



Willis W. Shenk

April 7, 2014

Willis W. Shenk, a farm boy turned longtime Steinman Enterprises executive who shepherded the company through decades of seismic change, died Saturday, April 5, 2014, at the age of 98.

His unexpected passing at Lancaster General Hospital was met with sorrow and deep appreciation for what one Lancaster civic leader called Shenk's "long, incredibly fruitful life."

Shenk retired as chairman of the board of Steinman Enterprises in 2004 after 65 years with the company, but continued to serve as an adviser to the Steinman family and company executives.

He served as a longtime trustee for both the James Hale Steinman Foundation and John Frederick Steinman Foundation, which recently merged.

In that role, Shenk left his imprint on organizations throughout Lancaster County.

"He was beloved in this community," said Carlos Graupera, CEO and executive director of the Spanish American Civic Association. "It's hard to imagine Lancaster without him. ... He was a real gem. He really was."

Shenk was married for 69 years to Elsie M. Sherer Shenk, who died in 2010.

His son, John David Shenk, of Lancaster, died unexpectedly of natural causes on Jan. 4, 2014, at the age of 58.

Willis Shenk is survived by grandchildren John David Shenk Jr. and Hannah Shenk Koch and their mother, Mary Louise Shenk. He is also survived by a great-grandchild, Ella Grace Koch.

His Long Career

Shenk's career with Steinman Enterprises began in 1939 with a letter of application, typed on a 1910 Underwood in blue ink.

Of the blue ribbon on his typewriter, he'd later say, "I didn't know better, and [it] was there."

Born Nov. 2, 1915, Willis Shenk was the youngest of John and Amanda Weidman Shenk's eight children.

The Shenks were Mennonite farmers who grew tobacco, corn and wheat on 57 acres near Manheim, in Penn Township.

Willis Shenk attended Doe Run School, a one-room schoolhouse, for eight years.

He graduated in 1933 from Manheim Central High School, and later would be among the first inductees into the Manheim Central Hall of Fame. He would receive honorary doctorate degrees from Elizabethtown College, Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology and Millersville University.

He never graduated from college, but he took correspondence courses through the International Accountants' Society, and accounting courses at New York University.

Lancaster Newspapers hired him in 1939 as an accountant because of his head for numbers, and “quasi-legal” mind, as he put it.

He had honed his skills as a bookkeeper for Manheim Mill & Elevator Co., and then as a tax preparer and auditor for Raymond D. Shearer, a Lancaster public accountant.

He became a certified public accountant in 1941. He served as senior accountant at Lancaster Newspapers until 1950.

He rose in the company to secretary-controller, then to vice president and secretary, and then, in 1977, to president.

After a management restructuring in 1983, Shenk became the first chairman of the board of Steinman Enterprises who was not a member of the Steinman family.

In that capacity, he led Lancaster Newspapers and other enterprises owned by the Steinman family, including Intelligencer Printing Co. (now just Intelligencer), Delmarva Broadcasting Co., Lancaster County Weeklies, Lancaster County Farming Inc. and Steinman Management Co.

As a 2004 story noted, Shenk oversaw the newspapers as they made the transition from hot-lead type to computerized production.

He also played a key role in the company’s decision to keep the newspaper's offices and production facility in downtown Lancaster.

Pillar of community

“By 1978, we and the board decided we needed to stay downtown,” Shenk

recalled in 2004. “I think it was right for the city, and it surely wasn't wrong for the ownership. The dollars and cents weren't much of a factor. It was more a matter of what was best for us and for Lancaster.”

Former Mayor Arthur Morris was Lancaster city's public works director when Lancaster Newspapers elected to remain downtown.

Everybody at City Hall “was extremely excited” about the company's decision, he recalled.

Morris, who served as mayor from 1980-1990, said he worked with Shenk on a number of projects, including some relating to the Steinman foundations.

“He was the consummate gentleman,” Morris said.

“He was just kind” and welcoming to everybody, Morris said, noting that Shenk possessed “a nice smile” and “a great chuckle.”

Charlie Smithgall, Lancaster's mayor from 1998-2006, also highlighted Shenk's sense of humor.

“I always enjoyed being around Willis,” he said. “He was a great guy.”

Smithgall said he respected Shenk tremendously. “There was no one more willing to help the city get better than he was.”

Mayor Rick Gray called Shenk a “pillar of our community.”

“Really, his support for the city at times is one of the reasons we got through a lot of hard times, and is a reason we got to the point where we are right now,”

Gray said. "From people who have much, much is expected, but that doesn't mean they always meet those expectations. Willis did."

Thomas Baldrige, president and CEO of the Lancaster County Chamber of Commerce & Industry, agreed: "It is not an overstatement to say that Willis Shenk's impact on Lancaster County was legendary. From his integrity to his loyalty; from his business acumen to his countless mentorships; and from his passion for the community to his commitment to helping others, Willis long stood as a role model for many.

"He will live on as a true inspiration to all those who knew him. Throughout his entire 98 years he was a true gentleman and a class act."

Carlos Graupera, of SACA, said Shenk was a "dear friend and a mentor and an example to me in many ways."

Through Shenk's work with the Steinman foundations, "He helped me enormously in my work, and he had a tremendous impact on how the Latino community was able to develop in Lancaster," Graupera said. "Every project we ever had had his imprint on it."

Graupera said that whenever SACA undertook a development project, "to see if I was on the right track, I would check with a couple of people, and one of the first was Willis. ... If you were trying to work hard and help the community, he always had an ear."

He was famous for peppering those who sought grants from the Steinman foundations with questions.

"By the time you were done, you had all your thinking lined up," Graupera said, noting that he treated people "with dignity. ... You felt like there was a

human being there, a real human being without any pretense at all.”

“You knew you were speaking to a very, very important person, but he didn’t come off that way. ... He wanted you to be comfortable in his presence.”

‘Company backbone’

Shenk was a trusted adviser to the Steinman family.

Beverly “Peggy” Steinman, chairman of Lancaster Newspapers, recalled Shenk saying that he treated the company’s money as carefully as if it were his own. “He always did right by the Steinman family,” she said.

“He was a great backbone of the company,” Steinman said. “I learned a lot from him.”

He was respected by everyone, she said, noting, “He was a very thoughtful kind of person.”

“Willis was a dear friend,” said Robert M. Krasne, publisher and vice chairman of the board of Lancaster Newspapers. “He was also the link between James Hale and John Frederick Steinman and today’s organization. He was transformationally innovative.

“He was also steadfastly loyal to the business principles and practices of the Steinman brothers. He has been and will continue to serve as an inspiration for the leadership of the Steinman family of companies.”

As Shenk neared retirement in 2004, he said, “It’s inherent in the Steinman family that there be fairness in their business operations and in their employee relations, and I would like to think that I didn’t breach that trust.”

Old school

A tall, courtly man, who wore a suit even when others deemed it too hot to wear one, Shenk was known for his calm reserve.

“He was a pleasant, thoughtful, considerate person,” Mayor Gray said. “He certainly represented the old school in the most positive of senses.”

At a 2004 roast honoring Shenk for his longtime service to the board of the Susquehanna Association for the Blind and Vision Impaired, now VisionCorps, his pastor, the Rev. Jonathan Jenkins, said, “The notion of a roast for Willis Shenk I find a little perplexing, because he is one of the most dignified men I’ve ever known.”

In 2003, Stephen Patterson, then president and chief executive officer of SABVI, recalled that it was Shenk who said, “ ‘The way this place is going to get turned around is through the industry.’ ... It was really at his urging that we launched our efforts to build up the industry.”

The VisionCorps industrial division is now a multimillion-dollar venture in which a skilled workforce of blind and vision-impaired workers is employed in light manufacturing, packaging, assembly and food processing.

Serving community

Shenk’s community involvements were many.

He served as a trustee on the boards of Lancaster Country Day School, Linden Hall School for Girls and Franklin & Marshall College.

In 1983, he and his wife were jointly elected president of a group called the Dance of the Month Club.

“I loved to watch him and his wife dance,” said Joan O’Brien, who co-chaired the Fulton Opera House’s Landmark Campaign with Shenk. “They were great dancers.”

In addition to co-chairing the Fulton Opera House campaign, Shenk served as chairman of the United Campaign Drive in 1959, and was president of the board of the Lancaster Community Chest in 1961.

He co-chaired fund drives for the former Lancaster Osteopathic Hospital, the Lancaster Health & Welfare Center, and Big Brothers of Lancaster County (now Big Brothers & Big Sisters).

He and his wife also were among the individual contributors to the Fulton’s fund drive, which made possible a \$9.5 million renovation that was completed in 1995.

Joan O’Brien said that the first two times she asked Shenk to co-chair the Landmark Campaign, he respectfully declined.

So she walked over to Lancaster Newspapers and asked him a third time, and it was indeed the charm.

When she returned to the Fulton to share the news that Shenk was on board, everyone cheered, she recalled.

“He was a key to a lot of the large donations for that renovation,” O’Brien said.

“He could open doors I really couldn’t open.”

Shenk had “such a presence,” she said. “I think he intimidated a lot of people. When you really got to know him, he was just a softie.”

Deidre Simmons, former executive director of Fulton Opera House, agreed.

“He was an inspiration to me,” Simmons said. “What he did for Lancaster is so difficult to put into words. I know the [foundation] funds were from the Steinman family, but he was such an incredible steward of those funds.”

Shenk put his “heart and soul” into the organizations he helped, Simmons said. “He loved this community, and he will be sorely, sorely missed.”

“He was a true Renaissance man — a financial wizard, very astute about politics,” Simmons said.

He had helped to found the Manheim Tennis Club, and played tennis — and rode a horse — into his 90s.

And he wove baskets to give as Christmas presents to friends.

“He was blessed with good health and a sharp mind,” Simmons said.

Indeed, Shenk was part of a Johns Hopkins University study on longevity.

“And he loved Elsie [his late wife],” Simmons said. “Oh my gosh, he loved Elsie. He was so wonderful to her in her final years.”

‘Lucky son of a gun’

In addition to serving as trustee for the Steinman foundations, Shenk served as trustee for each of the Steinman family trusts.

He also presided over the foundation named for him and his late wife.

With his son, David, he developed Doe Run Hills, a subdivision in Pequea Township, south of Lancaster city.

The late Caroline Steinman Nunan wore a "Willis' Fan Club" badge to a 1989 dinner honoring Shenk for 50 years of service to her family's company.

She called Shenk "a person with initiative, with his eyes fixed on the future rather than the past."

Echoing a phrase Shenk used, Nunan said Shenk never saw problems, "only opportunities."

For his part, Shenk said he was "one lucky son of a gun."

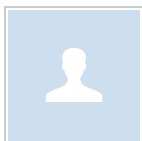
Peggy Steinman said she and her family felt they were lucky, too, in having found, in Shenk, someone they could trust.

His loyalty to the company never wavered, she said. "You don't find that much anymore."

Relatives and friends are respectfully invited to attend Willis' memorial service at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, 3131 Columbia Ave., Lancaster, Pa., on Friday at 11 a.m. The family will greet friends from 10 a.m. until the time of the service. Interment will be private at the convenience of the family. In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be sent in Willis' memory to the Elsie S.

Shenk Wellness and Women's Fund at Millersville University, P.O. Box 1062, Millersville, Pa., 17551, or Vantage House, 212 E. King St., Lancaster, Pa., 17602.

Tribute Wall



“ *Willis W. Shenk*

October 22, 2023 at 11:34 PM



“ *My heartfelt condolences to Willis' family. Words seem inadequate to express the sadness I feel about his passing. I truly admired and respected this great man and I will never forget him.*

Steve Rieker - April 11, 2014 at 08:15 AM



“ *Mr. Shenk's brother, Alvin, was my great uncle through marriage. My grandmother's sister married Al. Mr. Shenk certainly was genuinely a good person. From my family to the Shenk family, our sincerest condolences.*

Susan Shank Geesey - April 10, 2014 at 09:09 PM



“ *We are deeply saddened by the news of Willis Shenk passing. Mr. Shenk was an honorable, conscientious and principled man. I will fondly remember Mr. Shenk's sense of humor as he had a special way of captivating people. It was an honor to have known such a great person and we will truly miss him. Our most sincere condolences.*

*John & Stean Washington
Mobile, Alabama*

John Washington - April 08, 2014 at 04:41 PM

AM

“ *This is beautifully written for a man who is obviously going to be missed by many. I'm sorry that I won't be able to meet him next week for the fellowship interview.*

Amanda - April 07, 2014 at 07:53 PM