



Richard E. Olson

March 10, 2024

Steady. Learned. Honorable. Loving. Humble. Wise.

That was Richard E. Olson, who died on Sunday, March 10, 2024 at Lancaster General Hospital. He was 97.

A “Colorado boy” by birth and character, Dick moved to Lancaster, Pa., in 1976. He lived there with Evodia, his loving wife of nearly 58 blessed years, who died in 2007. They raised two children.

Dick had been president of Burnham Corp., Lancaster, before retiring in 1987, after a successful career in engineering sales and management that spanned 37 years and seven states.

Shaped by a Swedish-American upbringing, molded by a mechanical engineering degree on the G.I. bill, and led by his Lutheran faith, Dick left all who knew and loved him — especially his family — better off from that bond. Like many of his great generation.

Dick was born in May 1926 in Denver, the middle one of three sons. Mother and homemaker Johanna Olson had immigrated to America from Sweden at 17 (speaking no English) amidst World War I. Father Leroy Olson was born to Swedish settlers in Red Oak, Iowa, and became a lifelong Chevrolet business

manager.

His father's auto industry career moved the family cross-country many times. Dick graduated from Flint (Mich.) Central High School in 1944 and enlisted in the military during World War II. He served as a private in the U.S. Army/Air Force Reserve for two years before being honorably discharged from Lowry Field, Denver, in late 1945.

Dick met his sweetheart after World War II in a "set-up" by his sister. She brought her friend Evodia (Swedish for "gentle fragrance,") to the Olson home in California during the young women's break from nursing school in Moline, Ill.

Meantime, Dick had entered college in Boulder, Colo., — funded by the G.I. bill and fueled by bologna sandwiches.

Although Dick and Evodia clicked, college kept the pair apart for a year. Many love letters later, Miss Seablom (meaning "flower of the sea") and Dick married in 1949. They wed in a small-town west of Chicago (Sycamore, Ill.), where Evodia was raised.

A year later, Dick earned his Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Colorado and landed a management trainee position. The company that spawned his career and employed him the longest described Dick himself: American Standard.

He entered the plumbing and heating manufacturer's management trainee program in 1950 in Chicago. After a six-month stint, Dick and Evodia plus their new-born daughter moved to Kansas City, where American Standard assigned Dick to a four-state territory as an engineering sales expert.

Soon after the birth of their son, the couple was transferred in 1957 to Long Island, where Dick commuted into Manhattan, American Standard's headquarters. (He didn't care much for the daily commute on the Long Island Railroad but enjoyed playing countless hands of cribbage with fellow passengers.)

American Standard promoted Dick to hydronics division manager in 1967 and relocated him to Buffalo to oversee its factory there. Four years later, the company consolidated management in New Jersey, and the family moved again. Given that cost-cutting measure, Dick sensed the Buffalo plant could be "on the bubble," and he, out of a job.

So, he joined another company, and the family moved to Davenport, Iowa, in 1971. Shortly thereafter, American Standard indeed closed the Buffalo plant.

Dick brought both integrity and business experience when recruited to run Burnham in 1976 — a few years ahead of a deep recession.

Like many manufacturers at the time, the furnace and greenhouse maker needed to slash costs. The company's board pressured Dick to switch to foreign suppliers of lower-priced steel. He refused because, in his eyes, sending Burnham business abroad jeopardized the jobs of American steelworkers.

As a boy, Dick had seen labor strife up close during the Depression. From his elementary school window in Flint, Dick witnessed the bloody General Motors worker revolt a mere block away in 1937. The labor uprising, put down by the National Guard, was among the most violent in U.S. history.

So, some 50 years later, Burnham's orders for steel stayed in the U.S. The

local manufacturer regained its footing. And Dick kept his job. (He was a stubborn Swede after all.)

While Dick had plenty of achievements and abilities to boast of, he didn't. After graduation from a Harvard School of Management executives' program in 1980, for instance, he downplayed the accomplishment. "It was pretty interesting," he said. "But it was really more something the board thought would look good on my resume."

Over the decades, Dick applied his ingenuity to the various Olson homes, whose basement work rooms were amply equipped with tools. His mechanical, electrical and carpentry skills enabled him to repair or jerry-rig almost anything,

For fresh air and fellowship, Dick played golf and was good at it. By the time he hung up his clubs at age 93, Dick had "shot his age" several times, a score that eludes most golfers. He even made a hole-in-one — twice — a feat that evades many pro's and gets a golfer a brief in the sports pages.

Dick's love for his wife and family was deep and unshakeable. A finer role model no son could hope for — or respect and love more.

Before Dick and Evodia moved to Lancaster, for instance, their son visited while on college spring break. He found Dick had set up a home office months earlier to search for a new job after he had been fired (unbeknownst to his son). Noting how expensive his Chicago university was, Dick's son offered to suspend his schooling. Dick gently waived him off, saying, "Oh, no. We'll be fine." Why was Dick fired? The company CEO had ordered him to undermine and hound into early retirement a veteran fellow executive.

When Dick adamantly refused, the CEO terminated him. Dick had been tapped earlier to succeed the other man, which would have meant a

significant promotion and salary increase.

While an admittedly poor singer, Dick loved the Big Bands. As a young man in New Jersey and Michigan, he saw such greats as Duke Ellington, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman, and the Dorsey brothers, along with a young Frank Sinatra.

Dick was, however, a gifted visual artist. He oil-painted nautical scenes, sketched with charcoal and even dabbled in stained glass. (His fellow residents of Woodcrest Villa may recall the charcoal rendering of a Great Plains Indian on horseback which hung outside his apartment.) He also had perfect cursive penmanship.

An avid reader, Dick especially loved U.S. history and biographies, particularly those of American presidents. He faithfully read the Bible and daily devotions as well.

He was a lifelong Lutheran who was an active member of many congregations over the years. Dick and Evodia last were members of Zion Lutheran Church, Landisville.

Dick is survived by his sister, Ruth Pacini, of Grand Junction, Colo.; his daughter, Mary Kay Lake, a retired voice instructor, of Magnolia, Texas; granddaughters, Anne Marie Box and Amanda Keel, three great-grandchildren and by his son, Thomas Olson, a retired business reporter, of Pittsburgh. In addition to his wife, Dick was preceded in death also by younger brother, Raymond Olson, formerly of suburban St. Paul, Minn.; and by older brother, Bernard Olson, a World War II pilot fatally shot down over the Pacific Ocean.

Relatives and friends are invited to attend Dick's Funeral Service at Zion

Lutheran Church, 85 E. Brandt Blvd., Landisville, PA 17538 on Friday, March 15, 2024 at 11:00 a.m. with Pastor Timothy Seitz-Brown officiating. The family will receive friends from 10:30 a.m. until the time of service. Dick will be laid to rest next to Evodia, in Elmwood Cemetery, Sycamore.

In lieu of flowers, donations in Dick's name may be made to Zion Lutheran Church, 85 E. Brandt Blvd., Landisville, PA 17538 or Woodcrest Villa, 2001 Harrisburg Pike, Lancaster, PA 17601.

Cemetery Details

Elmwood Cemetery

Sycamore, IL

Previous Events

Visitation

MAR 15. 10:30 AM - 11:00 AM (ET)

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
85 Brandt Boulevard
Landisville, PA 17538

Funeral Service

MAR 15. 11:00 AM (ET)

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
85 Brandt Boulevard
Landisville, PA 17538

Graveside

MAR 20. 2:00 PM.

Elmwood Cemetery
Sycamore, IL

Tribute Wall

AB

“ *Annie, Robert and Connor Box purchased the Sentiments of Serenity Spray for the family of Richard E. Olson.*



Annie, Robert and Connor Box - March 14, 2024 at 10:40 AM

AB

“ *Annie, Robert and Connor Box planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Richard E. Olson.*

Annie, Robert and Connor Box - March 14, 2024 at 10:40 AM

RR

“ *One could never ask for a better brother than God gave me. There are so many happy memories of our childhood together. I loved and admired him always. His talent for drawing and painting was fantastic and seemed so easy for him...I envied that. One cold winter during the war we traveled together on a very cold train. Dick was returning to his Air Force base and I back to school. He removed his coat and put it over me. He must have really been cold, but he worried about me. That was my brother, and I miss him so. His loving sister, Ruth.*

Ruth Pacini, sister to Richard - March 14, 2024 at 01:31 AM

AK

“ Richard was my grandfather & the best one I could've ever asked for. There was never any doubt how much he and my grandmother loved us. They made my sister and I always feel so special & like we hung the moon. He was so kind, thoughtful, caring, humble, and generous. He was especially generous would my sister and I would go alone with him to the grocery store! We got all the goodies and treats we could ask for. I learned so much from him in my 43 years, even though it doesn't seem like it was long enough. I learned how to love unconditionally, stand true in what you believe in, what a good husband looks like, how to treat others, and how to have fun! When I think back on my childhood, there are very few memories that stick out that don't have he and my grandma in them. He would tell me how lucky he was to have us as his granddaughters, but we were really the lucky ones. I couldn't have asked for better. I love you, PaPa.



Amanda Keel - March 13, 2024 at 11:48 PM

LS

My Uncle Dick was one of the men from the 'Greatest Generation' and I have many examples of why I looked up to him, as I did my Dad. They were my heroes my whole life. When my Dad died at age 52 I had 41 more years to have Uncle Dick in my life as the best example of what a good man is.

Throughout my childhood our families went on vacation together not once but twice a year. I have hundreds of memories of love-filled times we spent together. Once we were at a cottage on a lake. The parents had all four kids 'asleep' on the sleeping porch while they stayed up playing cards. Mary Kay and I snuck out down to the lake to try skinny dipping. I will not forget our fathers catching us and the fright from the beam of their flashlights and the horror of being caught naked. But more so, the uproarious laughter from our Dads!!

It was just one of the legendary stories I hold dear of having loving family ties. I am honored that Uncle Dick was so easy to love and respect. He chose his words wisely and certainly had his serious side, he lived life abundantly for good, but we all also knew the twinkle in his blue eyes when there was humor or joy to be had.

Linda Ahlin Sulprizio - March 17, 2024 at 07:44 PM

AF

“ *Anne-Marie's Q2 Family purchased the Loving Lilies and Roses Bouquet for the family of Richard E. Olson.*



Anne-Marie's Q2 Family - March 13, 2024 at 12:45 PM



“ *Magnificent Life Spray was purchased for the family of Richard E. Olson.*



March 13, 2024 at 10:46 AM

GP

“ I worked for Burnham during the years when Dick was President. His professionalism, integrity, and leadership was an inspiration to me and all who had the opportunity to work with him.
Glenn Pottberg

Glenn Pottberg - March 13, 2024 at 10:12 AM



“ Sentiments of Serenity Spray was purchased for the family of Richard E. Olson.



March 12, 2024 at 08:23 PM

RR

“ Ruth L Richi planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Richard E. Olson.

Ruth L Richi - March 12, 2024 at 08:23 PM