

DORIS

The Cramers of Prairie du Sac

by Doris Litscher Gasser

Les Cramer isn't sure where all of the six members of his family were born since his parents, Oscar Cramer and Caroline Schneller Cramer, moved around considerably during the first few years of their marriage.

As for Les, he was born in a big stone house that had been owned by Ed Kindschi on Main Street, Prairie du Sac, after his parents, brother Sol and sisters Ruby and Ramona moved to town from a farm between Black Hawk and Plain. His mother, Caroline, was a sister to Vincent Schneller, a farmer, and Pete Schneller, who was the dearly respected owner of the Black Hawk Store from 1916-1958. Oscar Cramer was from a well-known family in the Plain area. He had a brother, James, who had his own truck and business hauling gravel, a brother George and a sister, Lucinda Cramer Schmalz. The Oscar Cramer family then moved to a picturesque stone house on Seventh Street in Prairie du Sac which was later the home of his brother James and his family.

During the period of time that the Cramers lived in Prairie du Sac, Oscar ran a meat market in Prairie

du Sac which he sold to Van Epp. The family moved to a farm on the north edge of town near the Prairie du Sac water tower. There were two more children born into the family while they were on the farm, Cal and Al. The family had the advantage of living in the freedom and delight of the county and almost being a part of the village. It was a farm with a friendly feeling. Les recalls the older folks telling that the reason that they had a new barn was that the previous owner had a still and it blew up and set fire to the old barn.

All six of the Cramer children went to the Prairie du Sac Schools and graduated from the Prairie du Sac High School. Sol, the oldest, married Irene Klenziug from Richland Center and became an EUB minister with parishes in Milwaukee, Denmark and Fond du Lac. Ruby married an EUB minister, John Koch, and served in the parishes at Honey Creek and Baraboo. Ramona worked in the office for Kraft Foods. She married Lorraine Doverspike, a music teacher in Antigo. Next in line came Les. We'll learn about him as this story unfolds. Cal is a WW II veteran, got his doctor's degree at the UW in engineering and married

Patricia Herr of Lodi. He retired from the UW staff and lives in Lodi with Patricia. Al taught seventh and eighth grade in Lake Geneva before he retired in Prairie du Sac.

Les recalled: "When we moved to the farm, we all helped Dad. We had about 70 acres of land. He raised corn and hay. We had dairy cows, hogs, chickens and Belgian horses. My dad liked to trade horses. We milked by hand. Robert Waffenschmidt came around with an insulated, tank wagon truck to pick up the milk and take it to the Sauk City Creamery. Every couple of weeks we went down to Sauk with the horses to pick up whey for the pigs. We used to go to the Harises, our neighbors, and drink cream right from the spout when they separated. I don't think I could hack that now. The Harises were so good to us. There was Lillian and Helen, John and Leroy. Lillian was still shoveling snow when she was 95 years old.

"My mother was a hard worker. She raised golden winedot chickens. They were a heavy chicken. She sold lots of eggs."

Les and Cal were ambitious youngsters. He and Cal fixed up an old buggy into a wagon, loaded it with sweet corn in the summer, hitched up their pony Flossy and went door to door in Prairie du Sac selling sweet corn. Everyone knew Oscar Cramer's boys so they had a good business. Les thinks they charged about 10¢ a dozen.

Les walked to grade school in Prairie du Sac which was the old, two story brick building located on what is today known as Washington Square. He remembers Miss Lynton, Nora Saether and Clara Conger as his teachers. He recalled a catastrophe: "Genevieve Mather was swinging and I walked under the swing. It hit me and cut my head open and I still have the scar. Mrs. Gus Zick was walking by and she picked me up



The Oscar Cramer Family, left to right: Calvin, Ruby, Oscar (father), Solomon, Leslie, Caroline (mother), Ramona, Alan. Photo by John Held, circa 1955, courtesy of the Cramers

and carried me all the way to Dr. Harris' office up town on the north side of the Gasser Hat and Gift Shop. Dr. Harris was tall and heavy set and a good doctor. Then my brother had made a milking stool in manual training class and that was in the living room. I stumbled over it and hit my head again.

"We took our lunch to school. It was about a mile away and we always walked. Quite often some of us boys ate in the furnace room with the janitor where it was warm. We shot marbles. John Schiffman was in the blacksmith shop nearby and he used some pretty forceful language. We could hear him in school when the windows were open. I went to school with Sara Albertus Eberhart and Verna Jensen Wenzel.

"I have been a member of Concordia church all of my life. My mother made sure that we went to Sunday school. I just ran into my old Sunday school teacher the other day, Reuben Unke. I remember he was a very good teacher. He taught Bob Giegerich, Dr. Zauft and me."

Les was a freshman in high school when the family had to face the heart-breaking fact that their mother lost her life to cancer. Everyone knew everyone else at that time and there was a warm spirit of caring. Caroline Cramer's death was a loss to the whole community.

Les went on: "After my mother died, my dad always had a hired girl to cook and clean for us. Two of them are still around here, Mary Hutter and Marguerete Kelter who both live out on County PF. They were good girls. They took good care of us. I talked to Mary the other day. We had a bucket of water in the pantry. When Mary walked past the window outside, we'd throw a dipper of water out. One time, we brought our pony Flossy into the living room and she made a mess and we were in deep trouble."

Les came home to the farm after school to do the chores while brother Cal participated in school sports. Cal took his turn at doing chores in the morning. Les' agriculture teacher was Harvey Shields, his chemistry

Harry Sarbacher. Classes weren't always uppermost on Les' mind. He recalled: "Ike Hehenberger had a restaurant across the street from Kaufman's. Once in a while we'd go there and listen to the World Series instead of going to school. There was a trap door to the basement. When Prof. Babington came looking for us, Ike would open that trap door and we'd disappear into the basement. We'd go swimming across the river."

Les graduated from Prairie du Sac High School in 1941. For a time after that, he worked on the farm. Then with the coming of the Badger Ordnance Powder Plant, he and Bill Meyer found a job with the surveying team. He remembered: "At that time, we hadn't seen much money. I think we got 75¢ an hour. We held the sticks for the surveyors. We didn't work when it was raining. We walked the whole area for the Sumpter plant. Some of the farmers didn't like us that much. Then I took a civil service exam and became a mail clerk and then ended up as a motor dispatcher.

"I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. I wanted to be a gunner but I had what they called "color instinct" so I couldn't become a gunner so I ended up as a flight engineer. I started out in Mississippi and on to Burbank, California, near Hollywood, where I went to Lockheed Aircraft school and worked with B-17 Flying Fortress bombers. We made cross country flights. We flew inspectors and some of the high ranking officers. I was in the Fourth Army Air Force. Then I went to Columbus, Ohio to Lockburn Air Base where they were training B-17 pilots. And then I went back to Lockheed Air Craft in California to a replacement depot and was told, 'You're going overseas.' But the only water I went across was Oakland Bay."

"I was a buck sergeant. That was a good rank to have because it gave one just enough authority to keep me off of KP and duties you didn't want. I was in the Army Air Corps three and a half years. I was in Hamilton Field when the war ended.

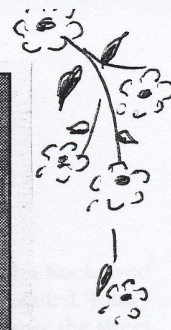
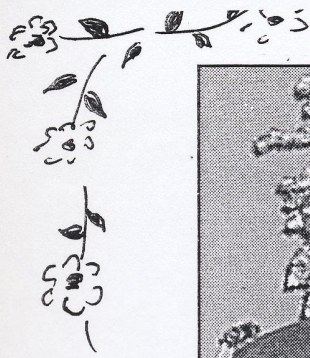
There was a Navy base there, too. I was discharged in Sacramento, California in 1945. I don't remember much of a celebration when the war was over but there was a lot of vandalism. I was going to hitchhike home but they transported us by train. We had a sleeper and a dining car."

It was while Les was stationed in Lockburn Air Base that the news came from overseas that his cousin, James Cramer II, had been killed crossing the Moselle River in France. Les was given a leave to go home for the memorial. James became the local VFW post namesake.

Homecoming was great! Les had met Marlys when he had been home on leave and through their correspondence their romance grew into full bloom. Marlys recalled, "Les came home in 1945 and we were married in 1946."

Marlys, who was born in Monroe, came to Prairie du Sac when her father, Waldo Dick, came to work at Badger Ordnance. Waldo Dick was a native of Monticello where he met Marlys' mother, Mildred Heidbrink Dick who came from River Falls to teach school. Marlys' heritage is German, Swiss, English and Dutch. She grew up with two younger sisters, Barbara Davis who, unfortunately, passed away and JoAnn Weatherly of Orange Beach, Alabama. The Dick family had lived in Merrill prior to the time that they moved to Prairie du Sac when Waldo became a supervisor in the powder line at Badger Ordnance. Marlys, who felt shy, recalled: "It was hard to find houses and the school was much smaller than we were used to. There were no frills. I liked school when we had good teachers. I got along famously with Mr. Doll. He had my kind of humor. We found a home to rent on Park Avenue near the school, next to Pastor and Hazel Bayley, owned by Walter Luck.

Les recalled: "I went to Marlys' house to ask her folks if I could marry her. Her little sister JoAnn was cute, almost as cute as Marlys. I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. She still reminds me of how embarrassed she was because her little friends, especially Jr. Keck, teased her.



Les and Marlys Cramer

Photo by Doris Litscher Gasser

Marlys Dick and Les Cramer became a bride and groom in the EUB church on June 20, 1946 in Prairie du Sac with Rev. Bender officiating. The reception was in the Marion Park Pavilion, a place of warmth and its own style of romance. Marlys recalled: "My bridesmaids were my sister Barbara, Audrey Schaefer and Janice Wintermantel. We went up North for our honeymoon and stayed at Ruby's cottage in Hayward. We fished and ate and then we went to visit Les' other sister, Ramona, in Mauston."

Mr. and Mrs. Les Cramer made their home on the Cramer farm.

Marlys was a busy farmer's wife cooking for Les, Al, Cal and Oscar. In addition to that, she worked in the office with Esther Mortar at Lehman and Steuber's Ford Garage in Prairie du Sac.

Marlys had grown up in a household of four ladies and wasn't accustomed to being a farmer's wife. They

left the farm and moved to an apartment upstairs in Peter Lohr's home. That is when Judy, their first bundle of joy, was born. In 1948, Les recalled: "I was working for my Uncle Fred Schmalz in the Oldsmobile garage. Lyle Sprecher was working there, too. He's a nice guy to work with. He had worked for J.U. Schmidt and was a good mechanic with a lot of patience."

Les, Marlys and Judy then moved to the upstairs of George Cramer's house on Seventh and Broadway in Prairie du Sac. This brought good news. A second daughter, Joyce, was born. Once again Marlys was cooking. This time it was for Uncle George. She recalled: "If I would have cooked sauerkraut every day, he would have liked my cooking better."

Les was moving on in his career. He recalled: "I bought the Mobil station in Prairie du Sac from Art Chamberlain. I ran that for about 25 years. I enjoyed that and had a lot of good customers. I had teachers come in. Jim Staff asked me about going into

the canoe business. George Culver was a good customer. Milt Laufenberg and Gillie Ganser, too. A bunch of state policemen came in for me to service their cars. The telephone office men came in. A number of appreciative lady customers came in. Those were the days when we washed windshields, pumped up tires, flushed out the radiator, checked the oil and gas and gave advice. I enjoyed all of my customers except those who took off and didn't pay me. I was quite trusting."

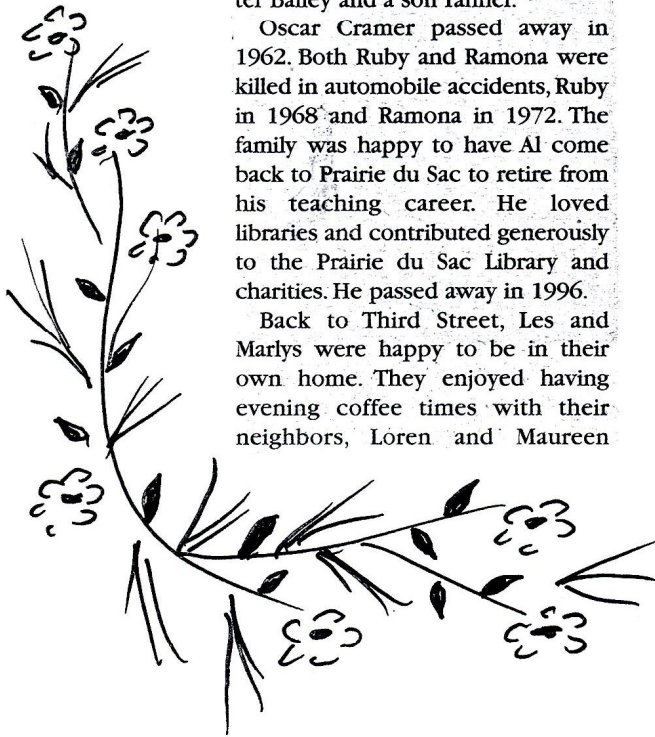
Les sold the Mobil station to Lyman Waffenschmidt in 1976 and went on to drive a tank truck for the Gil-Ray Mobil business owned by Gillie Meyer and Ray Platt. The co-op and Mobil merged businesses and Les finished his career as a convenience store manager for them.

Forty-two years ago the Cramers purchased their own home from Don Hufford on Third St. in Prairie du Sac. It was another move and another baby girl for the Cramers. Their third child, Carrie, was born in their new home on Third Street.

All three of the Cramer daughters have graduated from Sauk Prairie High School. Today Judy is married to John Hasheider, a farmer in Little Prairie. She is a quilter steadily booked for teaching demonstrations and has been published in "The Quilt Sampler—Better Homes and Gardens" several times. She has three children, Josh, Justin and Jessica. Joyce works as a secretary for her husband Mike Wiley who is in the disposal business. The Wileys have two daughters, Leslie, and Katie who has won first place in some successful tractor pulling contests. Carrie works for an insurance company and is married to Don Leister who inspects homes. They have a daughter Bailey and a son Tanner.

Oscar Cramer passed away in 1962. Both Ruby and Ramona were killed in automobile accidents, Ruby in 1968 and Ramona in 1972. The family was happy to have Al come back to Prairie du Sac to retire from his teaching career. He loved libraries and contributed generously to the Prairie du Sac Library and charities. He passed away in 1996.

Back to Third Street, Les and Marlys were happy to be in their own home. They enjoyed having evening coffee times with their neighbors, Loren and Maureen



Giegerich. Elsie and John Koch lived across the street. Les recalled, "John's leaves always blow across the street into our yard. So he put up a sign, 'Danger, Leaves Crossing.' Elsie was a princess of a lady." Marlys added: "Every year we have been going to Orange Beach, Alabama to spend time with my sister JoAnn. One year John sent us a bunch of pictures of the Giegerichs and themselves from previous times, making it appear as though the Kochs and Giegerichs and their dog were having a bit party in our house while we were gone. We received the mail Special Delivery on Christmas morning!"

Through the years, Les has fulfilled his civic duties in Prairie du Sac. He served on the village board 10 years, on the ambulance crew 16 years and in the fire department 25 years. Fire chiefs during that 25 years have been Alvin Luetscher, Elmer Anderson, John Winiger, Wayne Page and Paul Beerkircher. Fireman Louie Mueller, Ernest Hosig, Lyle Sprecher and John Winiger share that span of service with Les.

After 41 years of living on Third Street, the Cramers decided to take life a little easier and free themselves from tasks of mowing the lawn, shoveling the walk and cleaning out eave spouts. They sold their home and moved into an apartment in the Elsing development west of Prairie du Sac for an easier lifestyle.

Les walks over to the industrial park daily to chat with Mike Wiley and his daughters and grandchildren. Les and Marlys together enjoy their winter vacations at Orange Beach, Alabama. They enjoy their friends of all ages in Alabama and Wisconsin.

Marlys concluded, "We'll be married 57 years this June and we are enjoying our golden years together."