

The 1897 Charley Vorm Memorial Scholarship

Charley Vorm's birth certificate had no name; it simply said, "A son was born to Mr. and Mrs. Fred Vorm." So, later in life, upon being asked what he wanted his name to be, he replied, "Well, everybody's always called me Charley!" He was born in 1897 in the true "Wild West" territory which was not yet claimed by the United States as the state of Nevada.



He lived there until he was about five years old when his mother began to suffer from severe homesickness for Denmark, where she had grown up. Charley's dad, Fred, then moved the family back to Denmark, where Charley attended numerous schools.

According to his son, Charley carried a chip on his shoulder in his youth due to his small size in his comparatively tall family. He fought often, and his father finally hired a retired headmaster of a German reform school to be his private tutor. It was obvious to the headmaster that Charley did not learn well while sitting still, so they spent much of the next two years walking and talking during his lessons.

At the end of these two years, Charley took a four-year apprenticeship as a tin smith. As the apprenticeship came to an end, he started his own tin smith business at just nineteen years old. This was during the First World War, however, and Denmark soon informed him that he was still a U.S. citizen, and that the Danish government would not house him during the War. When given the ultimatum to either change his citizenship or leave the country, he chose to move back to the United States, a country with which he was no longer familiar. Just before he left to return to Nevada, his father decided to accompany him, and Charley's mother and two sisters followed soon after.

While traveling across the United States, Charley and Fred happened to stop in North Judson, which in those years was a major rail transfer point. They spent the night in the town and explored the area, talking to townspeople and discovering the town's attributes. Its chief resources were its many rail lines, which made transportation easy and accessible, and its topography, notably its sand hills and marshes.

Seeing great opportunity, they very quickly decided to take out the necessary money from what is now the First Farmer's Bank using their traveler's letter of credit. They then bought an old padding factory and established American Oak in 1916 as a preserving operation to process oak leaves from the trees found on the sand hills.

At this time, Charley was still just nineteen, bald, and running American Oak, which triggered the nickname "Old Man". He was very capable and a great businessman. Ownership of American Oak fluctuated, however; Fred sold his half and moved back to Denmark. Charley, at one point, also sold his half, and some time later bought all of it back.

At the time when his ownership was temporarily discontinued, Charley moved to Denmark for a year. Before leaving North Judson, he met Esther Anderson when she was visiting her aunt and staying in the same boarding house in which he lived. They wrote to each other while he was in Europe, and he soon proposed marriage in a letter. When she accepted, he moved back to the United States, and they were married.

After buying back American Oak, he expanded the company immensely, importing materials from all over the world. He stayed with the business until 1960, when he retired to Scottsdale, Arizona, and left the company to be run by his sons, Fred and Nels. Less than a year later, Nels tragically passed away in a plane crash. Fred owned and ran the company thereafter.

Charley stayed in Arizona for the rest of his life. He and Esther divorced after thirty-two years of marriage, and she moved to Florida. Charley was later remarried to Emily Kozubik.

Over the years, Charley traveled the world, including to Africa, India, Australia, and Alaska, and was soon known as one of the world's most renowned big-game hunters; he hunted polar bears, lions, tigers, elephants, kudu, gazelle, and more. In his home in Arizona, he kept a trophy room which held his sixty-two trophies. He also was an incredible photographer, filming movies which his son, Fred, said were "just as good as Disney's."

In 1985, Nels's son, Charles Vorm, became the President of American Oak and Chairman of the Board, and he remains so today. Along with his three daughters, he runs the company operations and continues its expansion, manufacturing in both Indiana and Mexico and importing products from Kenya, Italy, India, China, the Philippines, and many other countries around the world.

The 1897 Charley Vorm Memorial Scholarship was established by Charley's wife, Emily Vorm, in 1998 in order to honor Charley and his dedication to the North Judson community.

The renewable scholarship is awarded to graduating seniors of North Judson-San Pierre High School who plan to seek a bachelor's degree at an accredited college or university in Indiana. Students must have attended high school in Indiana for four years and must be in the top 20% of their graduating class.