

# Village historian

## Neustadt's history is a family affair for Charlotte Weinert

By Gerald Wright  
Record staff

NEUSTADT — Ask anyone here where the village historian lives and they'll point out the home of Charlotte Weinert.

To her, the writing or telling of village history is like recounting the story of her own family.

That's because hardly anything has happened in Neustadt's 130-year existence without at least one Weinert being involved somehow. And in her 89 and-a-half years Charlotte has personally witnessed many of the main events.

Village founder David Winkler hardly had the ink on his land-purchase documents dry when Weinert's grandfather, John Weinert, lumbered into town with a team and wagon and proceeded to buy land and build a tannery.

He was a saddle-maker who had learned his craft in the Kaiser's service, but disenchanted with Prussian militarism, was looking for more peaceful ways to employ his skills.

He found what he was looking for in Neustadt and before long he added a boot and shoe factory which was soon supplying footwear to half the settlers in the Queen's Bush, as the area was then called.

Other Weinerts have been bankers, railwaymen, teachers, musicians and postal officials, and one of them, Charlotte's grandmother, was a midwife who delivered Neustadt's most famous baby.

The baby was named John George Diefenbaker and although he left town with his parents when he was only four, he never forgot his roots. On numerous visits to his birthplace throughout his long political career, he invariably visited the post office.

Visiting the post office in Neustadt was the same as visiting the Weinerts, because for 87 years spanning four generations, the post office was located in the front part of their house on Mill Street.

"The last time Mr. Diefenbaker was here," Weinert recalls with misty eyes, "was just before he was elected prime minister in 1957. He came to visit my mother and sat right in that red chair here in our living room. My mother died about a month later."

Born just 10 months later than Diefenbaker, Weinert was one of seven children in a family that included two sets of twins.

From their Irish mother, also named Charlotte, all the children seemed to inherit a



Charlotte Weinert stands in front of the old post office wicket that is now part of her Neustadt apartment furniture.  
Philip Walker, Record staff

love for telling stories and passing on information.

Mother Charlotte married Jacob Weinert and moved to Neustadt without knowing a word of German at a time when German was still the main language of business and conversation here. At that time the village actually had two newspapers, *Die Waechter am Saugeen* and *Der Farmer*, both published in German.

With her nimble mind and tongue she soon mastered the language of the village so well that she became village correspondent for *Die Glocke* (The Bell), another German-language paper published in Berlin (Kitchener) by the same company which later founded *The Record*.

Even during her own girlhood, historian Weinert recalls, "On the street the kids all spoke German and in the schoolyard we spoke a mixture, but in our home we spoke English."

Despite their fondness for good stories, the Weinerts knew how to keep secrets. If they hadn't they'd have probably lost their jobs

because over a period of many years they knew among themselves more about what was going on in Neustadt than any other family in the village.

Historian Weinert's brother Arthur was CNR station agent and knew everybody and every piece of baggage or freight that left or arrived in town.

Her father Jacob was postmaster, so he knew who got mail from whom, while her mother managed the manually-operated telephone switchboard at a time when switchboard operators couldn't help overhearing a good bit of phone conversations.

Weinert herself became a school teacher, a job she kept for 26 years, teaching as many as 44 pupils from all eight elementary grades in a one-room school for a salary which never rose above \$1,000 annually.

Since her schools were never located too far from the home community, she too heard a good deal of what happened.

Weinert's experiences as a teacher led her to become a strong supporter of the Ontario

School Teachers' Federation, and she still attends the organization's meetings twice a year.

It also brought her into contact with another rural teacher named Agnes McPhail who became her life-long friend, and later Canada's first woman member of parliament.

Weinert finally gave up her teaching career in 1947 and came home to nurse her mother and replace her on the family's telephone switchboard after the latter fell and broke her leg.

One job at which she stayed even longer than teaching was that of organist in St. Joseph's Catholic Church here. She took over the organ first in 1916 and continued to play it with very few missed Sundays for the next 68 years, resigning the position only in 1984 when she was 88. She still plays the piano for recreation.

Despite a serious operation for bowel cancer two years ago, she appears to have recovered completely, and can be seen walking briskly around town doing her shopping and, of course, talking with fellow visitors.