

CCH Profile: Ernie Klimonda

Ernie Klimonda (Arnošt Jaroslav Klimonda)– long-time CCH resident, photographer, historian, and all-round good neighbor – has become a familiar face at almost every CCH event lately, though that face is often obscured behind a camera. As well as being official historian for the CCH civic association, Ernie also serves as its unofficial photographer, diligently recording Easter egg hunts, Halloween parties, Santa visits, tree plantings, and barbecues. (Check out the new CCH Web site at <http://www.cchca.org/index.php?c=history> to see some of his work.)

He can still be seen occasionally walking the neighborhood in his familiar blue porkpie hat, though perhaps less often than he did before his beloved standard black poodle, Duncan, died last year. Apart from photography, his great passions these days are his family – wife Dolores, daughters Veronique and Christine, and 14-year-old grandson Max – and bridge, which he plays three times a week, having recently cut down from four. He also has a really nice lawn.

But his life has not always been so tranquil.

His father lived his whole life in the same small Eastern European town where he was born, yet managed to live in five different countries.* Ernie has lived in that many and more, though has had to travel rather further afield to do it. In fact, he has made a living at it, with a career spent working for the Thomas Cook travel agency (the world's oldest agency – they got their start organizing tours of Egypt in 1846 and of the Crimean War in 1857) and later in the travel and administration department of the International Monetary Fund. Ernie also ran a flying school in Leesburg for a time, rode a BMW motorcycle, and until about 10 years ago taught flying and gliding on the weekends. Moving and traveling have always been part of his life.

His earliest travels were born out of necessity. Born in 1926, Ernie grew up in Czechoslovakia, much of which became formally part of Germany in 1938. In 1944, as the Russians began to break through into Eastern Europe, Ernie saw the writing on the wall and fled, not east toward the liberators, but west. “I had heard about Stalin,” he said. Getting out of occupied Czechoslovakia and making his way across wartime Europe was “not easy,” Ernie said, with characteristic understatement.

By the end of the war he had fetched up in France, and at 18 joined the French Foreign Legion, based in Algeria. For five years Ernie fought for the Legion in Indochina as the French tried to defend that piece of their fraying empire against the communist Vietminh, a precursor to the Vietcong. This was in Viet Nam before it was “ ‘Nam,” when Ho Chi Minh was a young man and Dien Bien Phu was still years away.

In 1950, Ernie was discharged from the Legion and decided to take his three months' service leave in Casablanca. “I'd heard it was beautiful,” he said. He ended up loving it, stayed there eight years, and in 1952, met French native Dolores, who he married in 1956. It was in Casablanca that he first started working for Thomas Cook. He also conducted overland tours of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia for cruise ship passengers who would leave their ships in Casablanca and rejoin them in Tunis. Ernie's five languages – French, German, Czech, English, and Spanish – were helpful in this line of work. The Klimondas' first daughter, Véronique, was born in Casablanca in 1957.

In 1958, Ernie and Dolores were caught up in the turmoil as another piece of the French empire sought its independence – Morocco. Like most Europeans at the time, Ernie and Dolores decided to get out, and took ship for America, where they have lived ever since.

Still working for Thomas Cook, Ernie moved his family around the DC area for a few years – living in the District, Alexandria, and Springfield. A couple of years were spent in Cleveland, Ohio, where Ernie opened a new branch office. Their second daughter, Christine, was born in 1959.

On January 1, 1969, the Klimondas moved to Country Club Hills, paying \$30,000 for their house on 3411 Andover Drive. Fairfax was then the “boondocks,” Ernie recalled. “I’d tell people at work where I lived and they’d say, ‘Where?’ ”

Not much has really changed since those days, Ernie said. People went to work, raised kids, and mowed their lawns. Traffic was bad back then, too. Ernie used to spend an hour plowing down Route 50 into town, in the days before 66 and the beltway. *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

But things were undeniably a little slower back then. Ernie remembers a time when he was preparing to land a plane at the new Dulles airport and talking to the tower to schedule a landing time. This was at 10:30 in the morning.

“Take your time,” said the tower, “We’re not expecting any other flights until three o’clock this afternoon.”

* The town – eský-T šín in Czech, Teschen in German, Cieszyn in Polish – began the 20th century as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was then part of Czechoslovakia after WWI, briefly became part of Poland in early 1938, was German during the war, returned to Czechoslovakia after WWII, and since 1990 has been in the Czech Republic.
Happy ending.