

Escarpment Visionary

CHARLES HILDEBRANDT 1925 – 2012

by Gloria Hildebrandt

Charles Hildebrandt, my father, died in April of this year and a surprising number of people wrote comments on our blog and sent cards and emails saying he changed their lives. His family was amazed because although he was not shy about mentioning his achievements, he never talked about this. He may never have known.

As a youth in Germany he developed a love for nature. An opponent of the Nazi party, he was required to work at shipbuilding in his beloved Hamburg. When the factory was bombed out, he took the opportunity to appear to have died and waited out the rest of the war by living in forests. After the war, when emigrating to new opportunities in Canada, he chose to work off his passage as a lumberjack because of his love of the forest.

He settled with his wife and two daughters in Georgetown in the late 1950s. He created a large garden and explored surrounding undeveloped lands. He was a town councillor when he first heard a presentation to council by Ray Lowes about the dream of a Bruce Trail, and immediately became a member. He served two terms and then, because of pro-development

leanings of council, became disillusioned with local politics and decided not to run again.

In 1964 the family moved to a parcel of land north of the Niagara Escarpment in the Georgetown area. This land was undesirable for farming because of its rocks, marshy areas and seasonal streams. Cows had eaten everything except some huge ancient hardwood trees, cedars and hawthorns. Charles had a vision of a nature preserve or animal sanctuary. He enlarged the cows' sloppy watering hole into a large spring-fed pond, created walking

trails, built bridges over little streams, and a boardwalk through the swamp which filled with marsh marigolds and irises. He placed handmade benches throughout the property. He planted many trees, but also let the land regenerate, changing from a beef cattle pasture back to a mixed woodlot.

He volunteered for The Bruce Trail as a writer for newsletters and as a hike leader. Eventually he craved greater challenges and began organizing hikes and camping trips to wilderness areas of Ontario. He practised orienteering backpacking off trails,

following contour maps by compass and leading groups for a weekend to two weeks at a time, summer and winter, through the deeper wilds of Ontario Crown land, even going further afield, to wilderness areas around the world.

Close to home, he hosted tree identification workshops and birdwatching walks. He could feed guests from the wild, giving tastes of wild leeks, ginger and a tree leaf he called pioneers' dental anaesthetic. Wild blackberries and grapes grew in abundance and he made his own juice and jelly even in the last year of his life. His

property is designated a Managed Forest by Ministry of Natural Resources under The Woodlands Improvement Act. His vision was that of a steward who has a gentle touch on land, preserving and protecting it for wild animals, plants and humans, in that order.

He was a contributor to this magazine, having written "Spring in the Living Garden" for Spring 2008 and "Planting for Summer Bloom" for Summer 2009. We were looking forward to more work from him, because even at the age of 87, in some ways it seemed as if he was just getting started. **EV**



Charles Hildebrandt, 2011, the last summer of his life. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.