locker, *Creighton News* newspaper, our historical society, and our



Jim Javorsky

Creighton is known for tasty BerryPepper treats, for its wandering purple pig and for hardworking citizens. Just in time for Halloween, Adam and Evan Rice work hard to spiff-up this immovable 2,000-pounder for their grandmother, Creighton resident Marjorie Rice.

library — we have just about everything we need here in Creighton.”

Creighton does have a lot. It even claims one treasure that although once common statewide, is absent from most Nebraska communities.

Stitching and stretching leather in the back of a building on Main Street, Jim Farnik keeps alive a trade that began shrinking when mass-produced ready-made footwear became more convenient than waiting on a custom-made pair from the local shoe man. Farnik is the village cobbler.

That time-honored occupation was already becoming scarce

when Farnik and his wife Merna bought out Falter’s Bootery in 1971. That’s when the couple with roots in Verdigre and Tilden stopped working their ground west of Creighton and moved to town to fix the boots that work the land.

He learned the trade from Creighton’s legendary leatherman, George Falter, and after more than 40 years with awl in hand, Farnik claims, “I’ve got a lot to learn yet.”

But customers who realize the value of well-made leather items that can be repaired instead of thrown away, have learned about Farnik. Boots and shoes from as far away as O’Neill, Atkinson, Norfolk, Sioux City and Neligh are on Farnik’s workbench, waiting for new heels, soles or to have tears repaired.

“Shoes aren’t made like they used to be,” Farnik said. “Today’s stuff — there are less stitches, and they’re molded, made of plastic. They just fall apart.”

Farnik recently heard through the

leather grapevine that the shoe repairman in a neighboring larger town is hanging up his apron.

“Stand-alone shoe stores in small towns are a thing of the past,” Farnik said. The Farniks have diversified to stay in business. They also sell cemetery monuments, and rent tuxedos, too. “It keeps us busy, and provides services so that our neighbors here don’t have to drive an hour to get things done,” Farnik said.

“I can’t keep up with him,” said Merna Farnik of her 75-year-old husband.

With many new businesses, and long-standing ones like Farnik’s Shoeland, energetic and caring officials, fun folklore and a cherished history, and the support of its residents, Creighton is keeping up.

Like a freshly restitched pair of work boots with new piping, Creighton pulls the laces up tight, digs in its heels, and stitches its future success to the strength of its soul. ♣

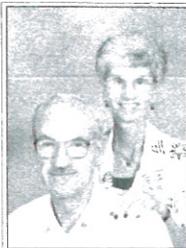




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Classical Performers Enjoy Creighton's Tranquil Tune

STORY & PHOTOGRAPH BY
ALAN J. BARTELS

THE TEMPO OF Creighton's quiet life is a tranquil tune to its resident audience. But while growing up there, Steve Larson sensed that his musical appetite would be satisfied elsewhere on the world's stage.

At age 5, Larson began piano lessons. "My mother was a taskmaster, she made me practice everyday," Larson said. "If she saw me slouching she'd put a yardstick down my shirt to make me sit up straight. She pushed me."

Larson later studied under Norfolk's virtuoso of the ivories, Arne Sorensen. "I worked with Arne twice a week," Larson said. "He was strict, demanding. It was wonderful for me. We played recently. Even at age 91 he was amazing. His fingers are still there," added the Creighton native.

Larson found his own fingers and future while attending the University of Nebraska and the St. Louis Conservatory of Music. He moved to New York, played at Juilliard and was assistant conductor of the Opera Company of Boston under opera pioneer Sarah Caldwell.

In 1990, the next verse of Larson's life began.

"I was in a meeting, and sitting across from me was the most exotic creature I'd ever seen,"

She was Markella Hatziano, a star mezzo-soprano of opera and Greek pop music.

"I brought her something from the health food store; that was my first move," Larson said. They met in January, began



From his hometown of Creighton, Steve Larson and his family create music and video enjoyed around the world.

dating and married in September.

Their nuptials took place in Greece; the reception was in Creighton.

"I was afraid to bring her here," Larson said of his prima donna. But Maestro was worried over nothing.

"I fell in love with Creighton," Hatziano said. "I fell in love with looking out the window and seeing something other than buildings. I could see leaves on the trees. I thought freedom, freedom - Nebraska."

For many years they traveled. Hatziano performed with every major symphony orchestra in the world, and Larson composed, conducted and produced. But then, while on a Swiss airline flight, Hatziano made a decision. Despite pressures to live in Boston or Greece, she chose Creighton.

In 1995, they bought Creighton's former Elementary School. "We gutted everything," Larson said. "It took a lot of time to get it to this point. It could take a lifetime to finish."

Stately columns, and Hatziano's origi-

nal art complete the decor, and near the expansive kitchen, Larson composes and produces music and video from a custom-made studio.

Five years ago, Larson halted his own engagements to write the things in his head - electronic music and compositions for Hatziano and their 13-year-old daughter, Alexandra, a violin virtuoso in her own right. The mother-daughter duo recently teamed up with Larson to produce the CD single, "Celebration."

Today agents in New York and Spain arrange Hatziano's international schedule. "We've seen most of the world," Hatziano said. "But my love for Creighton is stronger than even that for my home country."

"Our existence is a mixture of the simple life and a demanding international career," Hatziano adds.

For now, this polyphony through life plays out on the stage that inspired that talented 5-year-old boy with great posture. It plays on in Creighton.

For more information on Markella Hatziano's music go to www.markella.com.



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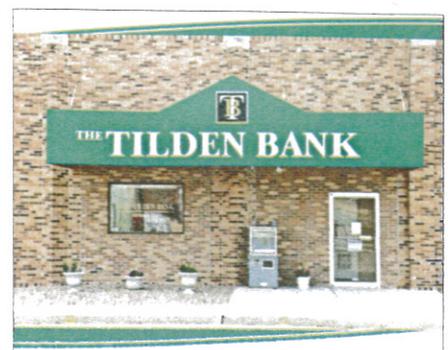
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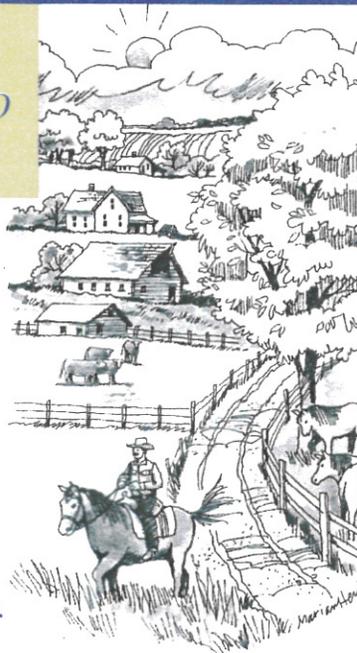
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