

Community mourns the death of an icon

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Gerry Frank, Salem's most famous citizen and more connected to the business, political and civic roots of this community than anyone before him, died Sunday morning. He was 98.

Everyone knew Frank. If you didn't, you should have.

He was a businessman, an author, a philanthropist and a champion of all things Salem and Oregon. He helped raise more than a half billion dollars for various civic projects and nonprofit organizations. That's half a billion, with a B.

"He's probably touched every person in this community with his generosity," Barry Nelson of the Rotary Club of Salem once said.

Frank was involved with so many activities and organizations there's never been enough space to list them in all the times the Statesman Journal has written about him, ranging from the American Cancer Society to the World War II Memorial.

He was a World War II veteran and a Cambridge University graduate.

He was a fourth-generation Oregonian whose family founded the retail chain Meier & Frank. He spearheaded the opening of its first branch store in Salem in 1955, which is what brought him to this community.

Frank became a fixture of Oregon politics, as U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield's right-hand man.

He later became the sole judge of a chocolate cake contest at the Oregon State Fair and the co-founder of a gourmet cake shop and restaurant. He also was the author of guidebooks for New York and Oregon.

As proud as he was of all that, it was his work in the trenches of this community that endeared him to so many.

He was a board member or trustee to dozens of community organizations, including Blanchet Catholic School, Cascade Pacific Council of the Boy Scouts of America, Oregon Historical Society, Oregon State Police Foundation and Special Olympics Oregon. Even when he turned 90, he still held positions for 18 different organizations.

Every organization wanted Frank's presence or his checkbook, preferably both. One year, he received 300 invitations to speak at events.

"You wish you could do everything people ask you to do," he once said, "which obviously is not possible."

Even so, Frank could be spotted at just about every civic and social event in town, often wearing pastel-colored shirts and ties, or eye-catching sweaters in cooler weather, and always a pair of funky loafers or brightly colored sneakers.

And, yes, he was a master fundraiser involved with dozens of efforts, including campaigns for the Salvation Army Kroc Center, Oregon Garden, Oregon Coast Aquarium, Oregon High Desert Museum and Oregon Symphony.

Prospective donors had a tough time saying no to him.

He had a tough time saying no, too. When he donated \$1 million to help build the Kroc Center in north Salem, it was almost secondary.

"He actually probably gave more than that by his influence," said Dick Withnell, a friend and fellow businessman and philanthropist.

Being "Oregon's Premier Citizen," by gubernatorial proclamation in 2000, came with a price. Only Frank knew just how hefty that price was.

"I am public property 24 hours a day. I have no private life whatsoever," he said during a 2017 interview. "That's not always easy, but it's been that way all my life."

To be frank, he brought some of that on himself. He was a quintessential self-promoter. His office-turned-museum displayed mementos from all his hobnobbing and globe-trotting.

Frank could have planted roots anywhere, but he chose Salem. He lived in the same house he had built in 1954 in the Candalaria neighborhood until he died, and his love and concern for the community never wavered.

"If I were writing about me," he once said over lunch at the Konditorei, "I would emphasize how fortunate I feel to be able to spend (more than) a half-century in this city. I stayed because I love the community and I love the people here."

Born into privilege

Gerald Wendel Frank was born Sept. 21, 1923, in Portland, the son of Aaron and Ruth Frank.

His father was a no-nonsense businessman who as president of Meier & Frank turned it into one of the leading retail stores in the Northwest. His mother was the exact opposite, nurturing and loving.

"My father taught me the toughness of being a businessman," Frank once said. "My mother taught me the importance of loving people and having a soft side."

He spent more time with his Scottish governess than either of his parents. Mrs. Anne "Roy" Munro came to the Frank family when Gerry was a year old, teaching him the importance of manners. Frank kept in touch with her almost daily until she died.



Gerry Frank stands overlooking Willamette Valley Vineyards, one of his favorite local places that are included in his guide book, "Gerry Frank's Oregon." Frank, Salem's most famous citizen, died Sunday morning at the age of 98. STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

His mother died of a stroke in her 40s, and his father died in his 70s. His older brother also died relatively young, in his 40s, leaving five nephews and nieces with whom Frank was close.

Frank attended public schools, graduating from Lincoln High in 1940. One of his fondest memories at Ainsworth Grammar School was running for mayor and winning the election on his 13th birthday.

That didn't pave the way for a future in politics, although he had a great uncle who served as Oregon's governor in the 1930s, and he would later work for a U.S. senator.

He also rebuffed multiple pleas to run for local office.

"I quit while I was ahead," he said. Frank's childhood was one of privilege. His family had two homes, spending summers on what he called "The Farm," which was in Garden Home near present-day Beaverton.

His father purchased the idyllic property because he wanted a place for his treasured show horses, with indoor and outdoor tracks and two stables.

It eventually became the family's full-time residence. In addition to a governess, the family's staff included a housekeeper, a farrier and a head gardener.

Frank, who drove a new Cadillac when he was in high school, never knew he was being brought up differently than anyone until he put on a military uniform.

From the battlefield to Cambridge

He attended Loyola and Stanford universities before joining the Army in 1943 and serving in the European Theater of Operations during World War II.

He was a sergeant major in the field artillery of the 89th Infantry Division, 3rd Army. His division took part in offensives that crossed the Moselle and Rhine rivers and overran Ohrdruf, the first Nazi concentration camp liberated by U.S. troops.

He undervalued his role and that of his unit in a letter home, dated April 9, 1945, and published nearly seven decades later in a book about Frank published by Jan Boutin:

"Naturally, all are very proud of the achievement the division has made in the short time we have been in combat — too much credit cannot be given to the infantrymen. After all, they are the ones who really do the fighting. The artillery, where I am, is just a supporting hand."

In another letter, he described the German countryside as lovely, reminding him of Oregon.

With his service came great opportunity. The Army sponsored one soldier from each division — out of 15,000 — to attend European universities, and Frank was selected for a term at Cambridge.

After getting out of the Army, he returned to Cambridge to complete his Bachelor of Arts degree and get a Master of Arts, with honors. He was there from 1946 to 1948, the only American out of 300 or so students at Trinity Hall, one of the colleges.

Years later, in 2000, he was among a small group of distinguished graduates invited to dine on Thanksgiving with Queen Elizabeth II for the 650-year anniversary of Trinity Hall. His Royal Highness Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, was chancellor of the university at the time.

Guinea fowl instead of turkey was served, depriving Frank of one of his favorite dishes, but he said it was worth the once-in-a-lifetime experience.

"I had to pinch myself that this ex-rag merchant from Salem was dining with the queen," he said upon returning to Salem.

Meier & Frank branches out

Expansion of northwest retail giant Meier & Frank brought Frank to town. His father was president of the company when it began scouting locations for its first branch store.

"My dad and I on Sundays would drive around Salem and Eugene, the two obvious places for a store," Frank said. "Dad would put his coat collar up so nobody would recognize him. The minute word got out that Meier & Frank was looking

for property, the price would go up."

Eugene was further away from Portland and at the time the larger city, but there wasn't a favorable downtown site to build. A block became available in downtown Salem, making it the frontrunner.

The property, bounded by Center, Church, Marion and High streets, included the building that served as Salem's first high school. By the time Meier & Frank purchased the property and began demolition, it housed only school administration offices.

Frank was named the Salem store manager in 1953 and in preparation for the opening, spent a year traveling the world looking at new stores, shopping centers and parking garages. He visited department stores in London, Paris and Rome to get ideas for merchandise display.

The \$5 million, 183,000-square-foot Salem store, the largest in the state outside Portland, opened Oct. 27, 1955. A frenzied crowd of 75,000 people flocked to the store that day, more than half the population of Salem. Some came just to ride the novel escalators.

The store featured some of the most modern innovations in retail marketing, including an attached parking garage for 750 cars.

Frank did more than just manage the opening and day-to-day operations of a prosperous store that would anchor downtown for many years. He immediately got involved in the community, which he felt was important to the store's success. He joined the hospital board and became active in United Way, Chamber of Commerce and Boy Scouts, and that was just a start.

Frank resigned as vice president and manager of Meier & Frank in 1965, around the time a bitter intra-family battle erupted over potential buyout offers. The chain was acquired the following year by May Department Stores, which later sold to the parent company of Macy's.

It was difficult for Frank to watch the family business, which his great-grandfather Aaron Meier started in 1857, pass into corporate hands.

"There hasn't been a day since I left that people haven't said to me how much they miss Meier & Frank," Frank said during a recent interview.

Some say one of the main reasons he stayed in Salem and was so charitable was to thank the community for the department store's success.

Trading retail for politics

Frank met Mark Hatfield when they were named two of the state's most eligible bachelors by "The Oregonian" in 1956. Frank was running Meier & Frank at the time. Hatfield was an ambitious young state senator from Marion County and dean of students at Willamette University.

The two became friends, and Frank ultimately became Hatfield's closest advisor and chief of staff during two terms as governor and three decades on Capitol Hill.

Frank followed Hatfield to Washington, where he was a special advisor the first term, paid a token \$1 only so that he would be allowed on the Senate floor. He later took charge of Hatfield's office and did receive a salary.

He didn't need the money. He was a millionaire.

Frank was an influencer behind the scenes, widely known as "Oregon's third senator."

"Few people ever occupy such a confidential position with a decision-maker," Ted Kulongoski, then state insurance commissioner, said in a 1988 Statesman Journal article. "It's rare in the sense that an individual is willing to sacrifice the glory for somebody else. Call it maturity, sophistication or whatever — Gerry just acknowledges you don't have to have a microphone in front of you to be effective as an elected official."

Frank could have had his own career in politics, but he always said he didn't have the necessary ego.

Hatfield retired in 1997, having never lost an election, and Frank was a big reason.

The king of chocolate cake

Hatfield was responsible for the chocolate cake contest that bore Frank's name and became one of the longest-standing traditions at the Oregon State Fair.

After Frank helped organize his winning gubernatorial campaign in 1958, Hatfield asked if there was something he wanted in return. Thinking of his penchant for chocolate, he told Hatfield he'd like to judge chocolate cakes at the state fair.

As Frank liked to say, it was Hatfield's only political "payoff" in a long and esteemed career.

The Gerry Frank Chocolate Layer Cake Contest was launched in 1959, and Frank was the sole judge for 60 consecutive years through 2019. Each year, he ate 100 to 200 forkfuls of chocolate cake in just a few hours. Even for an admitted chocoholic, he relied on a "Pepto-Bismol sandwich" to endure, taking a swig of the pink elixir before and after.

Only a pandemic could force him to put the fork down.

A five-layer, milk chocolate cake with milk chocolate buttercream frosting became the foundation of the gourmet cake shop he and Barney Rogers opened in 1982. They met on the board of directors of Standard Insurance, of which Frank's grandfather was one of the founders.

Gerry Frank's Konditorei, the German word for a pastry and coffee shop, expanded over the years to serve breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week. The 40-seat café became a community landmark on the corner of Commercial and Kearney streets SE with its red and white awnings.

Frank became the sole owner in 2012 when he bought out Rogers, then sold the business in 2017 to a group that included his longtime manager. The café has since expanded.

Part of the deal was that his name would stay on the marquee and title.

Museum for an office

Frank was connected. The walls in the fifth-floor penthouse at Spinnaker Place in southeast Salem reminded a visitor just how connected.

That was his office for 20 years, and it was part boardroom, part museum.

Decorated from floor to ceiling with autographed portraits, all signed to Frank, they showcased the famous people he rubbed elbows with.

They included Bob Hope, Sammy Davis Jr., Lucille Ball, President George W. Bush, Queen Elizabeth and Tony Blair, just to name a few.

Visitors to Frank's office arrived and departed starstruck, thinking they'd just been to a museum, not a workspace.

"I'm used to it," Frank said. "I see them looking around and just sit here."

One wall in his office was devoted to Oregon politicians, with Hatfield in the center. Another photo showed Frank between then-Gov. Ted Kulongoski and first lady Mary Oberst, with Oberst giving Frank a smooch on the cheek.

Each encounter was special to Frank, some more than others. Meeting Mother Teresa ranked right up there with the greatest, and personal correspondence from her was among his most treasured mementos.

He visited her a few times in Calcutta, India, while he was chief of staff for Hatfield in the 1970s and 1980s, and another time when she came to Washington, D.C. and attended a prayer breakfast.

A subset of his collection included documents and photographs signed by all the presidents of the United States and all the presidents of the Continental Congress.

It took 20 years of perusing auctions and bookstore attics for him to complete.

Frank was persistent no matter what the endeavor.

In October 2020, he reluctantly moved out of his office, realizing it was time to downsize at his age. He shared much of the collection with businesses, restaurants and organizations across town and the state, places that were part of his life.

His only request was that the items be shared publicly, not locked up in a vault.

The large round table where so many plans were hatched and funds raised for community projects will have a new home at the YMCA. The stories that table could tell are the stuff of legend, like the time 20 business leaders gathered around it for a 2006 breakfast meeting, resulting in \$2 million in pledges in 20 minutes for the Kroc Center.

Many items went to the Oregon Historical Society, including items related to Hatfield and Meier & Frank. Kerry Tymchuk, executive director of the Portland museum, made three trips to Salem to collect the goods, including stacks of Frank's personal scrapbooks. There are more than 150 of them, first kept by his family, then by his assistants.

"It's a one-of-a-kind history of Oregon," Tymchuk said.

Capi Lynn is the Statesman Journal's news columnist. She writes about the people and history of this community, and Gerry Frank was a frequent subject of her columns over the years. Contact her at clynn@StatesmanJournal.com or 503-399-6710, or follow her on Twitter @CapiLynn and Facebook @CapiLynnSJ.