

Honoring Independence - A Legacy of Generosity

For Clayton Anderson, The Villages of North Branch is truly “home.” Over nearly a century, Mr. Anderson has embraced – and shaped – the region surrounding The Villages as a general store merchant, farmer, grocer and meat market operator, construction contractor, automobile dealer, Village Board and City Council member, civic organizer, land owner, and even regional historian.

Among all of his considerable achievements, Clayton’s enduring legacy will be that of a philanthropist. In fact, The Villages community is a result of his determination to ensure that a first-rate senior care facility be established in North Branch.

In 2003 Clayton and his wife, Evelyn, donated the land on which The Villages is situated, with the stipulation that Chisago County use the acreage to build a new “nursing home.” Ecumen then purchased the land from the County for \$1, with a commitment to develop The Villages in accord with the Anderson’s wishes. By Clayton’s account, The Villages surpasses even his and Evelyn’s imagination in care and service to older adults.

And yet, when asked about his many contributions to civic, social, and religious concerns over the many years, his firm response is always, “Give Evelyn the credit for everything,” in reference to his wife of nearly 70 years.

Married in 1933, the Andersons made a life together out of affection, hard work and determination. With their friends and neighbors, they weathered terribly tough years during the Depression, “but we never went without,” bartering and sharing what little there was to go around.

In the late 1930s, Clayton and Evelyn moved the modest house that they had built in Sunrise to land they had bought in North Branch. They had no plumbing but they did have electricity, and Clayton remembers the bill to be about \$2 a month. Those were lean times, but Clayton stuck to his policy of never buying anything he didn’t have the money in hand to pay for. “I never owed anybody a nickel in my life,” he says, marveling at the kind of debt that is crushing so many families – and business – today. “I hate to think we may be headed for another Depression. Maybe not. I hope people have learned a lesson,” through this recent economic crisis.

The Andersons raised three sons, Gerald (born 1934), Quentin (born 1937), and Clennan (born 1942), and two “adopted” daughters, Rosemary (born 1944) and Roberta (born 1949). Evelyn’s cousin, Violet, was the girls’ mother, and “Rosie” and “Berdie” came to be part of the family several months after Violet passed away in 1955.

Clayton and Evelyn forged ahead in business and farming, all the while serving in meaningful volunteer roles. Though not drafted, Clayton volunteered to join the Navy during World War II and



Clayton Anderson

served in the Seabees as a Navy storekeeper. “So many things happened along the way,” says Clayton of the life they shared.

Together and individually, the Andersons were very active leaders in Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts, the Red Cross swimming program, the Masons and Eastern Star, and the American Legion and its Auxiliary. They made sure the residents of Green Acres Country Care Center (formerly known as the “Poor Farm” and the area’s only nursing home) each received gifts at Christmastime, as many had no remaining family.

Well into their 80s and 90s, respectively, Evelyn and Clayton raised thousands of pumpkins every year so that the school children of North Branch could come and pick out their own for Halloween. Always gifted at farming, “She could grow a crop on a doorknob,” according to son Clennan, Evelyn was a spontaneous giver of her time and talents in both organized and informal ways. “She had a lot of room for people, and a lot of patience,” says Clennan.

Sadly, Evelyn suffered a stroke in 1999 that left one side of her body paralyzed, and she lived the following six years at Green Acres. And while she was well cared for, the facility was, according to Clayton, “a piecemeal collection of structures cobbled together over decades,” resulting in a substandard environment for its residents. This personal experience is the genesis of their dedication to creating what is now The Villages, which opened in July of 2007.

Today, Clayton still attends to business and remains very connected with friends, family and associates. “He calls about two times a week to talk about city and county issues,” says regional historian Max Malmquist. “Clayton is a multi-faceted person, and has always been dedicated to this community. He’s had a lot of foresight, and North Branch has benefitted from his ideas and his generosity.” Clayton turned 99 years young in October 2009.



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