FROM THE COAL MINES TO CITY HALL

America has always been a land of opportunity; where a man has been free to seek his fortune. Since America’s earliest beginnings at Plymouth Rock and Jamestown, men and women have labored to improve their surroundings. Seemingly endless resources, a moderate government, and hard-working, bright individuals have propelled cities into the richest and most powerful nation that has ever existed. America. Louis Pete Anesi is one such individual.

L. P. Anesi was born on July 2, 1906, at Coal Camp 50, one mile south of Novinger. Pete’s father came to the Novinger coal fields during the turn of the century. Times were tough in those days. Pete’s father made two dollars a day and worked a ten hour day, six days a week. The mining was hard work and the pay was poor.

During the Great Flu Epidemic, Pete was a seventh grader at Novinger School. With so much sickness and absenteeism, the schools were closed. Pete then went to work in the mines until he was 14. He later finished school with night classes.

Since the demand for coal was minimal during the summer, a miner was lucky if he had a job. With no net income, the miners found it hard to purchase necessities; however, the coal companies wanted to take care of their miners in the off-months. The company store, a general store owned by the company to supply the miners with necessities, set up a loan agreement with the miners. A miner could purchase goods on credit from the company office. The miners then paid their debts when they received their paychecks on the 10th and 25th of the working months. If a miner borrowed money from the company office it was called a “flicker.”

When Pete’s father had finished paying all bills in full during the winter months, he had four dollars left. Since Pete had worked in the mines and given his pay to his parents, the four dollars were given to him. With four dollars in his pocket, Pete set off to buy a calf.

Photo at left: The tipple and engine room of the Big Valley Coal Co. which is now located at the bottom of Forest Lake. This photo was taken in 1935.
After purchasing the calf, Pete brought it back to the mining camp, slaughtered it, and then sold the meat to the residents of the mining camp. This venture was the beginning of a 60 year career in the meat packing industry.

Mr. Anesi left Novinger in 1927 during the largest miner strike at the Novinger coal fields. The strike was due to a withdrawal of a $1.50 bonus promised to the miners during World War I. The Novinger mines couldn't afford to compete with the coal fields in western Illinois which had nearly three times as much coal that was cheaper to mine. After the strike, the coal fields went non-union.

After leaving Novinger, Mr. Anesi and four others ventured to Gifford, to a possible mine site. When they arrived, they found a mine that had already been sunk, but the mine was full of water. After pumping all the water out, Pete and his comrades found only 23 inches of coal. They began mining, but Pete left on St. Patrick's Day of 1928 and came to Kirksville where he purchased a meat market, located on Washington Street near the square, at a bankruptcy sale.

In 1930 Mr. Anesi bought the Linders and Meyers farm and mine which is now located at the bottom of Forest Lake. The first commercial rock quarry in Adair County was then set up. It, at that time, was owned by Pete Anesi, but leased to Dixon Construction of Centerville, Iowa. After the owner's death, the quarry was sold to Floyd Bailey. Mr. Bailey then set up Bailey Limestone Co., but it was still located on Pete Anesi's farm. Mr. Anesi continued to operate the farm and mine until 1950 when the dam was closed and the lake began filling.

On April 4, 1932, Pete purchased the A. G. Burk Meat Market and plant on West Michigan Road. His ambition at that time was to work for Swift & Co., a large meat packer that thrived because there was so much beef for slaughter.

In 1941, Mr. Anesi expanded and modernized the packing
house as it appears today. He established a hog buying station
where he bought hogs for John Morrell in Ottumwa, Iowa, 66
miles away. Morrell, at that time had a killing capacity of
6,000 head of hogs per day. Anesi's packing plant produced
weiners, franks, bologna, ham, wholesale beef and pork, and
later a custom slaughter and processing service.

Mr. Anesi also established many meat markets in other
towns. In Kirksville, he had two meat markets other than the
packing house itself. One was located in the current Beard's
Gallery, which operated from 1932-1968, and another located
on the west side of the square. Anesi Meat Markets were also
located in La Plata, Macon, Mexico, Moberly and Fayette in
the 1980's.

During the summer of 1936, the government contracted Mr.
Anesi to slaughter the “drought cattle.” “Drought cattle”
were thin, starving cattle that had nothing to eat except tree
leaves. Pete recalled 20 days straight with the temperatures
over 100 degrees. The Chariton River did not run, but it had a
few holes with water. It was so dry that there was no grass
or weeds. Farmers were forced to cut down trees and let their
cattle pick at the leaves. Blowing dust at times reduced
visibility to under 50 feet. The dust wasn't Missouri dust
either. It came all the way from Kansas. But there wasn't
much relief at night either, with temperatures ranging in the
80's and 90's. The hot weather lasted all summer.

The government contract bought the cattle. Mr. Anesi
slaughtered the cattle, boned, and barreled the meat. The
cattle were shipped by truck from Clark, Scotland, Shelby,
Adair, Macon, Linn, and Schuyler counties to the slaughter-
ing plant. From longer distances, the cattle were shipped in
by rail to stockyards located across from the Dodson Pickle
Factory (now Baito Concrete). Other cattle from Southern
Missouri were shipped in by rail and unloaded at the Wabash
stockyards. Mature adult cattle were worth $22 a head and
yearlings were worth $17. The meat was then shipped to
tomato canneries located in Milan, Humphreys, Spickard,
and Galt. The “drought cattle” helped Pete Anesi gain a financial
foundation from which to grow.

Mr. Anesi's interests were not only in the meat packing in-
dustry at that time. He also purchased the Stevenson Hotel in
1945, the Dockery Hotel in 1947, and the Travelers Hotel in
1969. The hotels have since been demolished or changed
owners.

In the 1964 general election for mayor of Kirksville, Pete
Anesi ran against Joe Burdman. Mr. Anesi emerged vic-
torious. At that time, the city of Kirksville was under a com-
mision form of government with elected councilmen and an
elected mayor. In 1968, Mr. Anesi ran unopposed for his sec-
term as mayor, the first time in history a person had ran
unopposed for mayor in the city of Kirksville.

During his eight years as mayor, Mayor Anesi and his ad-
ministration passed four general obligation bonds that re-
quired a ¾ majority vote of the people. Mayor Anesi

Photo at left: Mr. Anesi purchased a whole railroad car load of bulls from Texas like the one pictured. He paid $25 a head for the bulls, but sold them before shipping them to Kirksville. Bottom photo: Mr. Anesi's team and hired hands putting up hay on his farm. The farm was known as the Linders and Myers farm before Pete bought it. This land is now under water at Forest Lake.
introduced major industry to the city of Kirksville also. During his two terms, Mayor Anesi and his administration brought forth Donaldson, Kewanee, Burroughs, and Century Steps Companies. There were two expansions of the Hollister Company, Florsheim Shoe's relocation, improvement of the water works, and the building of a new airport under the Anesi administration. The airport was most significant in the bringing in of factories since they would have never located in Kirksville without an airport. The Donaldson bond was passed 27 to 1. Other members of the city commission at that time were Jack Shelton, Jim Trent, and Art Peterson. During the mayor's second term, commission members were Elbert Lewis, Jim Trent, and Jack Shelton. Howard Watson was appointed to the commission after Jim Trent's death.

During his two terms as mayor, Mayor Anesi and his administration substantially improved Kirksville's water works and supply. They had built three stand pipes (water towers) with total capacity of over four million gallons. The system was arranged so that the residents of Kirksville could have water even if the pump, which pumps water from Forest Lake, was shut off for a period of time. A reservoir was also at the filtration plant.

Pete Anesi and some engineers also made up plans for a massive lake to be located at Sugar Creek, southeast of Kirksville. In the original plans, the lake was to cover 700 acres or more. The dam for the lake was going to be located just southeast of Yarrow. The lake never materialized due to a change in administration.

Mr. Anesi sold his packing house in 1976. It operated for a few years after that. Today the packing house appears just as it did ten years ago. The feedlots behind the plant are still in use.

Mr. Anesi considers himself to be “semi-retired.” He still owns 740 acres of land on Highway 3 South. He rows crops about 300 acres of it, and pastures the rest of the land. He runs 200 head of cattle with his concrete feedlot where he feeds the cattle silage. He has an office uptown for bookkeeping purposes for his farm and investments. He also has one rental apartment. Mr. Anesi is a director of KIDC (Kirksville Industrial Development Corporation), on the board of the Kirksville Housing Authority, a 50-year Chamber of Commerce member and ex-president, and a six-year Fair Board member, five of those years as president.

Mr. Anesi now resides at 215 South Florence with his wife Lucille. He has two children and four grandchildren. He has had so many successful accomplishments all he would comment was that, “I’ve had a lot of water under my bridge.” He adds, “To be successful, you must have will power and work hard.”

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