

BECKETT HOUSE 1900 - 2020, A Captivating Sequel

By Robert Williamson

In our October 2020 column the Henry Beckett family history was narrated, setting the stage for the visionary construction of Beckett Drive by the oldest grandson, Fredrick Henry Beckett ca. 1900. Hedy Kral, the current owner of the old Beckett house on West 18th Street saw that story and came forward providing more details to help flesh out the Beckett House saga.

Another grandson, Henry Lees Beckett (1867-1968) took over the farm in 1903 from his father, Henry Beckett Jr. (1833-1914). Having recently graduated from Guelph Agricultural College, he started the Beckett apple orchard which he ran successfully until his retirement in 1951 at the age of 84. By that time, urban encroachment on his land was steadily increasing and he sought quiet refuge in Ancaster with his two sons and two daughters. The old Beckett farmhouse was put up for sale.

Contrary to popular belief, the old farmhouse that exists today is not an original structure, verified by its extensive use of concrete construction and confirmed by a Spectator story on November 23, 1943. *"The two-storey stucco farmhouse of H. Lees Beckett on Garth Street was destroyed by fire shortly before noon. The old Mountain landmark erected over 140 years ago was completely gutted. Apples, valued at \$1,500.00, stored in the cellar were ruined. Firemen pumped water from the Chedoke Creek which ran through the property to help check the fire but in the end nothing was left of the famous original frame structure that had been stuccoed over in later years."*

Hedy Kral's, immigrant story makes a fascinating sequel to the original saga of the Beckett family coming to Canada in 1855 to enter Hamilton's burgeoning railway industry. Hedy Kral was born in Austria. She and her new husband Herbert came to Canada from the depressed former Russian zone in 1957. They rented a house on Markland Street at the bottom of the Queen Street hill, otherwise known as Beckett Drive. Hedy, a skilled fashion designer, readily found work in Hamilton's clothing industry making leather jackets for policemen and then wedding accessories at Tuxedo Junction. Herbert, a butcher by trade quickly found work in the meat departments of the expanding 1950s era supermarket grocery chains like Safeway, Dominion and Loblaws.

Meanwhile, also in 1957, the Dutch immigrant Kuiper family purchased the badly run down Beckett farmhouse with its seven bedrooms and two kitchens. They renovated the house turning it into a multifamily rental income property and put it back on the market. Hedy and her husband with another couple jointly purchased the duplex in 1960 for \$16,500.00. A few years later they were able to buy out the other couple and use the rental space for extra income. The house at 811 Garth Street was surrounded by open fields at the end of a very long driveway, which passed through a large, old apple orchard with raspberry bushes. There was a giant chestnut tree in front of the house planted by Henry Beckett in the 1870s. The subdivision developer in 1960 offset West 18th Street 30 feet to the west to avoid cutting down the heirloom tree. A few years ago the tree was struck by lightning and had to be removed, but Hedy, an avid gardener, replaced it with a beautiful pink flowering chestnut tree in 2016.

The house had several interesting features including a secluded widows-walk built into the roof of the third floor

attic where the family could enjoy sunbathing late in the fall or early in the spring. When it was later sealed off for safety reasons, a large in-ground swimming pool was installed on their 1/3 acre lot. Hedy and Herbert had lots of space renting rooms to Mohawk College students and raising their two daughters, Patricia and Lorraine. The latter attended Mohawk College and became a successful business woman while her sister Pat received an engineering degree in 1983 and was inducted into the McMaster University Alumni Gallery in 1999 for her outstanding contributions in producing robotic systems for the International Space Station.

It is easy to see why the Beckett House might draw a lot of attention. It has brought into prominence Mountain community residents who have played a significant role in our society. The list includes: railway foundry engineers, a creative road designer, a successful apple orchard farmer and most recently, a space robotic systems engineer.



Henry Beckett's 140 year old heirloom chestnut tree, the site's heritage longevity symbol was replaced by Hedy Kral in 2016. R. Williamson photos

