

Luther Buchele: 1920-2008

By Julie Rowe

Daily Staff Writer, On September 2nd, 2008

Luther Buchele, the first general manager of the Inter-Cooperative Council, and hence the grandfather of Ann Arbor's eclectic co-op system, died in a car accident Aug. 1. He was 88.

The ICC hired Buchele in 1951 as executive secretary — the organization's first full-time position. When he took the job, he lived in Nakamura House, then one of five co-ops on campus. When he retired in 1985, the organization had grown to include 18 houses and about 600 students.

Buchele, the namesake of Luther Co-op on Hill Street, worked with more than 15,000 residents over his 34 years at the ICC — but every one of them felt like they knew him personally, said Libbie Buchele, his daughter.

Sheila Ritter, the former ICC general manager, said Buchele was devoted to the cooperative system's principles—he loved to collaborate during board meetings, but it was the chance to go out and have a beer afterwards that Buchele appreciated most.

“He was very low-key,” Ritter said. “He wasn't like a university administrator who would be very officious. I think somebody might have wondered what he was doing in the office — assumed he was the janitor or something.”

At the start of each school year, Buchele brought new dishes and silverware to each house, a visit he used as an opportunity to meet students and encourage members to have pride in their houses. He was a constant presence at co-op events and parties, colleagues said.

“He really believed that the students could run their own houses and the organization,” Ritter said.

“He had to kind of infect people, if you will, with what we call the co-op spirit,” he said. Hired when the ICC was growing rapidly after the end of World War II, Buchele filled a desperately needed role, said Gordon McDougal, a University alum who lived in Nakamura House in the early fifties.

“We needed help, and he did almost everything,” McDougal said.

But the decision to hire him as a full-time employee was not unanimous. McDougal said co-op members were reluctant to hire someone who might appear to be an authority figure or director. But, after a majority of members decided the job was necessary, Buchele was hired to run the business aspect of the ICC and given the title of executive secretary. McDougal said Buchele filled the position perfectly — giving co-op residents privacy, but lending an ear to young residents in need of help.

His role, McDougal said, was not as a parent, but as someone a few years older who could offer advice and the wisdom of experience.

“He would tell you what he thought, but he wouldn’t tell you what to do,” McDougal said.

In the 1960s, Buchele successfully argued to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development that cooperative housing qualified as affordable housing. As a result the ICC was able to secure a million-dollar, low-interest loan to build the North Campus co-op houses was opened in 1970.

A tireless advocate for students, Buchele also convinced legislators that co-op members, who don’t rent their rooms, but rather own a share of the house, should qualify for a renter’s tax credit.

He served as a liason between co-op members and University administrators – who were often at odds with the co-ops during the fifties and sixties.

Libbie Buchele said the University’s last Dean of Women, Deborah Bacon, complained that the co-op houses were untidy and unsuitable for women.

Luther Buchele responded, “Co-op women may be untidy, but they have cleaner minds because they don’t discriminate against blacks and Jews.”

“My dad saw co-ops as a way of changing society,” Libbie Buchele said.

Raised during the Great Depression in rural Kansas, Buchele was first exposed to farming cooperatives and saw them as a way for people to work together to overcome financial difficulties. When he enrolled at the University of Kansas, Buchele moved into cooperative housing — which offered the only integrated housing on campus.

“I think that it was very much a philosophical and political leaning that he had,” Libbie Buchele said. “He really felt that people working together could get things done better than people working individually.”

Buchele is survived by his wife Joan; his twin brother Wesley; one son, Royd; three daughters, Theresa, Libbie and Heidi; and five grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held in Ann Arbor on Sunday, October 12 at 2 pm at the First Unitarian Universalist Church, 4001 Ann Arbor-Saline Road in Ann Arbor.

Printed from www.michigandaily.com on Mon, 01 Dec 2014 16:03:26 -0500