A look back to the early years of local resident Don C. Reid

This column by the late Suan Hitchley was published in the Jan. 10, 1989, Maple Valley News. Following is the continuation of the family history compiled by Don C. Reid of Hastings, which had begun in November 1988. The earlier installments featured the Cruso and McGraw families of Napoleon, in particular, the youth and careers of Amber Z. Cruso, and her marriage in 1920 to Theodore S.K. Reid, a Texas airman whom she met while serving at Ft. Sill, Okla., during World War I. They later settled in Hastings where their son, Don, was born in 1921. This week’s story recalls Don’s youthful memories of visiting his Cruso grandparents in Napoleon.

Quite a number of days were spent at Napoleon with my Grandmother and Grandfather Florence and Charles Cruso when I, Don C. Reid, was age 7 and under. Grandpa played the harmonica when I was little. It was a large one, about 10 inches long, with reeds on both sides, so you could play two different keys. It was a Homer concept model in a nice case. As I understood it, Charlie bought it while working on the railroad in the early days before his marriage. He learned to play it and was quite good at the old songs.

Charlie also had a very nice pistol and holster he brought home from the Civil War, and a cavalry saber and scabbard. (I still have the saber.)

In the 1920s, the government came out with a new law that all sidearms must be registered. Now, Charles H. Cruso was an alien, having come from Germany to Canada at age 7, then running away from home at 15 years to join the Union Army in New York State. He fought for the Union but never was naturalized as a citizen.

Because of this, when Charlie heard of the new law, he was afraid he might be deported if he registered his pistol. So he took it into the Thompson River across from his house and threw it as far as he could.

When my father found out, he was ever mad.

He told Grandpa: “They just wanted a record of the handguns, so if a crime was committed with one they would be able to identify the owner; they don’t care if you’re an alien.”

Well Grandpa was sorry he threw the gun away; it was a nice-looking pistol in very good condition. T.K. (my father) went down to the river and dove in again to try to find it, but without success. Grandpa finally had to register as an alien later on, anyway.

Grandpa Cruso had an Airwatt table-model radio, and every night he would pick up a channel around the table, put his hand behind his ear and listen to “Amos and Andy,” “Lam and Abner,” “Little Jimmy Dickens,” or some such program. He’d laugh and chuckle to himself and slap me on the knee and say, “Now

T.S.K. “Tex” Reid, a first lieutenant in the aviation section of the U.S. Army’s Reserve Officer Corps, enjoyed attending Nashville’s annual fishing tournament with his fishing buddy, former local resident Claudia Greenfield, who usually brought his planeline to the village to give rides to various performers around the curves to the Cruso’s on Reed Street in Nashville, wasn’t that a crackerjack! meaning funny or food or anything else he wanted it to mean.

Sometimes, when he was feeling good, Grandpa would go three houses down the street and visit Barney Brooks, an old Civil War veteran. They would sit on the porch and swap tales of how they won the war. Finally, Barney got so he was in bed all the time, but they’d wheel the bed out on the porch, and he could still talk up a blue streak.

Another old Civil War vet lived out on the road to Vermontville (Nashville Highway), across the railroad tracks on the north side. Once in a while we would take out some canned fruit or other things to help them out. They lived in a log cabin with a dirt floor. The dirt was mostly covered with rag rugs, but those two old folks were just as happy as you and I.

Even after I grew older, I loved to go and see Grandma and Grandpa Cruso. There was always plenty to do. As I grew up, occasionally I got the urge to ride my bike to Nashville from our home in Hastings. Every year, Nashville had a harvest festival with carnival rides, balloon ascensions and other exciting events.

Dad would often go over to visit a flying buddy of his, Claude Greenfield, a former Nashville resident who usually came with his planeline and gave rides during the festival, sometimes doing stunts over the village.

This particular year, Jack Wagner and I thought we’d like to try the bike trip to Nashville, so we began to bug Dad about letting us ride over to stay with Grandma Cruso and attend the festival the following day. Well, Mom and Dad finally gave in, much to our great joy.

We planned our route, where we would stop, for we knew a lot of people between Hastings and Nashville, and our estimated time of arrival. We phoned Grandma and received her permission, and Grandpa gave his usual parting words: “Keep your nose clean.”

We started out right after school Friday, figuring we’d have five hours of daylight to go the 12 miles at about three miles per hour. Now that’s about the rate you can briskly walk, but roads in those days were gravel, which had a tendency to slow you down a little, so we figured we’d do the job in four hours even with a few stops along the way. Mom packed us sandwiches and a Thermos of milk, and off we went.

In those days, the road to Nashville went out past the E.R. Bliss Company, past the Cairns, Tinkler and Freeman farms and across the Michigan Central railroad tracks, on which Charlie Cruso and his stepfather, John J. Miller, had worked. I worked at the Barry County Poor Farm (now the site of Thompkins Manor), on to Quimby, where Mother taught school in 1913, and attended church when the lived just up the road. Then it was up to Minnie and Byron Edmonds’ farm, where we stopped to get a drink and a cookie from Minnie and went out to the barn to see Uncle Byron’s sheep and cows.

Then we took off down the road once more. The hard part lay ahead. At the foot of Barry Hill, we stopped where the old mill used to stand at High Bank Creek and watched the fish swim in the creek as we tried to get up next to enough to take on the hill. Not a nice gradual slope up a paved highway, but a steep climb on a gravel road. Well, it wasn’t a hill you rode up to, so we walked our machines up, up, always keeping an eye out for ants coming over the hill, finally reaching the top and the Baraboo Valley Church kept its vigil over the cemetery.

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