

A 100-year life, lived one day at a time Bastion of Morris community overcame illness, a tornado, family loss -- all with a smile

BY ROB SEMAN
MORRISTOWN DAILY RECORD

MORRIS TWP. -- There are two distinctive features on B. Preston Root's face. One is a testament to the age of the man who turned 100 years old on Wednesday. The other is a testament to his youth.

In 1927, at the age of 21, he had gone for a swim in a contaminated lake and caught bacterial sinusitis. It was an ailment that today could easily be cured with antibiotics.

But penicillin would not be developed until 1929, and doctors were forced to operate, removing bone in his forehead. He calls the scar his "trademark."

"People recognize me, so it doesn't hurt," Root said with a big smile. That's the other feature --and that's what he says is the secret behind his long life.

"Keep smiling and keep breathing," Root said.

"I think you have to smile. It's the best antidote there is."

It could be his genes, too. Root's mother, Faye, lived to be 101. His sister, Felice, is 97 years old, and his brother, Rex, died at age 80. His wife died in 2001 at 97.

Regardless of the secret, Root's life and involvement in the Morristown community made the sharp-minded centenarian the center of attention of friends, relatives and local officials this week.

He was given a proclamation on Wednesday by the Morris Township Committee hours after the senior citizen's club in Morristown threw him a birthday party.

On Saturday, Root's life was portrayed in the Church of the Redeemer's annual Men's Dinner Cabaret. The show is typically a raunchy, somewhat off-color production, but this year the parishioners behind it dedicated the show to Root, who has been a faithful member of the church since 1943.

The script was culled from a five-page biography that Root prepared for director John DeAngelis and writer Len Resto.

Resto first met Root when Resto joined the church in 1999. Resto said that, since grade school, he sat in the back of the room, and it was in the rear pews that Root also sat.

Resto said he is astonished that Root is as sharp as he is at 100. In February, Resto told Root he would be having knee surgery, but he did not expect the 99-year-old to remember that.

"I saw him a few weeks later and he asked, 'How did your knee surgery go?'" Resto said. "I'm just so impressed by that."

While the cabaret actors portrayed Root's 100-year life a few years at a time, Root's own approach to life was far simpler.

"You have to take one day at a time," Root said.

"The best way to do it is say, 'this is it, this is my problem today and I've got to solve it,'" Root said. "And if I do a good job today, maybe tomorrow will be a good day, too."

In 100 years, Root has had his share of good days and bad.

Root grew up in hard times, when money was tight even before the Great Depression. Born on a 400-acre farm in Wells, Minn., Root's family was uprooted when a tornado leveled the farm, leaving them in bankruptcy.

His parents divorced when he was 16 and he, his brother, his sister and his mother moved to Minneapolis. His mother began working as a reporter for the Minneapolis Star, while Preston began working at a number of jobs, from delivering newspapers to selling them on street corners to delivering film and working in a grocery store.

"My mother made it a point that we lived in a nice house," Root said. "Even though we were poor, there was a lot of dignity."

Root eventually made it to college, first at the University of Minnesota, then transferring to Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, where he met his wife, Elinor.

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in foreign service in 1930 and in vain, as the Great Depression struck and the U.S. government closed many of its embassies.

Root would find refuge the following year, however, taking a job as a sales agent with Metropolitan Life Insurance in Washington, D.C.

He rose through the company ranks and eventually was relocated to New Jersey. He was promoted to sales manager of Morris, Sussex and Warren counties, and moved to Morristown in 1943. Root ordered the company's longtime home at 211 South St. to be built at what now is the site of an Eckerd drugstore.

To his employees, Root embodied a bygone era of the insurance field in which agents would work on a debit system, collecting premiums every week from clients and marking their payment in a debit book. That system has long since been replaced by annual payments by mail.

Root believed in personal relationships with his clients, something the debit system lent itself to -- at least in his approach.

As an efficiency expert for the company, Root recommended that his agents take their time doing their job. In stark contrast to what most might consider efficient in the modern day, it would be better to collect \$300 in premiums over five days, even though it could be done in two.

"That (five days) gave people the chance to talk to people about the need for life insurance," Root said.

With only two days, "you had no opportunity to prospect, no opportunity to make friends," Root said.

"The idea was, you do it in two days, what are you going to do in the third, fourth or fifth day?" Root said. "Find a new job."

Don Schuld and Larry Faschin, two of Root's former agents, said their boss was demanding, but he always kept an even tone with his employees and never yelled.

Root also was a very conservative man, they said, who believed that only husbands, not wives, should work -- a belief that had less to do with gender and more to do with ensuring that his male employees would work hard.

That wasn't to say that Root didn't employ women. Root gave Morris Township Committeewoman Kathleen Hyland her first job after high school.

Hyland said Root was demanding, but never rude.

"He made you toe the line, but he had a very gentlemanly way about him," Hyland said.

Root also is described as a progressive and tolerant man, particularly by his fellow parishioners at the Church of the Redeemer, which has a legacy as the place of worship for gay families and those afflicted with AIDS.

"He's sort of the conscience of this church," Resto said.

Resto said Root is credited with breaking the logjam of indecision over whether to convert the church's former rectory into housing for AIDS patients in 1994.

Root said that, at the decisive meeting on the issue, he simply asked, "if Jesus were alive today, what would he do?" Resto said that was all that was needed to make the decision to turn the rectory into what is now the Eric Johnson House.

"He's a really, really progressive guy," Resto said.

"I think you have to treat people like you want to be treated," Root said. "You have to accept everybody. I feel everybody is the same as I am."

Timeline of a life

The following is a timeline of personal and world events that occurred in the 100-year life of B. Preston Root:

April 19, 1906 -- B. Preston Root is born at the family farm in Wells, Minn.

1906 -- San Francisco earthquake

1907 -- Oklahoma is given statehood

1910 -- U.S. population -- 91,641,195

1912 -- New Mexico and Arizona given statehood

1916 -- Root family farm destroyed by cyclone

1917 -- Family moves to Minneapolis

1920 -- Prohibition

1922 -- Root's parents divorce. Mother becomes reporter at St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press.

1924 -- Root enters University of Minnesota School of Business Administration

1926 -- Root transfers to Georgetown School of Foreign Service; joins Delta Phi Epsilon; meets Elinor Johnson, his future wife

1927 -- Contracts bacterial sinusitis from swimming and is operated on at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota

1929 -- Root and Johnson attend inaugural ball of president-elect Herbert Hoover; stock market crash; penicillin discovered

1930 -- Root graduates with bachelor's degree in foreign services; Great Depression hits; Root marries Johnson on Oct. 23 in Philadelphia

1931 -- Root starts career with Metropolitan Life as sales agent in the company's Potomac district, Washington, D.C.; Empire State Building opened

1938 -- Moves to Larchmont, N.Y.

1939 -- Roots adopt daughter Elaine Louise from Canada; World War II begins

1942 -- Preston Root Jr. is born in Jersey City about 8 weeks early after Elinor is injured in an auto accident

1943 -- Root is promoted to district sales manager for Morris, Sussex and Warren Counties, moves to Morristown, joins Church of the Redeemer.

1944 -- Moves to current home in Convent Station

1944-1968 -- Root participates in a number of community groups, including: Dover Kiwanis Club, YMCA, Dover Chamber of Commerce; organized the Life Underwriters Association of North New Jersey, Morristown Kiwanis Club, Morris County Chamber of Commerce board, National Affairs Committee, Deer Lake Swim Club in Mountain Lakes, American Lung Association, board member of Planned Parenthood, New Jersey State Association of Life Underwriters, Morris County Golf Club; board of Morristown Memorial Hospital until 1966, Community Chest Morris County board member, deputy administrator of Civil Defense for Morris and Sussex Counties, foreman of the Grand Jury of Morris County, Morris County American Heart Association, trustee of St. Bernard's School in Gladstone;

moderator for the New Jersey Child Welfare Conference, trustee of the Morris County Children's Home Foundation, board member of St. John the Baptist School for Girls in Mendham, director of Morris County Savings Bank, advisory committee of the Morristown Women's Club

1945-1991 -- Cold War

1950-1953 -- Korean War, polio vaccine

1961 -- Berlin Wall built, first man into space

1962-1975 -- Vietnam War, assassination of JFK

1973 -- World Trade Center opens

1984 -- Preston and Elinor move to Sarasota, Fla.

1990-1991 -- Operation Desert Storm

1990 -- Preston has open-heart surgery

1993 -- Elinor suffers from chronic illness and is sent to hospital, rehabilitation, nursing homes and home nurse care

1999 -- Return home to Convent Station

2001 -- Elinor dies, Sept. 17, at age 97

.