

Bakers recall depression years

Rural electrification saved Baker Electric

Turn on the electric lights. Or the blender. Or the hair drier. Nothing to it.

It wasn't always that way. Ed Baker remembers the way it was before homes had electricity because he was

the one who wired hundreds of homes in this area for the first time.

At age 78, the veteran

electrician has finally retired. When he and his wife came to Cass City, they

weren't planning to stay. Helen Baker came first, in the fall of 1925, to teach home economics at the high

school. They were married in August, 1926, her husband having come here from Hastings, where he worked for Consumers Power Co., installing electric lines. In Cass City, he worked for three years for Burke's Drug Store (now Coach Light Pharmacy), having worked for drug stores in Hastings before going to work for Consumers.

Mrs. Baker grew up in Middleville, near Hastings. She and her husband met in 1923 while she was attending then Michigan State College and he accompanied a friend who was going to pick up his (the friend's) girl friend at the end of the school year.

Mrs. Baker taught here two years, then got a job teaching at Saginaw High School, commuting home week ends for a year.

They then moved to Saginaw where Baker worked a few months for Consumers Power as a salesman.

Consumers had started running power lines to the Au Gres - Point Lookout area on the north side of Saginaw Bay.

Baker and a partner took advantage of the opportunity and organized their own company to install wiring, mostly in cottages in that area. They did about 150 jobs.

Electricians first had to be licensed by the state in 1939. Baker served on the state licensing examination board in the early 1940s.

BUT THE DEPRESSION arrived, and the couple decided they should move back to Cass City. "We thought this was the cheapest place to live," Mrs. Baker explained. Plus, she was pregnant and her doctor was in Cass City.

The Bakers returned in the fall of 1931 and son Jim was born that December. They rented a house on S. Seeger Street and Baker resumed his electric business, minus a partner.

Business was slim until Detroit Edison Co. bought out Michigan Electric Power Co. in late 1933 and the next year, started running power lines out in the country. Until then, electricity was only available in town. "Up until that time,"

Baker explained, "it was just nip and tuck. In other words, we didn't know where our next loaf of bread was coming from."

But with lots of potential customers, business boomed.

Baker rented a store where the Ben Franklin store is now. "It wasn't long before they would be lined up on Saturday nights (downtown stores were open then), to see if you could do their job next."

Baker had from 6-8 employees wiring farm homes and barns. The average job cost \$150-300, which was a lot of money, especially since it was the Depression. "They sacrificed for that," said Mrs. Baker, who did the bookkeeping for her husband the many years he was in business. "That was a priority."

(The rule of thumb today is that wiring a new home, including installing fixtures and outlets, costs 10 percent of the total cost, or about \$4,000 and up.) The normal job in the 1930s, was installing ceiling lights in rooms, a few outlets, and lights in the barn and a yard light.

The first priority, the Bakers said, was installing an electric motor on the water pump. Most farmers then were using gasoline engine driven pumps, though there were a few windmills still around.

Inside, the first electrical appliances most homes had were a toaster and iron.

A second boost to the business came when the federally-funded Rural Electrification Administration was formed in 1937 and extended power lines to areas too sparse to meet Detroit Edison's requirement of a minimum of four homes per mile. Fewer than that, and it didn't pay for Edison to run power lines.

By the early 1940s, Baker figures everyone in this area had electricity.

A CHANGE CAME FOR Baker Electric in 1963, when the firm did the wiring for the first General Cable plant. The business started shifting from residential work to commercial and industrial, and for the past 10 years, except for an occasional home and minor repair job, that's all it did.

Work ranged from wiring entire buildings to wiring for installation of manufacturing equipment to maintenance.

Baker almost retired in 1971, but then his son Jim, an electronics engineer, decided to return to Cass City with his family from his job in Wisconsin, which required a lot of travel.

Baker Electric became a father and son operation, until July, 1978, when the latter went to work for General Cable as an electronics engineer, with whom he had been previously employed.

In addition to Jim, the Bakers have two other children, Mary Ellen (Mrs. Wayne) Wilson, Auburn Heights, and Robert, principal of John Glenn Junior High School in Bay City, and five grandchildren.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN logical for Baker to retire after his son left in 1978, but the firm had two other employees, Randy Bergh and Mick Kirm, who were not yet licensed electricians.

His boss decided to stay in business long enough for them to complete the required apprenticeship and pass their examinations. "When they got their licenses and could go on their own, that was it," said Baker, who officially ended his business Oct. 1. Bergh has now started his own business and Kirm is employed by Martin Electric.

For the past few years, Baker had restricted himself to making estimates, inspecting, buying and pricing, while leaving the physical work to his younger associates.

Retirement doesn't mean he will slow down.

He has been an active Boy Scout leader in various capacities for 37 years earning the rarely bestowed Silver Beaver award in the process, and presently is a member of Lake Huron Area Council.

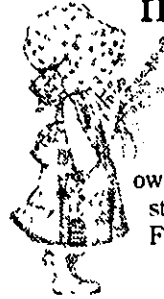
He is setting up a shop in his garage with various wood and metal working power tools so he can build various projects.

"If you sit down, you know the old man with a scythe is around," he explained. "I figure if you keep moving around, maybe he won't catch you as quick."

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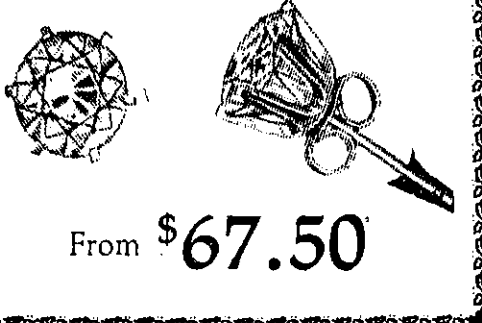
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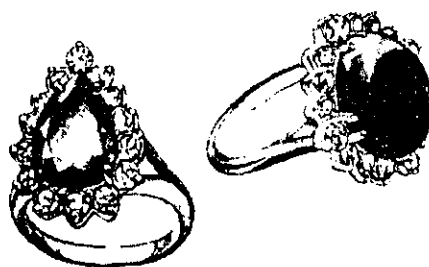
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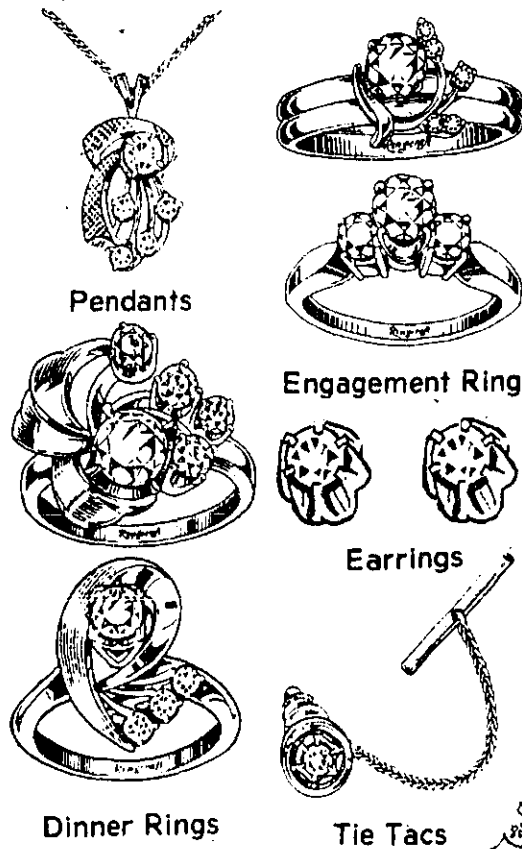
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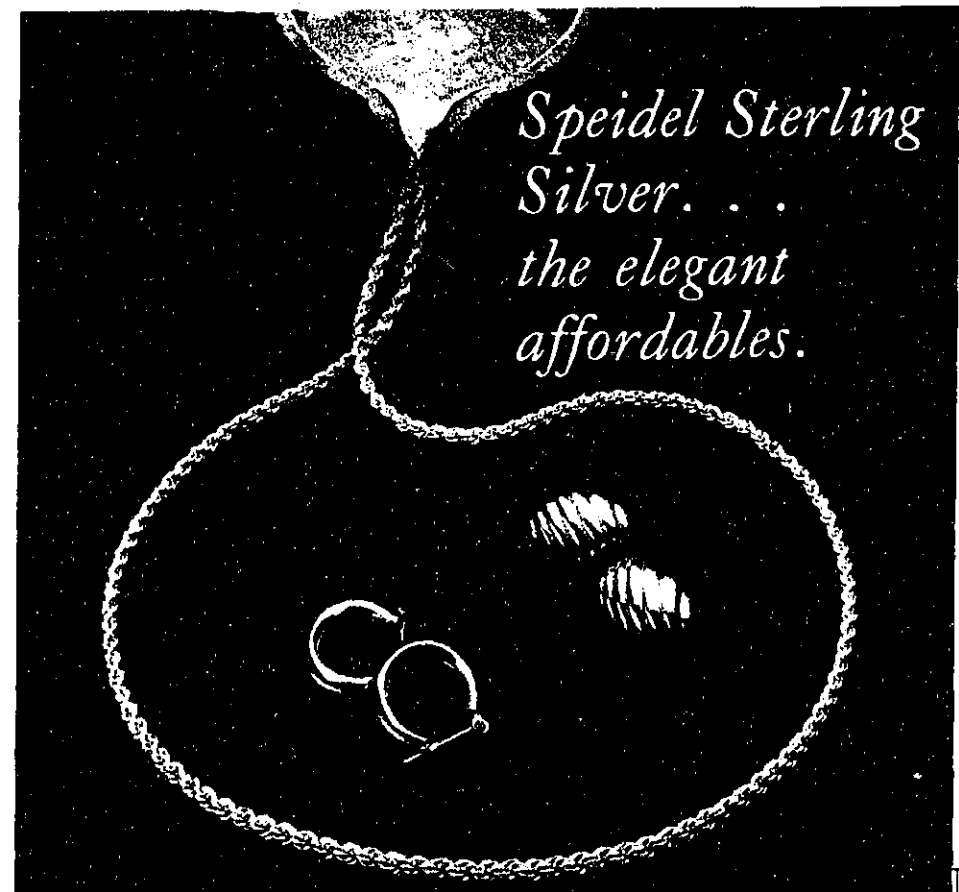
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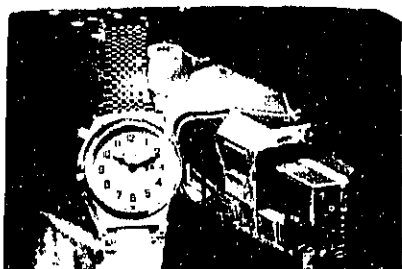
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ELEVENTH RAILROAD APPROVES BULOVA

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway recently added its name to the list of ten Railroads that have approved Bulova Accutron Quartz Railroad models for their operating personnel this year.

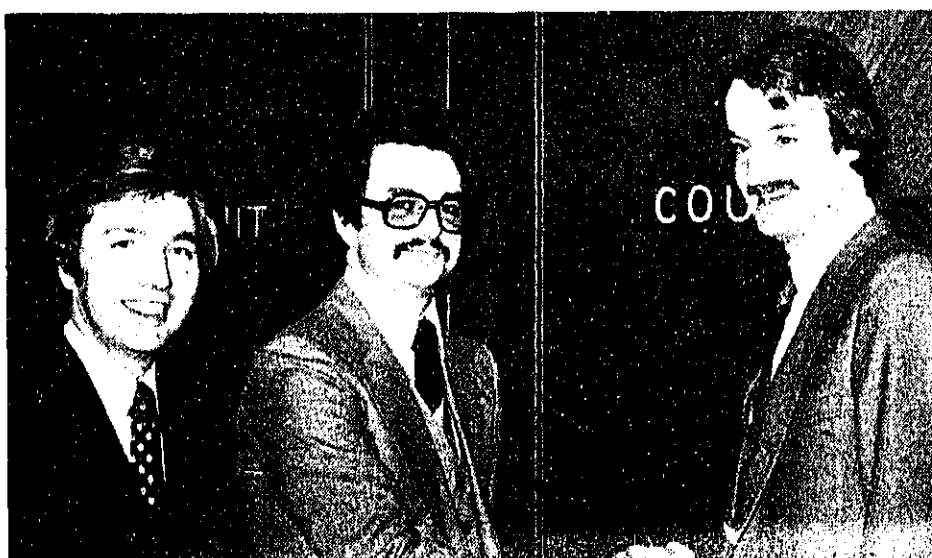


McConkey Jewelry and Gift Shop

Cass City



HELEN AND ED BAKER



NEW LAWYER — Admitted to the bar Monday by Tuscola County Circuit Judge Norman A. Baguley was Kim David Glaspie (center), receiving congratulations from Thomas P. Collon, an associate in the Pigeon law firm of Clabuesch Associates. Looking on is David Clabuesch of the firm. Glaspie, who will also be an associate, is a graduate of Cooley Law School in Lansing and the son of Mr. and Mrs. Grant Glaspie of Cass City.