


Luther Harpel

MEMORIES IN LIGHT



*He transformed his passion into a career.
His business served as a long-time anchor for
Lebanon's downtown shopping district.
And because he revolutionized his industry
locally, his family name became synonymous
with it.*

But perhaps Luther Harpel's most important contribution to Lebanon County was as the locale's greatest accidental historian. Him snapping a simple photo captured more than just a moment in time.

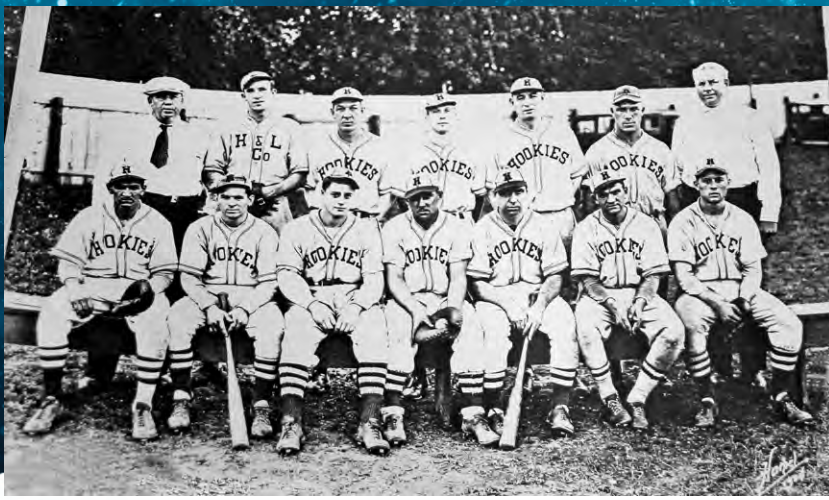
Luther Harpel was a family man, a photographer and a local businessman. He lived and took photos in Lebanon at a time when the industrial revolution was shaping the world and reshaping our culture and society for years to come.

Harpel took photos of everything that moved, anything he could get his hands on, and he would even travel to take those images. One doesn't have to look hard or far to find his photos even today, and when you do, you will be afforded a glimpse into a different world and a slower time.

"He took a large number of photographs," said Luther's grandson, Dave Harpel. "He was the source of events and a recorder of history, like at parades and ceremonies. He was taking them for his enjoyment, which developed into his voca-



*Sarah Harpel, left, and Luther Harpel, right,
with their 5 children.*



Early picture of "The Hookies", a team Babe Ruth played on to avoid the war.



Harpel Store in Mt. Gretna.

tion and fed his family. It created a revolution in the process.

"The Lebanon County Historical Society became very interested in his pictures," Harpel added. "His son Donald, my father, was a president of the society for a period of time, just to see that the picture history of the area was preserved and made available to be shared."

Certainly well-known locally during his day in the early years of the 20th century, Harpel seemed to understand the three keys to good photography – subject, subject and subject. He took photos of what was important to him, and what was important to Harpel was Lebanon and its surroundings.

While he was a fixture at local events, Harpel also photographed farms, animals, people and weddings. One of the most now-famous moments that Harpel captured was in 1918. That's when Babe Ruth came to Lebanon to avoid the draft for World War I, and played on the local steel mill's baseball team at Third and Green Streets in the city.

It was a time when the art and science of photography was in its infancy, cameras were very rare and the recently-invented phone was used as a new form of communication. There were just a few photographers locally, and Harpel was the only individual in Lebanon County with the know-how and resources to process the primitive film.

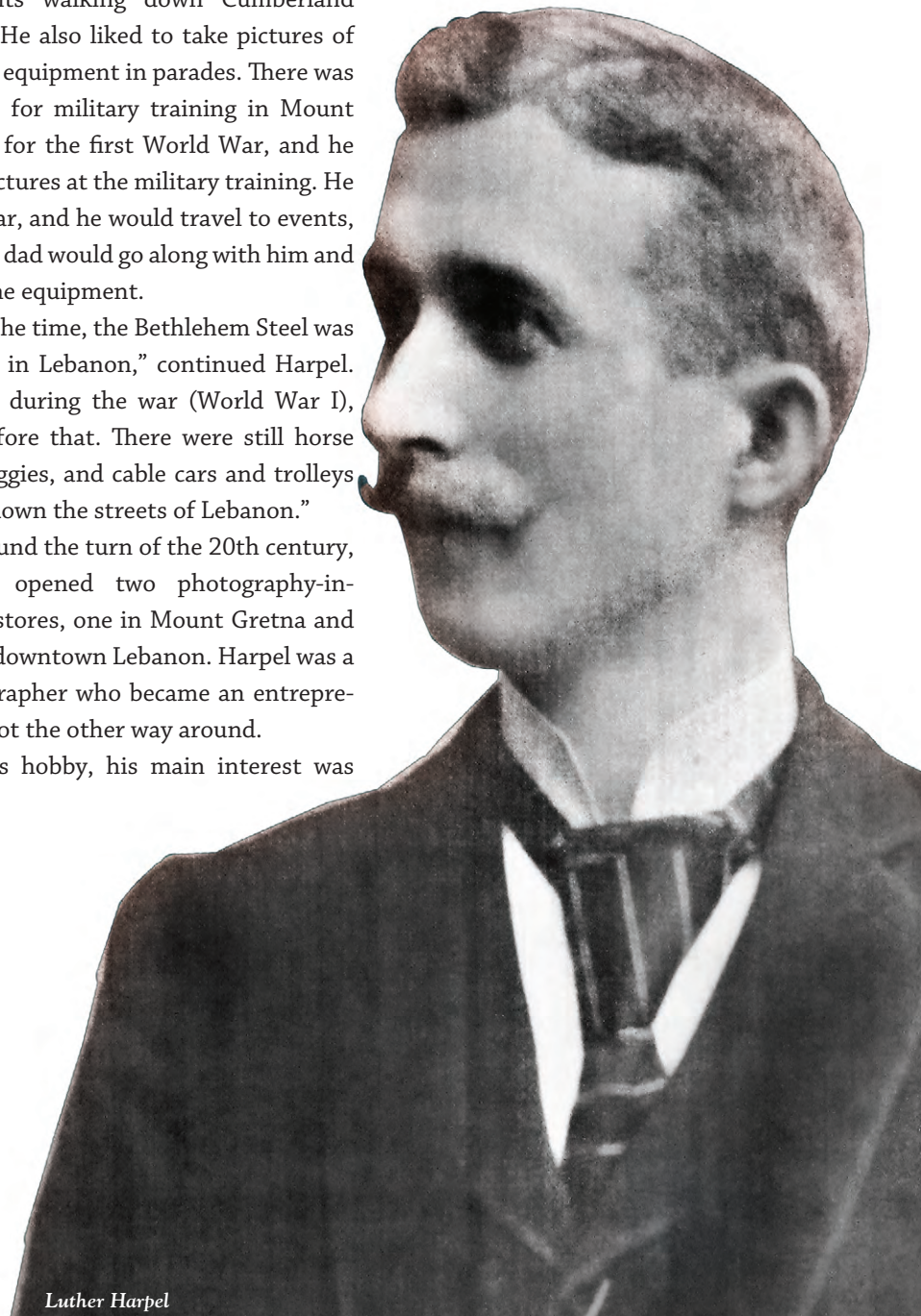
"He got to meet Babe Ruth, and he took the team picture," said Harpel. "He loved

the parades in Lebanon and he loved the elephants walking down Cumberland Street. He also liked to take pictures of the fire equipment in parades. There was a camp for military training in Mount Gretna for the first World War, and he took pictures at the military training. He had a car, and he would travel to events, and my dad would go along with him and carry the equipment.

"At the time, the Bethlehem Steel was roaring in Lebanon," continued Harpel. "It was during the war (World War I), and before that. There were still horse and buggies, and cable cars and trolleys rolled down the streets of Lebanon."

Around the turn of the 20th century, Harpel opened two photography-inspired stores, one in Mount Gretna and one in downtown Lebanon. Harpel was a photographer who became an entrepreneur, not the other way around.

"His hobby, his main interest was



Luther Harpel





Vintage portrait of Lebanon folk. Taken by Luther Harpel.

photography, because of his background in chemistry,” said Harpel, 85. “He was a chemist who graduated from the Philadelphia School of Pharmacy, and he mixed chemicals for the Chemical Fire Company of Lebanon, which was on Chestnut Street at the time. He worked for Lemberger Pharmacy in Lebanon, and he was a pharmacist. That’s where Luther got his start, and he went into business for himself.

“I would imagine that he was a photographer first,” Harpel continued. “He made a business out of a passion. He had a special camera that allowed him to take panoramic photos, which set him apart from the run-of-the-mill, box-camera photography. We were the only film processor in the area. Gantz’s Studio did portraits, and we did all the outside stuff.”

Located at 757-759 on the north side of Cumberland Street in Lebanon, Harpel’s sold typewriters, office supplies, post cards, greeting cards, stationery, luggage and gifts. The downtown Lebanon store specialized in film processing, picture framing and restorations – anything related to cameras and film and photos.

“The photography was the backbone of the business,” said Harpel. “He could do the chemicals required for developing film. He had a lab and he had a studio. Anyone in Lebanon who owned a camera would

come there to have their film processed.

“We had to keep stepping up to the latest technology,” added Harpel. “We sold typewriters, and they were the main business machine of the day. You had to step up with the technology, or you’d go out of business, and we were in business many years.”

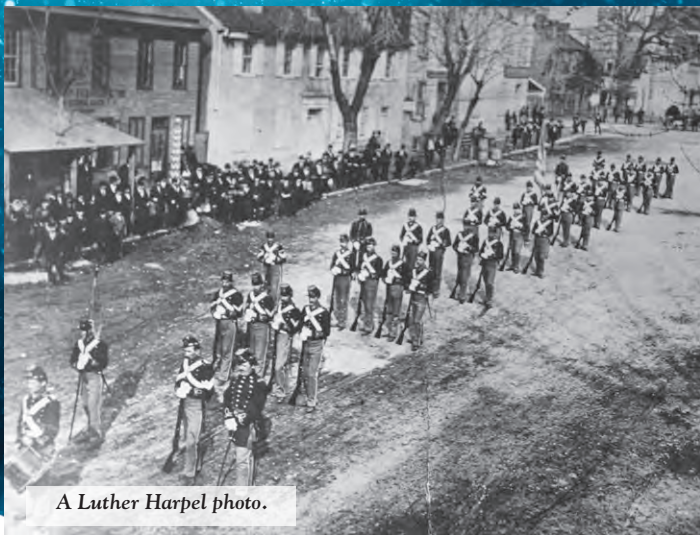
On November 13, 1990, one of the worst fires that the city of Lebanon has

ever seen signaled a tragic beginning of the end for Harpel’s downtown. The three-day fire was fueled by high winds and cost local fire fighter Timothy Stine his life, and it damaged Harpel’s building beyond repair.

Harpel’s stayed in business for more than a decade afterwards, but it never fully recovered from what came to be known lo-



Dave Harpel holds an afghan embroidered with his grandfather Luther’s likeness.



A Luther Harpel photo.



Luther Harpel had a special fondness for photographing fire equipment and local departments.

cally as "The HACC Fire".

"It began in the basement on the back alley side," said Harpel. "They were cleaning the boiler at the time. They had the stack of the boiler jacked up and open to service the boiler, and they lit the boiler as an initial test. The flames went up into the ceiling of the basement, causing a major fire. Harpel's and Haak's Department Store burned.

"After that, we sold the burned-out building to HACC," Harpel added. "We went down to a vacant building at 627 Cumberland Street. But we didn't have the studio there and we didn't have a place to process the film. We decided to rebuild at Seventh and Cumberland Streets, and then eventually we sold out to Aaron's."

To his family, Luther Harpel was more than a photographer or a businessman or an accidental historian. He was a father, a grandfather, a husband and a God-fearing man.

While the Lebanon County Historical Society continues to be the public keeper of Harpel's photographic work, many of his images have remained in the family.

"He was my grandfather," said Harpel. "He had a good sense of humor. He loved to travel, with the conveniences of the day. He was creative and inventive in the world of business. He was a leader in the Lebanon County area, all the way up to Hershey. He was in with Milton Hershey. He was in with the Myerstown



business people.

"He was a great father to his five children, two sons and three daughters," Harpel continued. "His wife Sarah was a very pleasant person. I liked the way he drove his car. He would take us for rides on Sunday afternoons, over Goldmine Road."

The Harpel name is still a very prominent one in Lebanon County today. But few are aware of the specifics of Luther Harpel's legacy or the story behind that legacy.

"I'd say some do and some don't," said Harpel. "The town was much happier then, and Bethlehem Steel was booming. The comings of new peoples have changed Lebanon. And technology has blossomed in other areas. Unfortunately, there are different markets today. People go where the money is, and rightfully so. You can't stay

in the same mindset.

"He grew with the history of photography," concluded Harpel. "There was a period when the eye of the camera was the television of today, meaning if you photographed it and printed it out for people, that's how you were educated. Today, television and newspapers bring it into your perspective."

In the annals of Lebanon's history, Luther Harpel's photos may in fact be worth more than a thousand words.



Jeff Falk