

Nursery Profiles: *Tom Piispanen*

by Mark Gilson

In conversations about local nursery leaders of the past 75 years, you may not have heard about Tom Piispanen. And yet, men like Tom are the ones who made the nursery trucks run on time. They drove and steered our local industry into a world-famous legacy. And they shaped our communities in compassionate and colorful ways. During our conversation with Tom in a Madison Village coffee-house, we bumped into other regular features of our local nursery industry including connections to the local estates of wealthy Clevelanders...stories of self-made men of the last century... and achievements of the Kohankie family, a local nursery dynasty descended from Prussian immigrants. Born October 14, 1937, Tom's grandparents managed the gas works in Ashtabula Harbor. Other family members originated *Collins Super Duper* of Madison Village (closed in 2018). He grew up on Garfield Drive, near Hellriegel's Inn (1), but spent much of his time at a cabin near Indian's Point on the Grand River(2). He recalls four cabins at the river level near the present-day Lake Metropark, sleeping in a bunkbed, and spending time at the big *Gulava Lodge* located on top of Indian's Point, operated by the Zion Lutheran Church in Fairport. Tom would sit on the floor with childhood friends as it bounced up and down to the music and movement of Finnish church members.

Tom's first nursery job, at age 10, was at *Cole's Nursery* on Jackson Street in Mentor, which dominated both sides of the road from Heisley east to Nye. Originating in 1881 as *Jayne & Cole Avenue Nurseries* on Mentor Avenue where it crosses present-day Rt 44, Cole's moved to Jackson Street after WWII and encompassed 248 acres plus additional tracts in nearby communities. Still a young boy, Tom left Coles after two years and moved to *Youdath's Nursery* on Mentor Avenue, where he recalls the crippled but successful Ray Youdath, a victim of polio. Later, working at nearby *Wayside Gardens*, Tom recalls Phil Bentley, the 'big boss', and Corey Lewis, bulb manager. Lewis would later open his own nursery in Kirtland, *Lake County Nursery*. Tom worked with Whitey Tamborski, a lively character who had his own nursery on Center Road in Perry, and Whitey's friend, Elsie Fults.



Field rows at Charles J. Kohankie farm in Madison.
Photo by Tom Piispanen.

After Wayside, Tom spent ten years with the Norton Estate in Mentor. Founder of the estate, David Norton, started out at the family homestead, Shandy Hall, Unionville, and became a Great Lakes shipping magnate partnered with Earl Oglebay. (3) Tom planted and maintained extensive gardens at the Norton estate, located between Center Street and Garfield Road from Mentor Avenue

south. Palm trees were overwintered in the greenhouse and moved up to the residence each summer. In addition to its kitchen gardens, the estate produced its own turkeys and sheep

Almost as an afterthought in this narrative, Tom mentions that during his late-twenties, he was drafted into the US Army and spent two years with the Armored Cavalry, 1st of the 81st, commanded at the time by the son of George Patton. . He recalls flying to a base in Louisiana during the Cuban Missile Crisis. We asked Tom if he served in Viet Nam? No...I volunteered for that...but ended up serving in the

worst place on the planet...Fort Hood, Texas. Tom was discharged from the army in 1963 but spent another five years in the Reserves.

In 1963 Tom began working for Charles J. Kohankie Nursery and would eventually purchase the nursery. (The Charles Kohankie operations were distinct from those of Henry Kohankie) (4) Charles Kohankie originally operated on forty acres located on the north side of Jackson Street in Painesville, about two miles west of Richmond Road. Piispanen recalls preparing hardwood cuttings in the winter and sticking them in an unheated greenhouse. The black muck soil to the north of the Jackson Street ridge was dug and resold as 'garden soil'. Much of Tom's time was spent off the nursery on estates in Lake County, many in Waite Hill, that were landscaped and maintained by Charles Kohankie. In addition to the Wintergreen Hill community in Painesville, Charles Kohankie clients included the Sherwins, Boltens, Nortons, Halles, Higbees, Whites and a sports franchise owner named Art Modell who lived in Waite Hill not far from the Kirtland Temple. Tom recalls picking up checks from the Modell organization prepared and handed out by baseball legend Luke Easter. Additional fields belonging to Charles Kohankie included a location near Waite Hill and Daniels Park, Willoughby, which was overtaken by I-90 construction in 1959, and another on Madison Avenue, Painesville, near nurseries belonging to Mike Sebian's and Cy Riggs. This property was later sold to Sidleys.

When the original properties were sold or outgrown, Kohankie purchased a 100 acre farm on Middle Ridge Road in Madison (near present-day Luvin Lavender Farm) (5). Piispanen recalls the way the existing concord grape vineyards were removed, common in Perry and Madison at the time, using tractors with steel wheels to avoid puncture by the wires and posts. 'We raised everything,' says Tom, 'including lots of Taxus', a local nursery staple in the 1960s and 1970s.



Once again, Tom was drawn to nursery propagation, preparing hardwood cuttings in the fall and winter to be grown by *Turkenburg Nursery*, propagation specialists on Wood Road. When the rooted plants were ready to be 'lined out' a couple years later, Tom recalls cultivating them in narrow rows with an Allis Chalmers with widespread wheels, wide enough to span several rows at a time.

When Charles Kohankie was ready to sell the operation, Piispanen entered the ranks of local nursery owners and operated it under the Kohankie name for ten years, eventually selling it to the Zampini organization.

Tom is a lively but reflective and honest narrator. He refers often to his wife of many years, a retired schoolteacher from Homer Nash Kimball in Madison Village. He also relates colorful stories about his years working for local developer, Fred Slagle, a dynamic 'self-made man'. Tom was able to interact effectively with strong personalities like Slagle, in this case helping to develop Thunder Hill and Little Thunder golf courses in Madison (among his many skills, Tom is a heavy-equipment

operator).

Additionally, Tom spent ten years with *Herman Losely and Son, Inc.* Tom protested when he was sought out by Ed Losley, replying ' I know nothing about trees and the things you grow!' ...but eventually gave in. The operation

Propagation greenhouse at Herman Losely and Son, Inc.. Photo by Tom Piispanen.

established by Ed Losley, his father Herman, and continued by his wife Gertrude and son Karl, a modern juggernaut encompassing over 1000 acres, was built around farm managers invested with great autonomy. Tom Piiespanen managed a farm on Rt 20 in Perry and another in North Perry, eventually passing on his responsibilities to Jake Benz, a well-remembered Losely grower from Switzerland.

During his nursery career, Tom often worked two or more jobs at a time with side-tasks in the evening. He recalls making wreaths for *Bleil's Garden Center and Florist*, Mentor, and hauling coal for the Turkenburg greenhouses in Madison. For many years he worked at a family farm on Bates Road, across from present-day *Powderhorn Golf Course*, where he raised up to fifty beef cattle, Angus, Hereford and Holstein. His least favorite were the ornery Black Angus. He named each one after people he did not care for.



Tom's most recent role was with *Habitat for Humanity* as Director for the tri-county area. A number of local projects were completed during Tom's tenure and he recalls his meeting with Habitat-heavyweight, former President Jimmy Carter.

Photo by Tom Piiespanen.



Tom Piiespanen, January, 2019. Photo by Bob Endebrock.

Tom leaned heavily on his cane and needed help getting up after our long conversation in the coffee-house. And yet, our final question for this remarkable man who started out in a long-gone cabin at Indian's Point... *What are you doing next?*

Bob Endebrock, former ODA Plant Inspector, who took over from Phil Kohankie in 1972, put this meeting together, along with Nancy Hearn, Madison Historical Society in December, 2018. Along for the ride and authoring this article was Mark Gilson, retired nurseryman, Perry. Thanks to George 'Josh' Haskell, local attorney and historian, Karl Losely, and others for review and edits.

- 1 Joseph Hellriegel and his wife opened a roadside inn in 1918 on the Madison Square at the location currently occupied by the parking lot for Behm's Funeral Home. The inn was destroyed by fire in 1927 and they moved to the current location on Mentor Avenue in Painesville.
<http://wwwnews-heraldcom.blogspot.com/2011/02/hellriegels-inn-another-chapter-in.html>
- 2 <http://www.lakemetroparks.com/parks-trails/indian-point-park>
- 3 <https://case.edu/ech/articles/n/norton-david-z>
- 4 See 'Kohankie Generations' by Mark Gilson at www.nglco.com/histories.
- 5 <https://www.luvinlavender.com/>