

REMEMBERING KELSEY, Part 2

The life, lore, and legacy of a “Clinton institution”

by Trip Sinnott



If the town of Clinton had a Hall of Fame to honor outstanding citizens over its 230-year history, Kelsey Wirehouse would surely be a shoo-in.



In fact, thirty years ago, Kelsey was given the high honor of being Grand Marshal of the town's 200th Anniversary parade at Clinton Community Day. The loud cheers he received as he rode by on that sunny day in 1986 were a heartfelt affirmation

of his beloved status in the town.

What was it about this 76-year-old man that drew such honor and affection from his friends and neighbors that memorable day? And why do “Kelsey stories” still resonate more than 25 years after his death with such fondness in the hearts and minds of so many who remember him?

“He made time for people,” is a recurring explanation, “and time for serving his community.” For many townsfolk, their visits to his rambling farmhouse — which Kelsey used as his office during his twenty-year career as town clerk — were special occasions. “Kelsey loved when people would come to visit him,” recalled longtime neighbor Don Estes. “He was a very compassionate, kind, and generous person.”

“Lots of people thought of Kelsey as a good-humored, storytelling town clerk and dairy farmer,” said longtime resident Hal Fountain. “But what many didn't know,” he added, “was that Kelsey was an exceptionally bright man, with a degree in engineering. And he was a very astute and successful investor in the stock market.”

“Because he ended up living on the farm and milking cows,” Hal said, “people tended to forget these dimensions of his life.”

Born on his Uncle Burton Fradenburg's farm in Stanfordville in 1909, Kelsey moved to Clinton Corners as a young boy when his parents, Ira and Jennie Wirehouse, bought a 132-acre farm on Pumpkin Lane.

His grandfather had first worked on that farm years earlier and it became Kelsey's home for the rest of his life. While living and working on the farm as a boy, Kelsey went to the one-room schoolhouse in Clinton Corners (site of our current town Post Office), and then attended Poughkeepsie High School, excelling in both arenas. After graduating from high school, Kelsey earned a bachelor's degree in civil engineering at Tri-State College (now Trine University) in rural Indiana. The photo [right] is from Kelsey's 1932 college yearbook. Equipped with his college degree, Kelsey



continued on page 2

Kelsey, Tri-State class of '32

returned home with high hopes of beginning his professional career as a civil engineer. But those hopes were dashed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. "There was no work," recalled Kelsey. "So dad said, 'Well, the farm is here. Maybe you can try your luck at farming.'"

And that's how Kelsey's lifelong career as a dairy farmer was launched, starting with a few calves "because they were cheaper to purchase than cows." For the next half century, the would-be civil engineer built up and tended the farm, adding cows and barns whenever he could afford them, and trading his horse team for tractors. Step by step Kelsey's dairy farm grew in size, livestock, and farm buildings.

Just prior to his two decades as town clerk, Kelsey had served on the Town Board from 1957 to 1965. By the time he retired at the end of 1985, the dairy farmer had also served in many other roles — including longtime officer of the Farmers' Mutual Insurance Company, a 57-year member of the Upton Lake Grange, a longstanding officer and one-time chief of the East Clinton Fire Company, a board member of the Clinton Community Library, a trustee of the Clinton Historical Society, an esteemed leader at the Old Stone Church in Rhinebeck.

Culminating Kelsey's three decades of public service to the community, he was gratefully honored at special dinners at the Clinton Historical Society, as well as by a retirement party at Town Hall on Sunday, June 29, 1986. Crowds of townsfolk came to thank and honor him for his long and faithful service to his beloved town.

A lifelong bachelor, Kelsey once said, "I don't lock my door, because somebody's going to have to come in and find me dead someday." That "someday" happened three years after the many special town celebrations of 1986. Kelsey did indeed die at home, on September 15, 1989, just five days short of his 80th birthday. And a neighbor did indeed find him dead, sitting in his favorite chair.

"Those who knew Mr. Wirehouse," a reporter for the *Millbrook Round Table* observed at the time of his death, "remember him for his humor, religious convictions, and concern for the community." Some of Kelsey's neighbors regarded him as an outstanding exemplar of the Golden Rule, noting his generosity to workers and those who needed a boost. Without any fanfare or publicity, Kelsey was known to quietly provide private loans to those in a pinch, with little or no interest.

"I remember Kelsey and his parents as pure souls with an open faith," Don Badgley recently recalled, as his thoughts turned to his childhood days on Pumpkin Lane as Kelsey's neighbor. "Kelsey was as much a part of the earth and landscape as the land and animals he cared for so much. These are the faded but sweet memories that make us who we are."

"Every town deserves to have a special character, and Kelsey was ours," said longtime Clinton historian Bill McDermott shortly after Kelsey's passing. "And I don't know if we're going to find another one anytime soon."

In the week following his death, Kelsey's hometown popularity literally helped carry him to his grave at the nearby Friends Upton Lake Cemetery.

"In fact," reported the *Millbrook Round Table*, "so many people wanted to serve as pallbearers for Kelsey P. Wirehouse that friends had difficulty choosing them." ■



Editor's note: After Part 1 of this article was published, we received a number of memorable "Kelsey stories." We plan to post some of them on our Facebook page this fall. If you would like to share your memories, please email craigmarshall266@aol.com.