

Author Honored

Distinguished Grad's life shaped in Butler

By Lori Dudek
Eagle Correspondent

Nearly 70 years ago, a young soldier prepared to leave his home in North Butler. Destined for Europe, he must have wondered if he would ever see his hometown again.

Although Chester Aaron, now an award-winning author, has not visited his hometown of Butler since he left so long ago, the people and places that shaped his youth, and ultimately his life, live on through his writing.

Aaron of Occidental, Calif., with 26 published works to his credit, reaches deep into his personal life and experience growing up in Butler in the years leading up to World War II. His first adult novel, "About Us," published in 1956, is the autobiographical tale of Aaron's life as a boy in North Butler. At the time, it was a rural coal-mining community populated by poor European immigrants. His family was the only Jewish family in his community. A sequel, "About Them," is slated for release on July 1.

The 88-year-old Aaron also was recently named a Butler High School Distinguished Graduate by the BHS Class of 2011. The announcement was made June 3 during the BHS commencement ceremony. Aaron is a 1941 alumnus of BHS.

"The students look at what an individual has achieved over their lifetime," said Jeff Schnur, principal at BHS. "The kids take this very seriously. They look for someone who is not only good at their craft, but has also reached out into the community."

While serving in World War II, Aaron was part of the American forces that rescued Jewish prisoners at Dachau concentration camp. Following his military service, he earned degrees at the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State University. He was a literature and writing professor at St. Mary's College of California, and still teaches continuing education courses at Santa Rosa Junior College.

Aaron also helped design a weekly workshop for 28 fifth-grade students at a California

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Chester Aaron,
1941 Butler graduate

school to learn to write short stories. The students recently published a collection of their finished works.

The Distinguished Graduate award is well deserved, according to Schnur.

As if being a distinguished teacher and author is not enough, Aaron is also a recognized expert on growing garlic, a passion that has its roots in Butler.

"My father had a little garden behind the store in North Butler," Aaron said. "And when I had an ear ache, he would squeeze garlic in my ear."

Aaron said that as a soldier in World War II, he would often see Russian soldiers use garlic cloves to treat their wounds. "They had a recovery rate that was as good as (Americans) and we had penicillin," he said.

Aaron's interest in growing garlic led him to collect more and more species from all over the world. At the peak, he was growing and shipping more than 40 different species of garlic. It was, in fact, Aaron's renown in growing the bulbous plant that brought him full circle.

Former Cranberry residents Mark and Mary Ellen Banks, now of Aspers, Pa., had heard of Aaron's extensive cultivation of garlic. Mary Ellen Banks' mother also had an interest in growing garlic. When the Bankses were planning a trip to California in January 2004, they contacted and met with Aaron to purchase some garlic as a birthday gift for Mrs. Banks.

They soon discovered Aaron was a Butler native. The Bankses and Aaron quickly became friends. When the Banks saw a Butler Eagle article about

the BHS Distinguished Graduate Award in 2008, they decided to nominate Aaron the following year.

Many of Aaron's works weren't published until he was retired.

"To me, that means he is a shining example of how to age gracefully and be engaged and connected to the surroundings and people around you," said Mary Ellen Banks. And yet, he is very humble and modest.

West Sunbury residents Mark and Margie Riddell also met Aaron in California. As friends of the Bankses, they were introduced to Aaron during travels to California's wine country.

"We chatted for hours," said Mark Riddell. "He knew many people of my wife's grandparents' generation. It was like a very small world came together. ... I wish I could have gone back in time and walked the streets with him, because it would have been a lot of fun."

Aaron's newest book is a sequel to the award-winning novel, "About Us." In the sequel, the autobiographical character of Ben Kahn is returning to his hometown following the unexpected death of a childhood friend. He reconnects with his childhood love, a daughter of the town's only black family.

As the details of long-hidden family secrets are unearthed, Aaron weaves a story that is gritty and graphic, and mostly true, he said. He relies on his intuition to decide what to include and what to leave out.

Each tale has a purpose, he explained.

"I believe in writing as closely to the truth as I can make it," he said. "As closely as to what I believe the truth to be."

In "About Them," Aaron includes the story of a male character who is found in the woods, naked and badly assaulted. He is found and saved by a family friend named Kenny Greenaway.

"The incident in the Kenny Greenaway story is true," Aaron said. "That really happened." Aaron said he has been asked why he chose to include the details of a disturbing sexual assault, when he has living relatives.

"I wanted to demonstrate both a story about hate and a story about love," Aaron said. "Kenny Greenaway helped us."

Throughout his work, Aaron writes of the real-life struggles and triumphs of his poor Jewish family in a non-Jewish coal-mining town during the years leading up to World War II. Although Aaron changes the names of Butler and North Butler to Summer and Sundown, locals can easily pick out landmarks such as Connoquenessing Creek and Cummings Store.

Aaron said "About Us" is about his family's experiences. As the only Jewish family in the small community, his family formed a particularly close bond with the town's only black family. A glaring omission in the story line became Aaron's motiva-

tion to write a sequel, he explained.

"The daughter, who is now gone, reminded me that we left them out of that novel," Aaron said. "And that is what provoked my writing this novel." The omission of the Taylor family becomes a central theme in "About Them," as Aaron, through the fictional character of Ben Kahn, tackles issues of race, religion and prejudice.

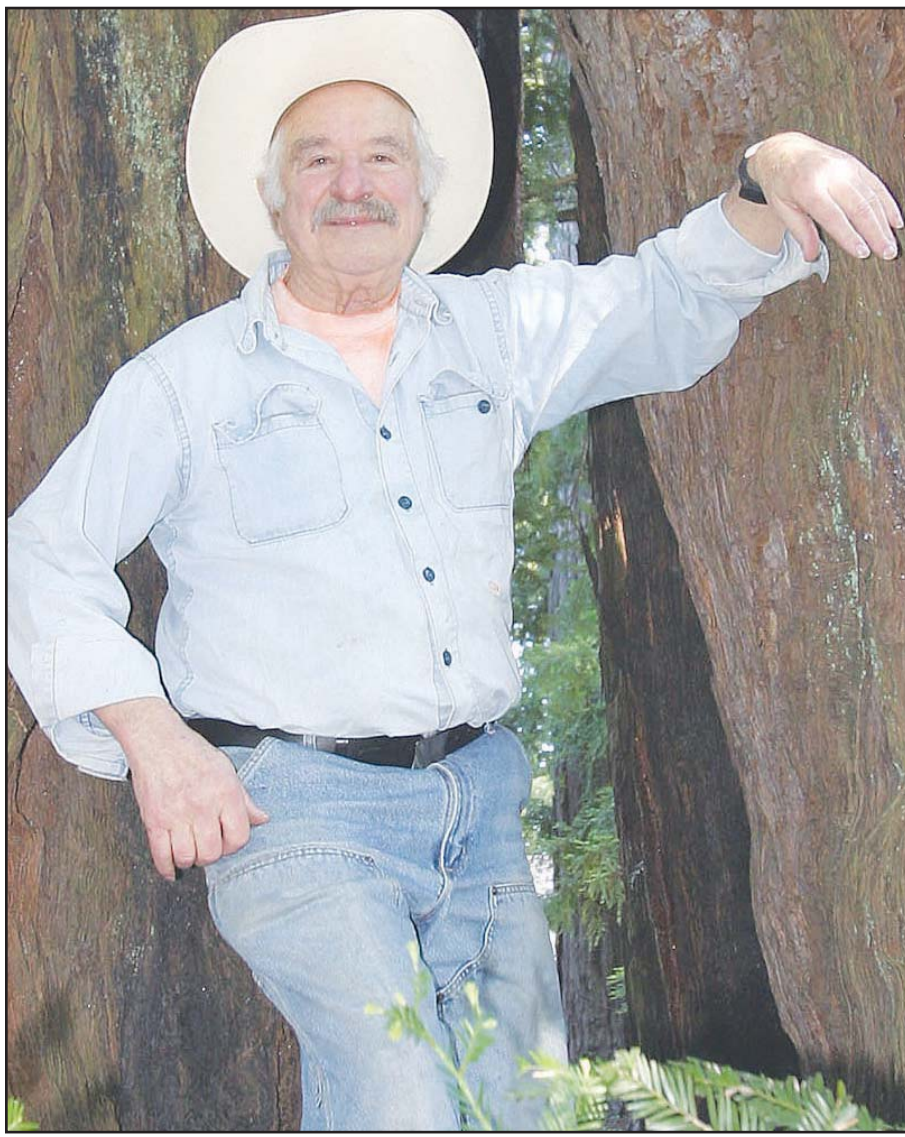
Aaron said many Jewish families living in Butler couldn't understand why his family chose to live in what was then a rural community apart from other Jews.

"There was no animosity, no anger, but there certainly was tension," he said. Yet he remembers a local man, Bernard Levine, who still lives in Butler, as "one of our closest Jewish friends in town."

"I haven't talked to Bernie in 50 years," Aaron said. But Levine recently called him when he saw a news article about the Distinguished Graduate award in the Eagle.

"I remember him sitting on the porch of my father's store when we were little kids," Aaron said of Levine. "It just goes on and on. My childhood just keeps coming back to me, and I keep writing about it."

"About Them," scheduled for release July 1, is available on Amazon.com or through Small Press Distribution at 510-524-1668.



Chester Aaron, the 2011 Butler High School Distinguished Graduate, has 26 published books to his credit, including "About Us," "An American Ghost," "Garlic Is Life: A Memoir with Recipes" and "Lackawanna: A Novel." He also served in World War II and at one time grew and shipped more than 40 different species of garlic. The Butler native and 1941 BHS alumnus now lives in Occidental, Calif. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Portable pools as risky as in-ground versions

Supervision is paramount

By Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The first U.S. study on child drownings in portable pools finds that a child dies every five days in such a pool during warm-weather months.

The research being published Monday in the journal Pediatrics shows 209 deaths and 35 near-drownings of children younger than 12 from 2001 through 2009. Most of the children, 94 percent, were under 5, and 81 percent of the incidents happened during summer months.

"The anecdotal evidence was suggesting that because portable pools are readily available in many convenience stores and malls, and they're relatively cheap, parents would pick them up, take them home, quickly assemble them, and all this would be done without a lot of forethought about the safety aspects," said senior

author, Dr. Gary A. Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus.

The study focused on portable pools, from small wading pools less than 18 inches deep to inflatable pools and other soft-sided pools that can reach depths of 4 feet. It was conducted by researchers at Nationwide hospital and Independent Safety Consulting in Rockville, Md. They say the findings are comparable to drownings related to in-ground pools.

The Association of Pool & Spa Professionals supports "layers of protection," and the study underscores the importance of active, undistracted adult supervision, said Carvin DiGiovanni, a senior director at the Alexandria, Va.-based association.

"The primary layer of protection is constant adult supervision supplemented by barriers, alarms and other related devices," he said. "We encourage homeowners to purchase the

additional layer of protection that works for them knowing that they would be more likely to use it."

The study shows that children were supervised by adults in fewer than half, 43 percent, of the drownings and near-drownings, and that most, 73 percent, were at home.

Smith said drownings overall represent the second-leading cause of injury deaths among young children and are different from other childhood accidents because there's no second chance.

Among other data, the report shows CPR was administered before emergency crews arrived in 15 percent of the fatalities and 17 percent of near-drownings.

These numbers help show "it's time for us to begin requiring that people learn how to do CPR," perhaps by adding it to high school curricula, said Susan Baker, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research & Policy in Baltimore.

BULLETIN BOARD

TONIGHT

FREE COMMUNITY MEAL, 5 to 6 p.m., First United Methodist Church, 200 E. North St.

REFORMERS UNANIMOUS ADDICTION PROGRAM, 7 to 9:30 p.m., Hannahstown Road Baptist Church, 250 Hannahstown Road, Cabot, 724-352-1890.

DANCE, 7 to 10 p.m., Donegal Grange, 851 E. Slippery Rock Road, Chicora. Music by Country Limits Band. Couples and singles welcome. Call 724-287-8900 for information.

SATURDAY

BUTLER FARMERS MARKET, open 7:30 a.m. to noon, intersections of Chestnut, Race and Shore Streets.

FREE COMMUNITY MEAL, 5 to 6 p.m., New Beginnings Free Methodist Church, 416 Center Ave.

STUFFED PORK CHOP DINNER, 4 to 6 p.m., Butler Moose Lodge, 225 W. Jefferson St.

STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL AND SPOON SUPPER with sloppy Joes, ham barbecue, chili dogs and side dishes, 4:30 to 7 p.m., Wolf Creek Presbyterian Church, Church, Route 108 four miles west of Slippery Rock and one mile

east of I-79. Takeouts available.

PUBLIC CARD PARTY, 7:30 p.m., Jefferson Grange, 211 Bullcreek Road, Jefferson Township.

SINGLES DANCE, 8 to 11 p.m., Mars VFW, 331 Mars-Valencia Road, Mars. Dance lesson from 7 to 8 p.m. For information, call 724-352-7687 or 724-625-1910.

MONDAY

FREE HOT MEAL, 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., Salvation Army Open Door Feeding Program, 313 W. Cunningham St.

BUTLER FARMERS MARKET, open 2 to 6 p.m., intersection of Chestnut,

Race and Shore Streets.

FREE COMMUNITY MEAL, 5 to 6 p.m. at First English Lutheran Church, 241 N. Main St. Hosted jointly with Grace Lutheran, Jefferson Center Presbyterian and Christ Community Methodist churches.

TAKE OFF POUNDS SENSIBLY meeting, 5:30 p.m. following weigh-in at 5 p.m., Trinity Lutheran Church, 120 Sunset Drive. For information, call Darlene at 724-865-3283 or Peggy at 724-283-9621.

AL-ANON MEETING, 8 p.m., Mt. Chestnut Presbyterian Church, 727 W. Old Route 422. Newcomers arrive at 7:30 p.m.

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