

Lesley George “Les” Leonard **Nominated by Thom Gerretsen**

Les Leonard was one of three people who started Marshfield’s annual Dairyfest. That alone should make him one of the 150 most notable residents during our city’s first 150 years.



There’s more, of course. Les (1923-2016) is a Marshfield native who became a pioneer in farm radio broadcasting in Milwaukee. He later came home to share his vast knowledge of Wisconsin and Midwest agriculture – not just on the air, but on the fertile lands of the community where he was raised.

Les joined the Milwaukee Stockyards in 1953 where he developed the Milwaukee Livestock Market Report for radio. In 1973, he moved his broadcast home to Madison as the farm director for WISC-TV, Channel 3. Three years later, Les returned to his final abode in Marshfield with his wife Virginia. He became WDLB Radio’s farm director while hosting an early morning show. He also served the Equity Livestock Cooperative and brought a fresh resource of agricultural knowledge to our community.

As the 1980s began, Les joined with then-Marshfield Mayor Marilyn Hardacre and local mobile home magnate Elmer Frey to create an annual festival that provides communitywide thanks to the largest industry in both our area and state: agriculture. More specifically, Dairyfest recognizes dairy farming and its many related institutions that employ thousands of Marshfield area residents.

The first Dairyfest was a giant breakfast which later became the opening event each Friday after Memorial Day. Up to 3,000 people have attended each year’s Mayor’s Breakfast, which also serves as a signature event for Wisconsin’s June Dairy Month. Numerous Dairyfest weekend events were later added, including a Saturday parade viewed by up to 20,000 people. The city’s 40th June Dairyfest took place in 2021 with numerous safety precautions as the COVID-19 pandemic continued.

Meanwhile, Les’ community influence moved into a different direction. In 1982, he helped Marshfield Clinic start an annual Auction of Champions – a gala event that features the sale of meat from farm animals judged as champions at each year’s Central Wisconsin State Fair. As of 2021, this banquet has raised about \$4 million for ag-related health research at the Clinic’s National Farm Medicine Center.

Later in the 1980s, Les created the foundation for WDLB’s parent company, Goetz Broadcasting, to start a statewide network of farm news and agricultural information. The Goetz Farm Radio Network served more than 40 stations with daily programs and broadcasts from Wisconsin’s largest agricultural events that included World Dairy Expo and Wisconsin Farm Technology Days. Les received numerous honors for his pioneering broadcast efforts and industry service. In 1992, he was inducted into the Wisconsin Broadcasters Association’s Hall of Fame.

Les Leonard cultivated the groundwork for many other farm broadcasters who advanced the craft into cyberspace and the Internet era.