

Heinz Zdralek, The Baron of Casa Loma

by Gordon H. Ficke



In 1928 Heinz Zdralek immigrated to Canada from Germany with his parents when he was five years old. At about the time their ship was leaving Germany, the country was being seceded to various neighbouring countries due to concession reparations as a result of losing World War I. Heinz's father was a plumber and pipe fitter and had been promised work in Newark New Jersey. Once their ship arrived there the family was not permitted to enter the U.S.A. because the area of Germany Engelbert was born was now under Polish control. Their ship continued on to Halifax. From there the new immigrants were loaded into cattle cars and sent by rail to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Heinz recalled. "Looking through those slats in the cattle car while we were traveling through the Quebec landscape, it seemed like we were in Siberia, it was so bleak and cold."

The family made a valiant attempt to establish a homestead in Balmoral, Manitoba, thirty miles north of Winnipeg. Heinz laughed. "When it is forty-five below zero and the wind is blowing, they didn't think it was such a good idea!" Heinz's father was not a farmer but his mother was raised on a farm. Heinz remarked. "She performed the duties of pioneering during that time."

Through corresponding with friends in the Kelowna area, the Zdraleks discovered that the Okanagan weather was much more hospitable than the frigid Manitoba winters and were anxious to move there. In 1930 Engelbert landed a job in Kelowna pushing a hand truck for Occidental Cannery, a company that processed tomatoes. The family lived downtown on Ellis Street in a coal bin.

While he was working there Heinz's father met Nieches, a Scotsman who moved their family to Benvoulin Flats. They occupied an old house there for two months before moving once again.

In February 1931 they moved to the old Campbell house, built in the 1880s, in the Casa Loma area, on the west side of Okanagan Lake. Engelbert now had the responsibility to operate and maintain the three engines there. An enormous piston pump formerly used in a Klondike Gold Rush mine now was used to provide irrigation water to this area. The engine that powered this pump burned six gallons of oil an hour. "This engine took the hot kerosene vapour in that gave it power." Heinz explained. The third engine that his father operated was a standard gasoline engine.

Heinz and Johan attended Boucherie School that once stood where Stevens and Westlake Roads intersect today. One day the teachers asked the children what they would like to name the area in which they lived. "Isabelle Bartley named her area Mountain Valley Ranch." Heinz remembered. When the teacher asked Heinz, he thought about Casa Loma Park that butted to their Campbell house property, and thought that Casa Loma (Spanish for stone house) would be a good name. From that day the name stuck for this secluded area along Campbell Road.

The Zdralek family had the opportunity to purchase approximately 140 acres from the owner David Leckie. "At

the time my dad purchased the property," Zdralek confessed, "the land was deemed useless stony land on the lakeshore. Normally settlers acquired land where there was running water, either from springs or wells. Nobody believed in pumping water." It just wasn't cost effective." However," Heinz smiled, "because it was stony, the earth there was warmer and produced tomatoes ten days earlier than anywhere else!" Heinz laughed. "The chap that hired my dad in early February 1931 went broke." In lieu of wages his father acquired a small tomato patch. That was the beginning of a new venture, growing and selling tomatoes.

In 1935 they acquired a 1923 Marshall Diesel engine that generated 25 horsepower. This engine was formerly used in the town of Rutland to generate power. Heinz's father hauled it to their property in their one-ton International truck. This engine was now used to pump water from Okanagan Lake for their greenhouses and vegetable garden.

The Zdraleks grew 130,000 tomato seedlings annually in their greenhouses. From those seedlings 90,000 would be transplanted in their 32-acre field. Once the tomatoes were semi-ripe they were picked and packed in their own packinghouse and then trucked to the fourteen grocery stores that were their regular customers. The Zdralek's were receiving up to 20 cents per pound for these tomatoes. After three weeks when the price for tomatoes went down, they stopped picking the semi-ripe tomatoes and let them ripen for cannery use. For these tomatoes they received ¼ cent per pound or \$6.00 per ton at the cannery in Kelowna. "What a blow!" Heinz exclaimed.

Compound that low price they received with the fact that they gave the cannery the boxes the tomatoes were shipped in. Those boxes that were purchased in the thousands from Simpson's Sawmill cost 12 cents each!

During the course of the season the family would produce around 400 tons of tomatoes. To augment the family income, they grew other vegetables too such as cucumbers and peppers. There were no fruit or vegetable stands in those days.

"It was difficult to define what happened." Zdralek recounted. "The stores suddenly did not want to buy local produce, whatsoever. Their wholesalers wanted the grocery stores to buy their fruit and vegetables from Mexico, so the union truck drivers had work." Heinz ascertained. The wholesalers would inform the grocery stores that if you buy locally, you would not be able to buy wholesale." The grocery stores had no choice but to turn down locally grown produce.

"An attempt was made after World War I to establish a local irrigation system." Zdralek remarked. "The flume was built from Bear Creek and a ditch was dug through this area and completed in 1924, but that venture failed."

The undeveloped area above Casa Loma that eventually became known as Lakeview Heights was assessed to be suitable for agriculture. The Veteran Land Act (V.L.A.) enacted in 1942 offered 12-acre lots in this area to returning World War II veterans. "The interesting thing that happened when the V.L.A. started," Heinz remembered, "they offered us economical water." The family agreed to the irrigation terms and ran the water down from the top. When the V.L.A. first opened their earthen dam in 1949 they had excess water. "Unfortunately, a short while later problems arose with the irrigation system. Due to the fact that the headwaters at Lambly Creek was five miles from the reservoir, connected by a series of open ditches and wooden flumes, debris from the mountainsides often fell and broke several timbers and plugged some of the pipes in the dam. Consequently, there was a shortage of water for that year.

"Even after the second world war, the federal government had a hard time deciding whether to start the process of establishing and develop the V.L.A. area." Heinz recalled. "They approached me asked me if I was interested in taking a block of the V.L.A." Zdralek theorized that the V.L.A. didn't appear to be economically feasible. Heinz accepted the 100-acre block for \$400.00. The terms for payment were very reasonable over a lengthy period of time. "Before the year was up the same chap came around again to say that they now had received some money from Ottawa that we would like to run the program again, and would pay Heinz for any time he spent on improving his property." Heinz

related. "Well, at this point I haven't put any time on it! We'll just exchange the cheques and go from there, he said." Heinz laughed. He hadn't endorsed anything. That is how lax things were when the V.L.A. program first started. Heinz's older brother Johan, who was five years older than him, served during World War II and upon his return acquired a 12-acre lot in the V.L.A.

In the 1940s and early '50s the Zdraleks built a small resort on their lakeshore property for summer tourists. They started with six cottages and Johan added twelve more cabins. However, the businesses were run separately. Heinz met Elsie in 1947 during the Kelowna Regatta. The couple married in 1948.

Between 1950 and 1960 Heinz's father subdivided and sold part of the farm. In those days they subdivided only four lots at a time, selling each lot for \$2500 to \$3400.00. Today local governments encourage the development of large properties with hundreds of lots. "Then the developer gets stuck paying the property taxes on the unsold lots!" Heinz laughs.

The family was still growing fruit at the time, producing as much as 400 tons of peaches during the season. The fruit was sold to both the packinghouses and the grocery stores. While the peaches were sorted, a tenth of them would be ripe and those would go to the grocery stores, where they received a better price.

At around that time Engelbert built a pump house and pipeline with Heinz and Johan to service the owners of the lots they had sold. A five horsepower electric pump provided all the water they required.

When Engelbert and Enni were too old to farm anymore, Heinz and his brother each took half of the farm property. When the fruit market collapsed and peaches were selling for as low as 2 cents a pound, it cost more to produce the fruit than what it could be sold for.

In the early 1960s Heinz and his family switched from fruit farming to growing hay. Hay was selling for \$3.00 per bale when he first started. Most people who had horses could afford the cost of buying hay for them. Today, hay is selling for \$8.00 per bale. "Now, only rich people can afford horses!" Heinz laughed.

In the 1980s both of Heinz's parents, who lived in their own house, passed away. Engelbert was 84 years old and Enni was 87. In 1999 Heinz's brother Johan passed away.

Today Heinz, at 86 years old, still grows hay on six acres of land that is left from the original farm. The hay is stored in a barn and his loyal customers come from as far east as Lumby and as far west as Sooke, on Vancouver Island. The gentleman from Lumby uses his horses for logging and they won't eat the Timothy hay from Vernon. "You try and log with a horse that doesn't eat!" He declared. Heinz grows a blend of alfalfa and orchard grass, just right for horses. The customer from Sooke remarked that the hay on Vancouver Island is always wet. "When I come up here I always bring back a load of hay."

Heinz cuts, crimps and bales the hay while sitting on his John Deere tractor. When it comes to the physical work of taking the hay bales from the field and stacking them in the barn, he hires help.

Heinz and Elsie have enjoyed traveling the world, collect interesting artifacts and are enjoying life, savouring each day as it comes.