

Local News

Darke — a golden couple

They're known throughout the community as Jean and Harry — and this weekend they're celebrating their 50th anniversary.

Jean Osborne and Harry Darke met up in Arnstein, north of Huntsville 52 years ago. Sometimes in life we run into stories where we have to shake our heads and admit they are defined by fate. How else can one explain how a farm boy from Shiloh met a girl from Golden Valley?

Back in the 1950s Harry's mom Ruth took a job off the farm housekeeping at the White House in Brighton. They were surveying for the new Highway 401. There was lots of work around. Ruth got to know some of the surveyors. For young Harry, working on the farm, it was his in.

With a twinkle in his eye he tells of his three-day career in high school. He actually attended the first day, but the teachers kept telling him what to do. The next two days he spent in the pool hall, and might have continued except his dad found out and brought him back to the farm.

In his own defence, Harry recalls there was lots of farm-related work with reasonable wages. And then, of course, he landed the job on the highway. When the surveying ended in this area he was kept on to help survey the pipeline between Port Credit and Sarnia. He must have been a good worker. They kept him on and his next job took him to survey the already existing Highway 522 — near Golden Valley.

For her part 16-year-old Jean Osborne and her sister Fern (Day) were doing everything they could to help their parents survive on a 200-acre subsistence farm that supported seven kids. They two girls were the oldest in the family. The hotel in nearby Arnstein needed help. Fern cooked, and Jean waited tables — where she met fun-loving

Harry.

Harry remembers they didn't date. He worked long hours and Jean had to help clean up at the end of her shift. They'd walk over to her family's farm and play cards. That was the beginning of a long and fulfilling life together — one that has both of them now feeling blessed with the happiness it has brought them.

Jean says she would live almost every minute of her married life over again, it's been that good. The one period she would never re-live is the death of their first-born child hours after he was born, an event that still haunts her.

The decision to follow Harry south at age 17 wasn't difficult and her family supported it. Jean remembers those early days. They had nothing. Every day they would get up and milk 33 cattle and be on the bus at 8 a.m. She finished elementary school but that was it. Her mom, Edna, was ill. Jean had to care for the five younger ones.

In the winter her dad, George, walked to the neighbouring mill and worked for a dollar a day. He would carry 100-pound sacks of flour home on his shoulders. They never starved. They ate pork and chickens and a lot of venison. The kids helped skin the deer. Some was canned, some was salted down, and some hung in the ice house until the ice ran out. Her mom washed clothes in a wringer washer.

The chance to go south and eventually marry Harry was a way to escape. Jean fell for the easy-going southern boy who was six years her senior. In Harry she saw hope for a better future. Looking back, there is no doubt in her mind she was right. He was her first love and her last. As for Harry, he knew he had the perfect companion. His friends knew he had a great girl up north.

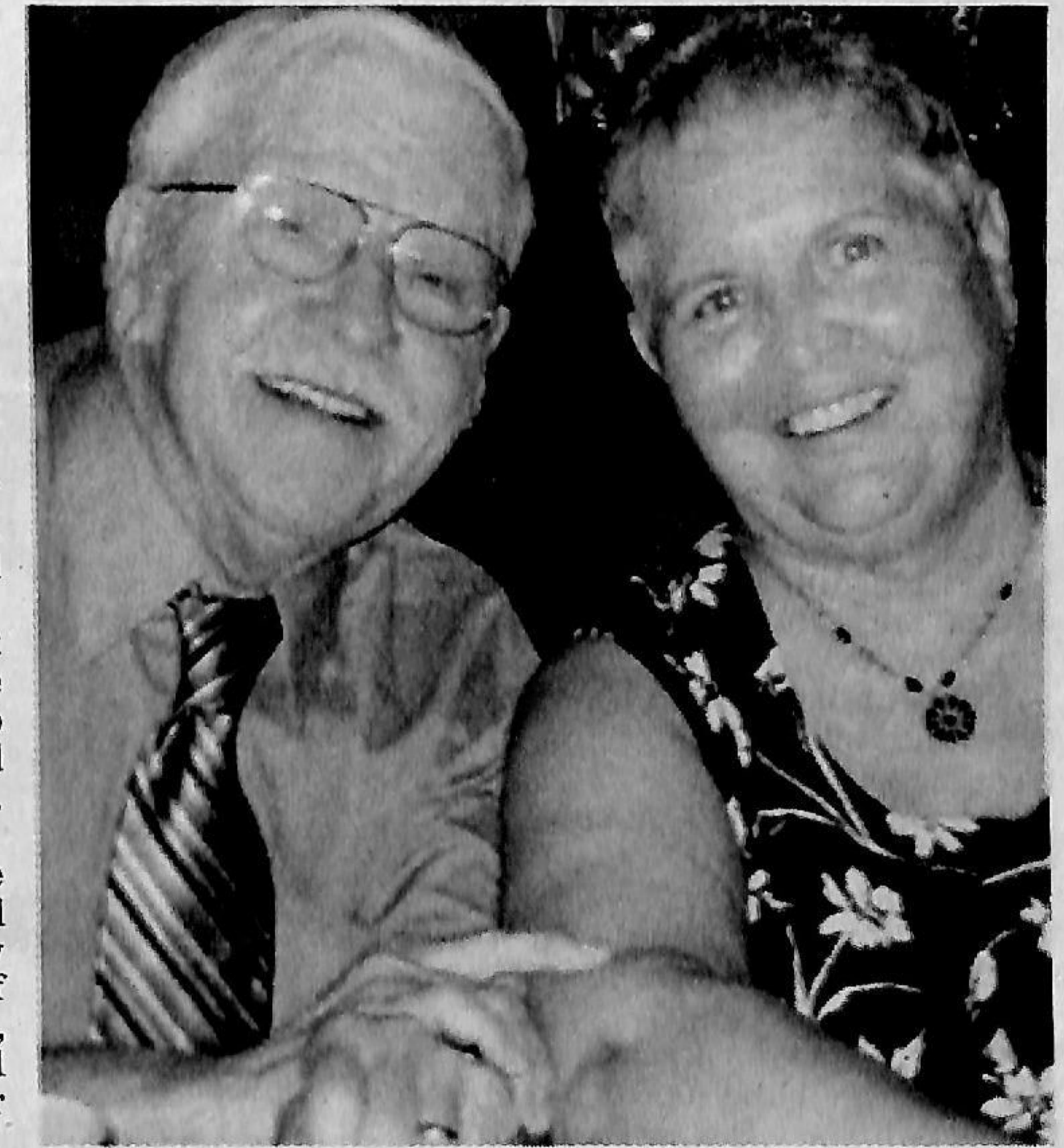


PHOTO BY BOB OWEN

Harry and Jean Darke

Jean and Fern landed in Colborne and worked for Alfred and Gladys Dove at Dove's Restaurant in the Victoria Opera House. Fern cooked, Jean waited tables. They lived on the second floor.

Harry was back home. This time he was working on the actual construction of the 401. On February 22, 1958 they were married at Jean's home in Golden Valley. Harry's parents and Jean's family were the only guests. They honeymooned for two days in North Bay and Sudbury, before settling in Shiloh on the Darke farm.

They weren't settled long before Jean had one of the biggest shocks in her life. The northern girl was unfamiliar with the shivaree. She found out quickly enough when Stu Oliver led a gang of others up the stairs to their bedroom under cover of a smoking chainsaw. Fifty years later one can still sense the panic she felt then.

Harry knew of the practice but hadn't told his new bride. His dad, Robert, stayed up late that night — he knew what was coming. Then to add insult to injury, while everyone was out at Dundonald celebrating the excitement, a few slipped back, hung Jean's undergarments from a stove pipe hole, and hid the bed in a shed.

Two years after they were married the young couple shared the joy of the birth in Campbellford Hospital of their daughter Diane (Chapman). The work on this section of the 401 was done. Harry had work in Brampton, so off they went. The family was complete with the arrival of Dennis.

In 1970 they returned to Dundonald to run the general store immediately west of Eden Church. They were the last owners of the little business that at times had included a post office and telephone office. Times were changing. It closed forever in 1972. Despite the closure Harry and Jean remain pleased that they were the ones to bring ice cream to the hamlet.

Halloween for area kids was a treat when the Darkes lived there. It was before parents felt they had to gratify their children's greed and head to the towns. Each year Jean made trays and trays of juicy, sticky brilliant red candy apples. Down the road in their rambling brick farm house Alma and Doug Mutton served apple cider. Baby Hugh, in his seventies at least, and his spinster sister Nellie handed out sugar cookies. Families seldom got to more than a handful of houses. In 1985, the Darkes moved to town.

By then Jean had launched a 25-year career as a personal support worker. It's always been more than a job. She continues to be passionate about the people who are touched by her loving care.

After eight years at Davidson Plumbing and Heating, Harry headed out on his own. In 1989 Dennis took over Darke Heating. It was a necessity. Harry had suffered two heart attacks. He had to retire from the job that consumed every hour. The heart attacks slowed him down but they didn't stop him. For nearly a decade his smiling face could be seen as he drove the Zamboni, first in Grafton, then in the new Keeler Centre.

Why did their marriage last so long? Harry has the answer for that. They married at a time when marriage meant something. They didn't give up after a fight. They pulled together.

— BOB OWEN