

Frank, Oregon businessman and civic leader, dies

By DOUGLAS PERRY
The Oregonian

He was Oregon's beloved local tourist, traveling the state's byways and reporting back to a large, enthusiastic audience.

For Gerry Frank, who died Sunday at 98, this was far from his only claim to Northwest fame. Before he began recommending day trips on KPTV's "Good Day Oregon" and highlighting favorite restaurants in a column for The Oregonian, he served as U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield's right-hand man for more than two decades.

When Frank stepped down as Hatfield's chief of staff in 1992, The Oregonian pointed out that he was "nearly as prominent as his boss."

For years, Frank was Salem's best-known restaurateur, holding court at Gerry Frank's Konditorei, where he offered up "his famous crushing handshake" to patrons and friends alike. He also promoted numerous charity endeavors over the years and served on a multitude of corporate boards. He even became a favorite of Big Apple connoisseurs after writing the top-selling travel guide, "Where to Find It, Buy It, Eat It in New York."

He was celebrated as Salem's "First Citizen" and its "most-eligible bachelor" — and as Oregon's "third senator."

When Frank turned 93 in 2016, popular conservative radio host Lars Larson heralded him as "the single greatest ambassador for Oregon and the Northwest."

Frank insisted he never expected to have such a multifaceted public career. "I thought I would be in the family business all my life," he said.

That business was, of course, the Meier & Frank Co., Oregon's biggest and best-known retailer throughout the 20th century. In its heyday, the department-store company's Northwest influence was so great, wrote former Meier & Frank store model Jan Boutin, that its "sales representatives joked that there were four major cities on the West Coast: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle and Meier & Frank."

Frank, the great-grandson of store founder Aaron Meier, was never Meier & Frank's mayor — that was his father Aaron Frank. But, as he later did for Hatfield, he served as its indefatigable major domo. He traveled extensively to discover the secrets of the world's top retailers, and in 1955 he personally put what he'd learned into practice as manager of the company's new Salem store.

Ten years later, the company's board suddenly forced his father out as chief executive. Amid bickering among members of the family, the company was sold to the St. Louis-based May Department Stores Co. Frank said the contentious battle for control of Meier & Frank was "the saddest" period of his life.

He never really got over it. "In Frank's view," The Oregonian wrote in 1977, "the most poisonous influ-



Michael Lloyd/For The Oregonian

Gerry Frank, mentor to politicians and businessmen for generations, celebrates his 93rd birthday at the Roger Yost Gallery in Salem in September 2016.

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ence in Oregon has been the control of business by owners from outside the state who don't have a stake, a real emotional tie' here."

Gerald W. Frank was born in Portland on Sept. 21, 1923, eight years before his great-uncle, Julius Meier, became Oregon governor. His privileged childhood was offset by his father's work ethic and his mother's social obligations, and he admitted he spent more time with his governess than with his parents. Frank graduated from Lincoln High School, served in the military during World War II, and attended Stanford University and England's Cambridge University.

Despite holding fancy degrees, Frank didn't begin his retailing career in the Meier & Frank executive suite. "He started in the receiving room opening boxes," Boutin wrote, "then got promoted to opening larger boxes!"

After the May Co. took over the company, Frank turned to another passion: politics. He had been managing Hatfield's campaigns since the mid-1950s. Now he joined the senator's office, initially taking a dollar-a-year salary.

Frank, whom Hatfield called his "best friend," soon became chief of staff. He relished the job — even on the rare occasion when Hatfield's viewpoint made him uncomfortable, such as when the senator opposed

the Vietnam War.

"I'm a flag-waver," Frank said of his early support for President Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the conflict in Southeast Asia. "I've been in the military. I must say my (attitude) has always been, 'My country, right or wrong.' I found it very difficult not to accept what the president, the commander-in-chief, was saying."

But he backed Hatfield's anti-war stance for one simple reason: "I trusted Mark's intelligence."

He also stuck with Hatfield through late-career scandals that threatened the senator's reputation, such as the revelation that Hatfield had accepted gifts from lobbyists. In 2012, a year after Hatfield's death, newly released FBI documents showed that in 1985 the federal government had secretly indicted a Greek arms dealer on charges of bribing the influential senator.

For years Frank was probably the best-known congressional staffer in the country. In 1976, a Salem man approached Hatfield at a campaign event and asked for a brief audience — with his assistant. "My wife says she won't want anything else," he told the senator, "if she can just see Gerry Frank."

"It is hard to overstate Gerry Frank's contributions, through decades of service, to our community in Salem and to the state of Oregon," Gov. Kate Brown said in a state-

ment Sunday. "As the chief of staff to Sen. Mark Hatfield for over 20 years, he was sometimes called Oregon's Third Senator. He also advised countless governors throughout the years, myself included. I am lucky to have called Gerry a trusted counselor and friend."

Throughout the 1970s and beyond, rumors swirled that Frank would run for governor, and pundits around the state believed that, if he did, he would easily win. But he never threw his hat in the ring.

One longtime friend offered a theory on why Frank never put his name on the ballot: "I think he knows that the title 'Gerry Frank' is enough to get him anything he wants in Oregon."

That included cushy spots on a long list of corporate boards — as well as a place on an advisory panel for Aequitas Capital Management, which collapsed in 2016 in one of Oregon's largest-ever financial scandals. The company's receiver, Ronald Greenspan, issued a report that chronicled Aequitas' long history of institutionalized self-dealing and "actual fraud," which he called "Ponzi-like."

In 2007, Aequitas provided Frank with \$250,000 for a planned restaurant in Portland. When Aequitas fell apart, the receiver came looking for repayment. Frank "initially denied he owed anything in the mat-

ter," The Oregonian reported, but he ended up paying the debt with a combination of stock from a health care finance company and cash.

Frank diligently kept up with Oregon's power elite even long after leaving politics, but he insisted his true avocation was very different. More than anything else he loved discovering new places and meeting everyday people. For decades he served as the sole judge of the annual chocolate-cake contest at the Oregon State Fair. In the early 1980s, shortly after beginning his Oregon TV career, Frank wrote "Where to Find It, Buy It, Eat It in New York," which immediately became an indispensable guide for anyone who found themselves in New York City. Twenty editions of the book have been published, and more than a million copies have sold.

Years later came his Oregon guidebook, "Gerry Frank's Oregon," first published in 2012. This book grew out of travels for his newspaper column, which he titled "Friday Surprise" — a reference to the popular weekly Meier & Frank sale from back in the day. He never forgot that his Northwest celebrity had as much to do with his family's department store as anything he had accomplished as a politico or travel writer.

"Carrying the name of Frank and getting around the state as much as I do, I am constantly, practically every day, still running into people who worked at the store, whose relatives worked at the store, who shopped at the store as young people, who visited the store from far-away places in the state," Frank told the Oregon Historical Society in 1991. "Meier & Frank was very much a part of their lives and was certainly the focal point of the community life."

Frank loved being an important member of the community. It drove him, during his long post-Meier & Frank career, to seek out work he believed made Oregon better, whether that was trawling the halls of power in Washington, D.C., running a restaurant in Salem, leading a charity drive in Portland or sitting on a corporate board in Lake Oswego.

"I want to have a personal identity," he said in 1977 of his various charitable and corporate efforts. "I want to be involved in something. I don't have anything to gain by pushing any company, but I want to have (a role) in the economic and cultural fabric of the state. I resent any implication that there is any question about it."

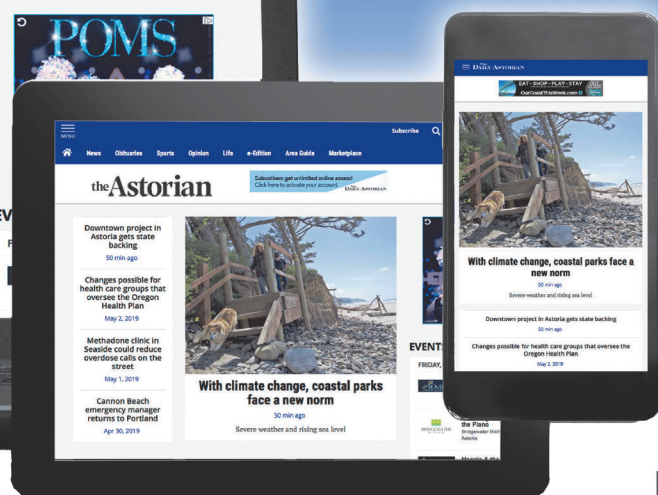
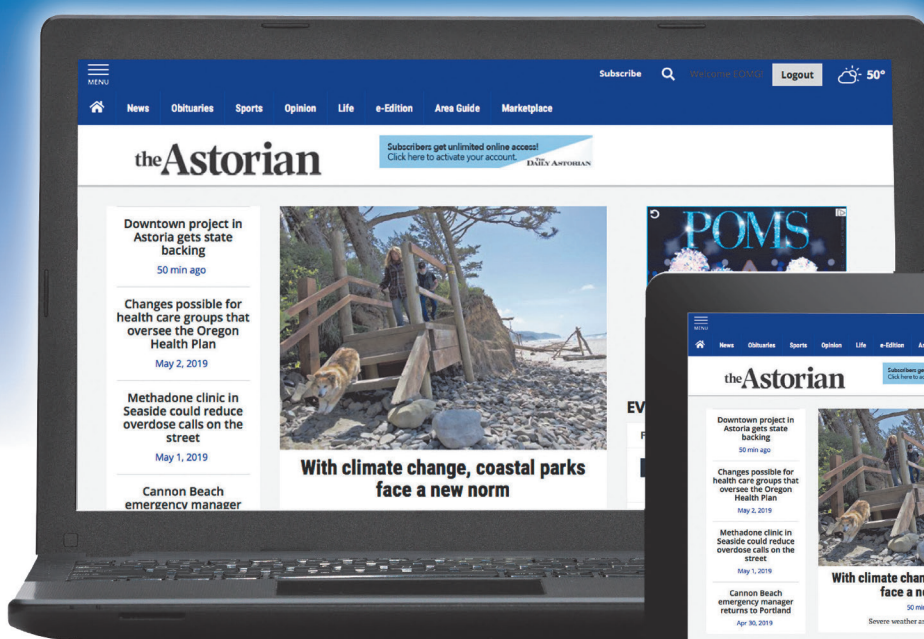
There was a question about it every now and again, but Frank will be remembered as a beneficent champion of his native state, one who worked hard for the greater good. And he did it until the very end. He liked to point out that he wasn't one for hobbies — he felt drawn only to activities that made a difference.

"I can't sit and clip coupons," he said. "I can't go out and play golf."

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