

Ageless Norman Harrison...A St. Luke's Profile

When I approached my hero Norm about sharing his story, he quipped, "I was born at an early age." Knowing he will celebrate his ninetieth birthday on St. Patrick's Day in the Year of our Lord 2012, I knew everyone would be well pleased to hear his story, especially when it starts with a joke.

That date of birth would be March 17, 1922. Some might not know that the place was Bolton, Lancashire, England. A midwife, Nurse Emma, delivered Norman at his grandparents' house. Big brother Jack was eight years old and born in N.J. The Harrison family would return to the U. S. two years later. His parents were churchgoers. His maternal grandfather was choirmaster, and his four sons were choirboys in the church where Norman was baptized. (These fellas would be his uncles!) I remember Norman telling me once that his father instilled in him the importance of dressing up with a shine on his shoes for church. That lesson stuck. His father would be quite proud of his son's colorful shirts, ties, and shined shoes today.

During his boyhood and school years, Norman was involved in the church youth group and Boy Scouts, eventually becoming a member of the Order of the Arrow. His scouting experience was shared years later as the scoutmaster for his son who became an Eagle Scout. He played basketball and baseball and confesses he was Bloomfield's worst trumpet player. Still in the band, he moved on to drums. And his love for drumming attests to his love for big band music. I remember his story of playing hooky from school to go into NYC to hear Benny Goodman's band. In high school he ventured to the stage, too, and it was probably the acting that got him out of trouble for that act.

Norman attended Colgate University as a Naval Aviation Cadet. His first job was an insurance underwriter before entering the service in 1942. His three-year service in the U. S. Navy included a year in the Pacific as a weatherman. Many know that Norman dreamed of flying for his country, but that it did not become fulfilled. Today he lives flying through Doc Sexton's aviation magazines, which he shares with several St. Luke's men who dream the same dream. Did someone say that Norman's famous STL ball cap stands for the St. Louis Cardinals and his hero is Stan Musial? Just ask him.

After three years outdoors with the Navy, Norman could not fathom working inside, so after his tour, he joined the Bell System as an installer and repairman. He was part of the N.J.



"I remember his story of playing hooky from school to go into NYC to hear Benny Goodman's band."
—B. Watters

Bell task force sent to New England for two weeks to restore service after Hurricane Carol in 1954. While driving home across the George Washington Bridge, he learned Hurricane Donna came through and took everything down again. These vivid images of New England cemented his love for this part of the country. In 1957 he was promoted to a computer programmer, and a year later he was "loaned" to AT&T in NYC to computerize its personnel and payroll systems. Norman believes New Jersey Bell forgot about him and he stayed with AT&T until the government (in all its wisdom) broke up the Bell System. Retirement came on January 1, 1984 when he was District Manager of the Bell System Personnel Data Base, the world's largest database in the private sector, nearly one million people.

Of course, Ruth came into this man's life way back. They met at church. She was just a kid when he went off to war. When he returned, she had grown up. Wow! Ironically, Ruth worked for N. J. Bell a few years before Norm did. They were married on September 9, 1949. The Harrison's two grown children both work in Flemington, N.J. Cynthia is a certified medical assistant serving with an OB/GYN. Jeffrey and his wife Nancy are both doctors maintaining a psychology practice. Apple of their eyes is Olivia, their 14-year-old granddaughter, who always loves to visit VT... and ski. Ruth, everyone knows, is a fine artist and has been for half a century, and her best fan is Norm.

In 1988, after a three-year search, the Harrisons found the perfect home on Main Street in Chester, that even provided space to show and sell Ruth's paintings. During their trips to Vermont they attended services at St. Luke's, so they found two homes! (Later on they would downsize to a sweet stone house just down the street.) True, they had left behind a wonderful home and property that included a white wine vineyard in Pittstown, NJ, but they were joyful about being in the best of New England. Today, like the first time, Norman loves the St. Luke's congregation—"a wonderful group of loving, caring people, blessed with a variety of talents and interests." No wonder he fits in and does those things like volunteer driving, and with Ruth and Paul, taking communion to members of St. Luke's who are unable to come to church—that is when he isn't reading. He read a book Lew shared with him about the Tin Can Sailors almost overnight!

My hero (and Ruth's naturally) has always had Jesus in his life, beginning with his enrollment in the "cradle roll class" at four years of age for which he still has the diploma. Even in the Navy, during the war years, he attended services on deck—his weather predictions and other conditions permitting. No wonder Norman prays that St. Luke's will continue to grow and to keep its heritage. Like this man, his faith is ageless and forever.—**Bonnie Watters**