

Veterinarian praised for actions

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By Rosemary Horvath Staff Writer

Norm Keon of St. Louis wasn't shy about showering praise on Missaukee County veterinarian Dr. Alpha Clark.

In 1973, the country veterinarian conducted a self-guided investigation into why prized dairy herds he had doctored suddenly became sickened and deformed.

It was Clark's steadfastness and single-handed fight against controlling powers statewide that finally uncovered the PBB contamination disaster. Keon, an epidemiologist for several district [health](#) departments, including Mid-Michigan District Health, spoke at a monthly meeting of the Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force.

He recounted details of his friendship with Clark and how he helped arrange for Clark to donate a treasure-trove of archives to the Clarke Historical Museum on the campus of Central Michigan University.

The word hero really fits him, Keon said of the now octogenarian who put his career on the line back then.

Now tending to small animals in his limited practice, Clark had taken Keon on a tour of the back roads around McBain and Falmouth where the devastation occurred.

Thousands of diseased herds, stricken by the polybrominated biphenyl, or PBB, were slaughtered and buried at select sites in that area as well as numerous sites across the state.

Clark had reminisced about the strong Dutch heritage that guided area farmers into raising prized cattle and beautiful farms.

Keon said Clark was as devastated over the outcome as the [farm](#) families who watched as their livelihoods disintegrated.

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Keon said he wrote down every word Clark had uttered.

The saga of how the toxic fire retardant chemical laced with PBB had been switched for a special supplement for dairy cattle at the Michigan Chemical plant in St. Louis was chronicled in the book *The Poisoning of Michigan*. Written by investigative journalist Joyce Egginton, the book was republished in 1980 by Michigan State University Press.

Keon encouraged task force members to read the book even if they know something of the PBB disaster already.

Egginton writes in detail about the [court](#) proceedings at which Clark had testified as to why he suspected PBB poisoning.

A portion of the test samples he had sent to Michigan Department of Agriculture conflicted with a set he sent to a private lab in Wisconsin.

The latter confirmed Clark's suspicions whereas MDA and state officials refused to admit the cattle feed distributed through Farm Bureau Services had been tainted.

Clark had 10 boxes filled with material chronicling the ordeal. This includes exhibits from court proceedings for which Clark testified on behalf of a farm family that sued to recover their loss.

The trial lasted 14 months and was considered the longest trial ever in Michigan.

Although the couple lost the case, it drew enough attention for state officials and a 45-member research team from Mt. Sinai Medical Center and the University of Michigan to test 3500 people to determine how the chemical affected their health.

The Clarke Historical Museum is located inside the CMU's Park Library building. The Alpha Clark material has not yet been fully processed but is available for researchers.