

# *“You know, Garbagemen are the cleanest people”*

In a community like ours it is easy to get to know someone, especially someone that we see every day, and it is just as easy to take that person for granted like any other permanent feature. The postman, the grocery clerk and the meter reader are some examples of those kinds of people, but like all individuals they have a story.

Our story is George Lehl, garbage-man.

For twenty-three years the people of Empire and Charleston have seen the familiar figure of George the garbage man in his white coveralls with matching shock of hair as he makes his rounds taking care of the remains of our affluent society.

George, who is 76 years old, feels he has worked long enough, and although he has no plans for the immediate future he is looking forward to his retirement.

George Lehl emigrated to this country from Russia in 1912 and still carries part of the old country with him in his speech and in the many memories that he brought with him and has maintained through the years.

In the early 1900's in Russia the political climate was one of revolution, class struggles, minority discrimination and war. The Czar was threatened by internal conflicts and revolution, and at the same time outside of Russia was the threat of war. To provide soldiers for the Russian army, the Czar conscripted minority groups within the country.

George lived with his family in Norka, a town of 13,000 which was made up entirely of German people who had emigrated to Russia during the reign of Catherine the Great.

Catherine, German herself, brought in one million German farmers, merchants and artisans to help Russia advance as a nation.

One of the conditions promised by Catherine to those Germans willing to migrate to Russia was a promise that Germans would not have to serve in the Russian army for 100 years from the time of her reign. The 100 years ended in the early 1900's, and in order to avoid political pressure from their own people the Russian

government began to draft minorities, including Germans, to fight their wars.

In 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War the Russians drafted their German minority citizens for the army, and George's uncle was named in the fifth draft. One of the first Germans to go from Norka, his uncle, who spoke Russian, attended the Russian version of West Point and became an officer.

In 1912 everyone was being drafted for service starting at age 14, and George's uncle and the town minister, who had done missionary work in the U.S., counseled the family to leave Russia. Two days before the grandfather's death, he told the family to go to America because it was a new country and Russia was two hundred years old and "ready to go down the drain."



**“I have worked every day of my life.  
Now I don't know what I will do.”**

George's father, Philip, took that advice, and with his family and possessions, came to the United States where George has lived for the past 64 years.

We asked George if the United States is also "going down the drain" since it is now 200 years old.

"I don't believe America has any chance, it's not different than any other country. I think eventually they will go that route (communist). People can't imagine anything like that because we have everything today and we can have our mouth open all day long and we are rich. If we know how many communists we have in high places in America we would probably wet our pants."

"I think this is the way all countries are going, that is toward communism, name me one that isn't."

George came to this country from an area that was totally agricultural with no forests or industry except

those connected with farming. For fuel the people would clean out their barns and compress the manure into

blocks which they burned like coal through the winter. These blocks also helped pay for their children's

education—each family contributing 75 blocks to heat the school as their share of school costs.

From this idyllic agrarian setting where wheat was ground to flour by wind, water and horse power, George and his family booked passage on the "Boston", a passenger and cargo vessel headed for Boston harbor in the United States.

Arrival in Boston lasted barely long enough for culture shock to set in for the Russian and German speaking emigrants before they boarded a train to Portland, Oregon, where they were to rejoin relatives that had fled Russia at an earlier date.

George, at twelve years of age, had no trouble learning to speak English from the other children on the block and advanced quickly in school despite the language barrier.

In Portland, George's father worked for the railroad while George worked in his uncle's butcher shop, a bakery and a furniture store for 10 cents an hour, ten hours a day.

In 1922, George opened a grocery store in Portland with a partner from Fresno who was in the wholesale grocery business, and later when his uncle's butcher shop failed, he moved to a larger store that incorporated a meat shop.

The store was in operation during the depression and served the people in an emergency food capacity.

George tells us, "My dad said as long as you have food to eat you have to divide it with people who are hungry. So as many as 15 people a day came to the grocery store for something to eat. We divided coffee,

sugar, soup bones, everything that people needed into small packets that we could give away to those who needed it. My wife knew that I would always bring someone home for lunch and she was always ready."

"My father lost his job at the railroad when he refused to work on Sunday," George said.

"Religion was much stronger in Russia than it is in this county; the richer people get, the less religion they have."

"This country was started on a religious basis, then the business men ran it for awhile. Now it's run by the attorneys and you can't expect much."



"Akron, Ohio was named after my home town in Russia. Akron is Norka spelled backwards."

"Sixty per cent of our congressmen are attorneys and that is why they can't get much done, because they just talk around in a circle."

Speaking of crime and its growth in this country, George had this to say,

"Where I came from they had three judges—my grandfather was a judge."

"I think they were the attorneys and the witnesses and everything—because they had a jail that only held them overnight, they didn't hide the man. They took him out in the park and invited the public and took his pants down and gave him so many licks on the rear-end and turned him loose."

"They said, now here is a thief, watch him!"

"Here they protect them, that is the difference."



**"Garbage men are the cleanest people on earth. If you had to handle peoples dirt every day you would want a bath when you got home too."**

In the mid-fifties the Portland grocery business came under heavy competition from supermarkets

causing George to think about a change in types of work. At about this same time his brother called him from Coos Bay to tell him there was a garbage business for sale here that someone might be interested in. George turned out to be the person interested and for 23 years he has been making that interest pay off.

The business was small when George took it over and has been growing ever since.

When George took over the business one of the first things he had to do was buy a new truck. That truck, with care, lasted him until he expanded into handling container garbage, emptying the dempsy dumpsters usually found at apartments and commercial establishments, when he found it necessary to buy a new specialized truck.

With the new truck came georges first helper and a doubling of the size of his business.

Now a broken hip has ended the working career of this man who has worked every day for the last 55 years.

The Builder and the people of Empire and Charleston wish George Lehl a happy and comfortable life in this much deserved retirement.