



Visit us for all of your Real Estate needs

Flanders Realty Group

2 North Brown St, Rhinelander, WI 54501
www.flandersrealtygroup.com (715) 420-1100

CRS, GRI
ABR, ePro

Advanced Search

search...

search sponsored by

home : community : community news

Facebook

More

May 26, 2021

2/26/2021 7:28:00 AM

Ralph Larson shares his own oral history of growing up in Rhinelander

Stephanie Kuski
River News Features reporter

Ralph Larson, a 60-year member of the Rhinelander Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Ray Rousseau Post 3143, has called Rhinelander home for nearly his entire life. He is well-known in the community both as a local VFW member and for sharing his wealth of knowledge about Rhinelander history.

Over the past several months, Ralph has provided me with a plethora of childhood stories and anecdotes about our town's history as I was researching topics for Rhinelander Revisited, a continuing series spotlighting local history. In doing so, he showed me just how vital it is to chronicle these oral histories in an effort to preserve our town's - and its residents' - legacy.

For that reason, it has been an honor to get to know Ralph and a privilege to share his story.

Rhinelander Roots

Ralph's family tree traces back to his paternal grandfather Lars Larson who immigrated from Sweden in 1880. Lars worked as a farmer and logger in Pine Lake and also served as the Pine Lake treasurer in 1914 and '15.

Like many families at the time, Lars and his wife Emma had 10 children, including Ralph's father Arthur who was born in 1894.

As a young man, Arthur served in Rhinelander's Company L of the 127th Infantry during World War I. Arthur's brother Albin also served in the first World War while his brothers Arvid and Lester served later on during the second World War.

Later in life, Arthur established Larson's Service and Sporting Goods on the north end of Eagle Street and also worked as a lumberman at several logging camps throughout Oneida County. He cruised timber with local prankster Gene Shepard and was even friends with reporter Jack Cory, the latter a frequent patron at Arthur's sporting goods shop.

In 1935, Ralph was born the youngest of four siblings to Arthur and Edna Larson. His family's sporting goods shop doubled as his childhood home. Originally built in 1922, Ralph still proudly resides there to this day.

Ralph recalls fond memories growing up in



In January 2021, Ralph Larson was honored as a 60-year member of the VFW Ray Rousseau Post 3143. Larson joined the Army at 18 years old, serving for three years in Germany as a combat engineer. Later in life he took over his father's sporting goods shop on Eagle Street, where he still resides to this day.

Welcome, Stephanie Kuski!

MANAGE YOUR ACCOUNT

Order photo reprints

Classifieds
Advertising Information

Community Connections
Submit to Newspaper...

Ced Vig's books for sale
Kris Gilbertson's 'I Recall...'



Cedarburg, WI

73°

1:13 pm CDT
Mostly sunny

DELTA CONNECTION

is now booking flights into and out of Rhinelander...

FLY Rhinelander

Powered by **SkyWest**

Rhinelander. At that time, he said you had the freedom to be a child but there were also strict rules to keep you in place.

As the son of a schoolteacher, Ralph said he was expected to earn good marks in school but he was also free to make his own fun.

He remembers walking along the train tracks that stretched behind his home to Hodag Park, until he and his friends were inevitably chased off the tracks.

"It was a really interesting life growing up," he said. "My brother and I talk about it now quite a bit of how lucky our generation was because we had to do our chores... and make our own fun. We didn't have TV or anything when we were growing up. It was a very interesting time."

As was common with many other youths at the time, Ralph learned how to drive a pulp truck by the time he was 12 years old. When Arthur wasn't tending his sporting goods shop, he was out logging with his sons at a time when it was common for individuals to contract with the county to complete public logging bids.

Arthur would cut, fall and measure the trees, while Ralph remembers working long days peeling bark off the trees and carrying supplies into the logging camp.

In 1953, Ralph graduated from Rhinelander Union High School. That summer Ralph took a job working for 60 cents an hour at the local papermill, but he quickly decided it wasn't the job for him.

His dad then offered him a job logging for \$20 a week plus room and board. But because there wasn't much logging to do come February, Ralph decided to follow in the footsteps of his father, uncles and brothers and joined the military.

Service Abroad

At 18, Ralph volunteered as an Army enlistee and committed himself to three years of service. His brothers Arthur Jr. ("Buddy") and Oliver had served in the Air Force while Ralph joined the 299th Engineer Combat Battalion in 1954.

After completing 14 weeks of training in Washington D.C., Ralph reported to duty as a combat engineer stationed overseas in Höchst, a small city district of Frankfurt am Main, at a time when the U.S. and other Allied Powers occupied Germany.

"I was in seventh heaven in Germany," Ralph recalled. "I was lucky... I fit right in."

Because he had been driving pulp trucks since he was a kid, operating heavy equipment came naturally, and so Ralph quickly earned the title of E-5 Sergeant.

As a combat engineer, he built bridges and roads and even detonated explosives, but said he was fortunate to never experience combat first-hand.

By 1957, Ralph returned home to Rhinelander. Soon afterward, he purchased a pulp truck and returned to logging pulpwood with his dad for the next few years.

Bachelor

But by that time, there were fewer and fewer small-time loggers in the area. So Ralph decided to quit the pulpwood business after a few years and moved on to trucking.

"I loved truck driving and I loved traveling," he recalled. "I did that for three years. I had a very good time."

Ralph drove as an owner and operator for Aero-Mayflower Transit as a young bachelor. On one trip from New York to Florida, he reconnected with a friend living on the east coast who introduced him to a young woman named Doris.

"We hit it off pretty good," Ralph said. "About two more trips through there, I asked her to marry me and she agreed. So we got married."

Ralph and Doris tied the knot in 1962. As a married man, he decided to quit trucking and instead moved to Virginia to be with his wife.

Soon after, however, Arthur decided to retire and sell his family business, which prompted Ralph to purchase



Submitted photos

A young Ralph Larson is pictured in his junior high school band uniform, circa 1949. Larson has many fond memories of growing up in Rhinelander and he enjoys sharing those stories with locals in an effort to preserve the history of his hometown.

WALDMANN
Construction, Inc.
Design / Build General Contractor

715-479-3132
St. Germain, WI 54558
Your Home is Built on Our Reputation

D & J GET READY FOR WINTER DRIVING
CLICK HERE FOR DETAILS

Auto, Truck & Equipment Repair, Inc.
Stevens Street • Rhinelander • 715-365-7400

Click HERE for current Metal Prices!
715.362.9445 ext. 1

OAK LEAF
SALVAGE

4208 Oak Leaf Road, Rhinelander, WI 54501
Buyers of Junk Cars and Recyclable Metals
Dealers in Used Automobile & Truck Parts
NEW - Drive-On Scale - W/! Pick Up Cars!

Domino's
LARGE 3 TOPPING PIZZA
MON.-THURS \$7.99
Carry Out Only
Click here. DOMINOS.COM
Rhinelander 715-362-2525

715-369-5270
4690 South Shore Drive Rhinelander

East Side Automotive
Complete Automotive Repair
Rust Proofing

Master Certified Auto Repair
Quality Used Auto Sales
Click here for more information

TAKE NOTICE WISCONSIN!

Search State of Wisconsin public notices.

the shop from his father. That same year, the newlyweds relocated to Rhinelander.

Business & Family Man

Ralph owned Larson's Service and Sporting Goods from 1962 to 1982. The station had gas pumps right on the sidewalk and was also equipped with fishing equipment, bait and other sporting goods. At the time, he said a Zebco Rod & Reel was listed for \$4.99.

When they owned the shop, Ralph and Doris were also busy raising their two daughters, Sharon and Trish. The young family tended the shop and also logged pulpwood in their freetime, continuing the long tradition of one Larson generation teaching the next about logging.

"When (the girls) graduated from McCord School in the sixth grade, I gave them each a little hatchet so they could limb and help peel in the woods," Ralph recalled.

But by the early '80s, economic pressure, an empty nest and an itch to get back into the trucking business prompted Ralph to sell his dad's shop. He went back to trucking for various companies, this time accompanied by his wife.

Ralph and Doris traversed the country trucking until the early 2000s when Ralph became stricken with cancer. Once he recovered, Ralph turned to running cranes and building log homes for Frontier Builders out of Land O'Lakes. Even then he traveled to cities in Pennsylvania, Illinois and Indiana building homes for about five years, until his wife had a heart attack in 2005. Once Doris returned to health, the couple took to trekking the western U.S., visiting the Grand Canyon and the Royal Gorge with their children and in-laws. Even though they traveled the country when they were trucking, Ralph said they never had an opportunity to stop and see the sights, so when the couple retired, they did just that.

Community Member

In January 2021, Ralph was honored as a 60-year member of the VFW Ray Rousseau Post 3143. He recently retired from his post as treasurer but still takes pride in the organization.

Since four generations of his family have resided in Rhinelander, Ralph also takes great care to help preserve local history by sharing his own life experiences. Because of this, he has been instrumental in helping me write several installments of Rhinelander Revisited and I personally have grown very fond of his company.

Oral storytelling is such a rich part of our Northwoods culture and we all play an important role in safeguarding this history. In a similar way, Ralph asks younger members of the community to take time to talk with their elders - to listen to their stories, chronicle their experiences and ask lots of questions, because preserving their stories plays a large role in preserving our collective history.

Article Comment Submission Form

Please feel free to submit your comments.

Article comments are not posted immediately to the Web site. Each submission must be approved by the Web site editor, and meet the comment guidelines (see "Comment Guidelines" at right). There may be a delay of 24-48 hours for any submission while the web site editor reviews and approves it.

Note: All information on this form is required. Your telephone number and email address is for our use only, and will not be attached to your comment.

Submit an Article Comment

First Name:

Required

Last Name:

Required

Telephone:

Required

Email:

Required

Comment:

Required

Passcode:

Required

[Click here to see a new mix of characters.](#)

This is an anti-SPAM device. It is not case sensitive.

[Facebook](#) | [All Things](#) | [Wisconsin Lottery](#) | [The Lakeland Times - affiliate](#) | [Winter Road Conditions](#) | [Snow/Trail Conditions](#)

The Northwoods River News | Walker Communications, LLC
232 S. Courtney Street, Rhinelander, WI 54501 | Office (715) 365-6397 | Fax (715) 365-6361

Corporate billing office: The Lakeland Times / Lakeland Printing Inc. | P.O. Box 790, Minocqua, WI 54548 | (715) 356-5236 | Fax (715) 358-2121
Members of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, Wisconsin Community Papers, Rhinelander Area Chamber of Commerce, Minocqua Area Chamber of Commerce

Site Design and Content | Copyright 2021 1up!
Software © 1998-2021 1up! Software, All Rights Reserved