

Southwestern In Focus
PUBLICITY-SHY EL PASOAN
IN BUSINESS AND PUBLIC
ACTIVE SERVICE

By Art Leibson
EPT Sundial 9/29/68

William J. Chesak, who marked his 77th birthday last Wednesday and has been in El Paso for more than a half-century, is one of the most publicity-shy workers ever to serve the community he adopted as is home circa World War I.

It is no accident that Chesak has been so self-effacing. Born and raised in a German community of Wisconsin and educated in German-language schools, he spoke no English until he was eight years old and quit school to go to work in his early teens. Speaking a halting English for some time, he developed a bashfulness that followed him through a highly successful business career and years of public service.

Chesak started working at 12 in a cheese factory. By the time he was 16 he was a full-fledged cheese maker, a highly specialized occupation, but his mechanical aptitude turned him toward things automotive. Going to work for the Hendee Manufacturing Co., who produced the newfangled motorcycle, Chesak was made a salesman, over his protests that he couldn't sell anything.

To sell a motorcycle in the industry's start-up period you not only had to demonstrate it but also teach the buyer how to handle it. Chesak taught the late U.S. Sen. Bob La Follette Jr., as well as traffic cops on the Milwaukee police force, how to handle the two-wheelers.

In 1915 he was transferred to the factory branch at Dallas where Miss Verna Ross was employed as a secretary. Four years lat-

er they are married in El Paso where Miss Ross had moved, followed by Chesak whose first job here was as a trombonist in the pit of the Texas Grand Theater.



WILLIAM J. CHESAK
JOINS ARMY BAND

From the pit he noticed a distinguished-looking military man who visited the theater for each change of program and always took a front row seat. The U.S. had entered the war and during one intermission the visitor went into the pit and asked Chesak if he had registered for the draft. He had. The 5th Cavalry Band needed a good trombonist, Chesak was told by the man who turned out to be the band's director, so why not join up? After thinking it over, Chesak agreed. It would be a good chance to see the world, he thought, but two years later, when he finally returned to civilian life in 1919, he was right where he started-at Ft. Bliss, having never left home. Three younger brothers also had served in the Army.

Having married, and saved a small nest egg, Chesak looked around for a business and settled on El Paso Headlight Co. In those days cars and trucks had no headlights when they left the factory. That was something extra, and the early headlights were fueled from acetylene tanks, having to be lit and turned out after each nighttime trip. Chesak's business mainly was refueling the

tanks. From that start, Chesak built up a flourishing acetylene business and 10 years later he sold out to Union Carbide Co. for \$151,000, part of the proceeds going to a silent partner who also operated a lavish handbook in St. Louis, also the late W.W. Thornton, and the late J. Page Kemp. A brother, Charles F. Chesak, also still living in El Paso, remained with the company as superintendent.

Chesak then started up a new business, Modern Engineering Co., and later merged it into Car Parts Depot, becoming vice president. Leaving that company he formed another acetylene firm, in July, 1941, headquartered in Salt Lake City. That was an absentee ownership and was sold in 1952. For practical purposes Chesak had retired in 1938 to look after his investments and continue his efforts on behalf of El Paso.

His public record is impressive. He was an organizer of El Paso Symphony Orchestra, playing the bass viol in its first performances while his wife played the cello. For 30 years he was a member of the Shrine Band. He helped organize and also played with the First Baptist Church orchestra, later serving the church as a deacon, and chairman of Board of Deacons and of the building committee that built the present church.

He is past president of the Central YMCA and was a member of the "Y" national committee for three years. He was an early member of the Lions Club where he held nearly every office including that of president of the Downtown Club (1932-33) and deputy district governor (1942-43). He was an organizer and first secretary-treasurer of the Touchdown Club, his interest sparked by the Chesak's two football-playing sons, Bob and Bill. Bob ran interference for Bill's backfield scrambling, at El Paso High School, but was too light to continue at Tex-

as Western College (new U.T. El Paso) where Bill continued to star.

ENTERS POLITICS

In 1943 he was asked by Mayor J.E. Anderson to fill a vacancy as city treasurer, a \$100-a-month job, and he accepted. Two years later the late Harris Walthall, then alderman, was named Collector of Customs and Chesak was named to the vacancy. He served out the appointive term and one elective period, then quietly dropped out of politics.

When Chesak and his wife joined First Baptist Church there was an assistant pastor, J.T. Williams, who had come here after Army service. He had a young son whom Chesak watched grow up in El Paso, after his father died in Abilene, Tex. He is now Mayor Judson Williams. Chesak long admired Williams and when he took office and asked the retired businessman to serve on a financial advisory committee, Chesak could not refuse. He returned from a trip to learn he had been named chairman of the committee. He also had served on the first committee named to draft a new city charter and this summer again answered the mayor's call to become a member of the first Board of Equalization to be appointed under a 1968 charter amendment.

Also, he had served on the City Parking Committee, and as president of the Community Chest. There probably were several more civic chores that Chesak has forgotten through the years.

Back in Wisconsin, descendants of Friedrich Seidemann, Chesak's great-grandfather, had begun holding family reunions, rapidly approaching the size of a convention. When the Chesaks went back there this year, for the 35th formal reunion, there were over 400 attending. Chesak had a complete family

tree prepared and printed for distribution to the widespread members of the family.

At his home, 1101 Kelly, Chesak and his wife still entertain themselves with private musicales, the trombone standing beside the piano. Some years ago Chesak, and the late Allan Falby, then county sheriff, formed a German band for the entertainment of the Lions clubs, dressed in motley uniforms but with the old-time oompah beat. When Falby died, the spark went out of the band and it has been mostly inactive since.

The Chesaks travel much, take it easy otherwise, and enjoy a gentle, full life. Next year they will celebrate their golden wedding anniversary and recently Chesak received his cap for 50 years in Masonry. Their sons are well established, Bill as a sales director for a clothing firm in South Carolina and Bob as a builder of several hundred El Paso homes.

Theirs, in the Horatio Alger tradition, is a real-life success story.

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Southwestern In Focus

Publicity-Shy El Pasoan Active In Business And Public Service

By ART LEIBSON

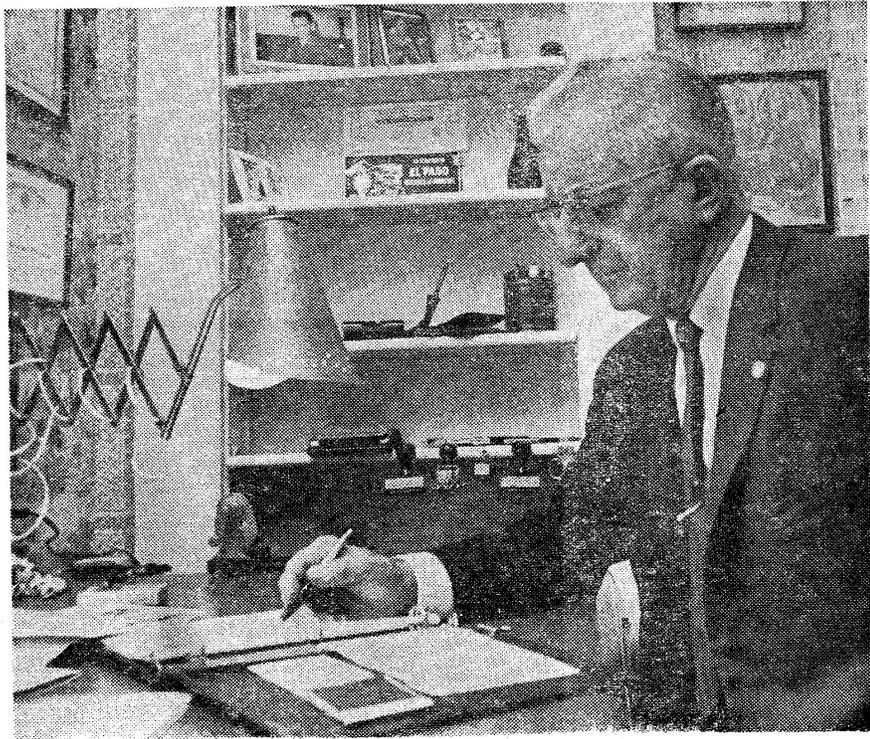
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