

# The Cheatham Family of Laveen

Written by Corrine Cheatham

One of the pioneering families of Laveen is the Cheatham clan. They have lived in Laveen since the early 1900's. Until a very few years ago, they farmed and operated one of the states best known dairies here in Laveen along 51st Avenue just south of Baseline.

Armon Deconda Cheatham, known by friends and family as "Dee", and his wife Lula Ann Foster Cheatham, started their married life near Duncan, Arizona. They had a small dairy where they sold milk and butter. As their dairy began to grow, so did their family. Three of their sons were born in Duncan: Earnest, George, and Leonard. In 1919, the Cheathams sold their dairy in Duncan and moved with their children and Dee's brother, Shelton Cheatham, to Laveen.

Dee and Shelton bought and operated the Laveen Store at the southeast corner of Dobbins Road and 51st Avenue and 40 acres of farm land.

Dee, Lula, and their sons lived at the back of the store. This was where their fourth son, Armon, was born in 1922. For 30 years Dee was also Laveen's postmaster.

The Cheathams later sold the store and Dee and his brother, Shelton, set up separate farms. Dee and Lula moved to 51st Avenue and Elliot Road. Besides farming, they started a dairy. As their sons grew, so did their farming operations. Eventually, each of Dee and Lula's four sons assumed responsibility for running the dairy and farm according to their interests and abilities. Their oldest, Earnest, evolved into the business manager and public spokesman. George supervised the crop farming. Leonard became the manager of the dairy, and Armon handled building, repairs, and maintenance.

In 1941, there were too many cattle for the space around their original home, so the family bought 360 acres of land south of Baseline Road between 43rd Ave. and 51st Ave. On 51st Ave. just south of Baseline, they built their new Cheatham Dairy milk barn and corrals. It was a difficult task because the site for the dairy first had to be cleared of mesquite and rattlesnakes. When

completed, the dairy was state of the art at the time and had a reputation for being one of the biggest and best in the state. Their prize winning herd of registered Holstein cattle was well known and the largest in the nation. The big herd they developed kept the dairy going with milking operations 24 hours a day with only short breaks to clean the equipment.

One of the trademarks of the Cheatham



Dairy was their use of big Belgian and Suffolk draft horses. Dee and Leonard started with a few good horses they bought from farms in the mid-west and bred themselves a herd reaching over 50 at one point.

When any of the Cheatham boys turned eight, they started to work on the farm and their first job was learning to mow hay. The mower was hitched to a pair of the big, strong Belgian horses. When they were teenagers, their job was to load bales of hay onto a wagon and drive the team of horses back to the dairy where the hay was unloaded and stacked. There are many family stories of the experiences while working with their beautiful horses. (Getting in shape for football was a little easier for the young men after a summer of this hard work!)

If you took a drive through Laveen thirty years ago, you would have seen horses being used for many types of farm work and going up & down the roads on the way to the fields and back and forth to the dairy. The horses pulled the hay mowers, the rakes, the baler, and the wagons. As time moved on, things changed. The grandsons began taking over

the running of the farm and dairy for their fathers and uncles, and tractors and machines started taking over for the Belgian horses. However, there were still some chores around the dairy for the horses. They were used to feed hay to the dairy herd until the

dairy stopped operation in 2003. They were one of the last farms in Arizona to continue using draft horses in their farming and dairy operation. Leonard Cheatham made it part of his trust that as long as there was a Cheatham Dairy, there would be Belgian horses.

The family welcomed thousands of school children to the dairy over the years. It was a favorite field trip for many schools in the Phoenix area and the children always loved seeing the big horses.

Dee and Lula's sons and daughter-in-laws as well as all the grand children were very involved in the Laveen community. Earnest and Edna, Leonard and Rita, and Armon and Ruth served on the Laveen School Board, worked on the PTA, 4-H, and Cowbells. They were always involved in Laveen's Annual Barbecue

and for many years the Belgian horses pulled a wagon around the school yard to give everyone rides. They were also very active in their respective churches. The Cheathams participated in dairy and agricultural leadership throughout the state holding many offices and positions. Their children have followed their examples.

Armon Cheatham is Dee and Lula's only son surviving to see the changes in Laveen today. The dairy and the farm land has been sold, and there are houses on the land they



once farmed. The family realizes that time brings changes, but there is sadness that they aren't still working together at what they loved. The Cheatham family recognizes and is grateful for the legacy of their grandparents and parents and hope to live in such a way as to honor this great heritage.

