

Some of Percy Van Camp's earliest recollections from his childhood are of his days as a student at the one room Archer School which was located on the First Concession of Cartwright, east of Blackstock.

Percy had just three teachers: Fred and Floyd Hall, who were brothers, and Amy Richardson.

It was well over a mile from the Van Camp farm to the Archer School, and Percy and his four sisters and six brothers used to walk it every day.

Percy recalls one very stormy and snowy day in winter when his parents decided it was blowing too hard for the kids to walk to school. That was good news for a lad of ten, and Percy promptly headed down to the barn where he could find all kinds of interesting things to while away a winter's day.

But his older sister Jessie decided that the weather wasn't that bad, the kids would go to school after all, and they "dragged me along with them," he recalled with a smile on his face.

Percy Van Camp will be 90 on April 12. And Cartwright has been home for all those years.

He was born on the family farm on Concession 1, and farming was not only his occupation for some 40 years, it is his major interest, even to this day.

"I still get a great kick out of seeing a good crop grow," he told the Star last week while seated on the sofa in the living room of his house in Blackstock.

Just a couple of weeks in front of his 90th birthday, Percy enjoys good health, though his hearing is not good. (The afternoon of this interview, he hummed and fretted while family members put a new battery in his hearing aid.)

He's a man of average height, with plenty of neatly combed snow-white hair.

Not the hands of idleness

One look at his hands (they are large and strong) and it's not hard to figure out what kind of work Percy did most of his life. They are not the hands of a man who spent a lot of time in idleness or sitting behind a desk pushing a pencil around.

They years do not show in his face, and his voice is clear and sharp. There is an ever-so-slight trace of a lilt, possibly reflecting the local way of saying certain words, or the Irish-Scottish-Dutch heritage of his forefathers.

Percy was a beef farmer mostly, though like all farmers in those days, he kept some hens, a pig or two, a few milking cows, and sheep which were pastured along the road and always came home on their own each evening.

But he was never a dairy farmer. "Dairy and I just don't get along very well," he chuckled in reference to farming and to his life long aversion to dairy products.

Percy has never eaten milk, cheese or butter, takes his tea or coffee without cream, and can manage ice cream only if it's frozen hard, not the least bit soft. He can't say why exactly he has had this life long aversion to these products which are such a traditional part of the fare at farm tables.

When asked about life on the

farm a half century ago, he replied that things haven't changed all that much. You grow your crops of hay and grain and feed it to the cattle. But what you won't find on many farms these days is the four-acre turnip patch.

"Turnips are a great conditioner for animals," he stated, adding he's convinced that feeding his cattle a steady diet of turnips helped cut down on the veterinarian bills.

But there is a lot of hard work involved in growing four acre of turnips. Percy would get a sore neck and shoulder from hoeing the rows. Unlike his brother Sanford, Percy was not ambidextrous with a hoe. In the late fall, usually about Thanksgiving, the turnips would be rooted from the ground with pitch forks, loaded onto a wagon and dumped into the root cellar in the barn.

"It got used, that's for sure!"

Percy recalls that his parents were fairly strict when it came to raising a family of 11 children. Up behind the coat-rack, his father kept a stick, and "when it came off the wall, it got used, that's for sure." His parents attended Methodist Church in Blackstock and the kids spent a lot of time in Sunday school.

As a young man, work on the farm pretty well filled every day, but in the summer months, there was always time for pick-up baseball in the evenings.

The boys would meet at the Fairgrounds just about every evening for a game of fastball (not softball, that was for the girls, explained Percy)

And in winter, he did some skating at the covered rink in Blackstock and played a little hockey.

"I was never very good at hockey. Once I thought I'd try goaltending, and that spoiled it for me. I got hit in the leg and it was sore for several days.

The old rink, though covered, had a natural ice surface, and work wouldn't get started until there was enough snow to build a good base to make ice. Percy recalls there were lots of volunteers ready after the first heavy snowfall to help bring the white stuff into the arena in wagons so the manager could get started on the ice making.

The old rink saw its last skaters about 1930, and by 1934, the new one in the present location at the Fairgrounds was open (built at the worst of the Depression with a lot of 25 and 50-cent pieces)

Percy, who was 36 by this time, recalls going for a skate for the first time in that new arena. "I suddenly felt old, very old. I was skating with the children of people I knew. I was of a different generation, and I didn't feel too good about it at the time," he said.

Blackstock in those days was a farming village much the same as it is today (without the subdivisions, of course) Commerce was geared around the farms, and included an implement dealer, blacksmith shop, harness shop, a tailor, general store, a garage and car dealership operated by one of Percy's brothers, and a hotel.

"The hotel didn't have an open bar as such, but I won't say they didn't sell a little liquor in there



Percy Van Camp will be 90 in April. He's spent all his life in Cartwright Township. He has some fond memories and he related some of them in a lengthy interview with the Star last week. (see story for details) Though he's been retired as a farmer for some years, he still has a great interest in the land, and he loves family get-togethers.

from time to time," he recalls with a twinkle in his eye.

A large part of social life involved just visiting with neighbours in the evening. In 1925, Percy married Elva Wright, a girl from a neighbouring farm, and they raised a family of three: Merrill, Keith and Aileen, all of whom still live in the Blackstock area.

Still loves Fair Day in August

One of the enduring traditions in Cartwright Township over the years has been the annual Blackstock Fair, and for more than half a century, Percy played an active role in running the Fair, serving as a director, secretary and president. He received a special certificate in recognition of his contributions to the Fair, and he still loves Fair Day each August.

His favourite events are the horse shows. "I was sitting in the bleachers watching the horse show and I looked around and it seemed life everyone around me was well over 70. I guess it's the older people who like the horses," he said.

And Percy greatly enjoyed the Royal each November in Toronto. Up until a couple of years, he always went to the Royal on Friday night to see the champion roadster.

There was one aspect of his involvement with the Blackstock Fair which didn't sit too well with Percy and that was going to the business people to ask for donations.

"I never liked to do that."

Percy's father, William Arthur (he was known to everyone as W.A.) was a municipal politician, and although Percy himself never sought elected office, he always had a keen interest in local affairs.

He talked at length about the controversy that surrounded the decision to build the Cartwright High School in the early 1920's. He recalls that there was a lot of opposition to the school plans, mainly from older people who felt it would be too expensive.

There was an endless series of meetings over the school issue, and obviously it was a hot topic, for Percy said one lawyer used to come all the way from Bowmanville just to attend these meetings "for his entertainment."

The school issue was eventually put to a vote and carried. And then it became a political issue as well since the Township had to issue debentures for construction.

Deep snow didn't stop the vote

Percy recalls the night before one of the votes, he and several friends had set off by sleigh for Janetville. On the return trip, the team of horses became exhausted in the deep snow. Percy and four others, who were eligible to vote on the school issue early the next morning, set out by foot in the snow for Blackstock to make sure they didn't miss the vote.

"We had five votes in our group and we knew the school would carry by just three votes, so we had to walk all night" he recalled.

The vote carried, the school

was built, and to this day it has done a fine job educating the young people from Cartwright Township.

There were a lot of ups and downs in farm life in those days, and when Percy talks of the Depression, he uses the word "survive."

"We were all really scared."

"There was just no money at all, none. I guess I pulled through it with some luck. People were burning grain for fuel."

Another very dark time in Percy's life was in the winter of 1918 when a horrendous flu epidemic swept across Ontario. He was 20 years old at the time, in the prime of life, but recalls "we were all scared, really scared. People were dying, sometimes three out of one house."

The flu hit in October and stayed til the following March and at times the community was like a ghost town. Businesses and schools were shut, even the church services were cancelled, and people did not leave their homes unless absolutely necessary.

And it wasn't just the very young or the elderly who fell. Percy said strong men lasted only a few days.

"We didn't go anywhere that winter. We stayed at home, but we survived."

In 1953, after some four decades working the farm, the sugar bush and the wood lot, Percy "retired," moved into a house in the village and took a job with the roads department.

But his interest in the land and growing crops never faltered and to this day, he owns a 100-acre "ranch" just west of son Merrill's farm on the Third Concession.

He loved to spend time there and when he was no longer able to drive, would talk one of his grandchildren into driving him out.

And he's a great card player, especially euchre and "Pedro." Just the mention of the word "Pedro" (also known as 44) and his eyes light up in anticipation of a game.

But there is something else very important in Percy's life: his family. He takes enormous pride in his grand-children and great grandchildren. He looks forward to family get-togethers at Christmas, birthdays or for any occasion. Sadly, his wife Elva is in failing health and just recently had to be hospitalized.

He says that looking back on a long life, one of things he enjoyed most was the way friends and neighbours helped each other out. Everyone would pitch in to get some work done, and it's just not like that anymore.

When asked what the secret is to living nearly 90 years and enjoying good health, Percy chuckles and says maybe it had something to do with not eating dairy products, or that he gave up smoking a pipe many years ago.

And fresh air and exercise probably has a lot to do with it. He spent his entire life working outside and even now takes a regular walk each day down the street to the store to pick up his newspaper.