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A Lover Of Philanthropy And The Outdoors



Robert Merriman, a Burlington resident, was a philanthropist with a talent for connecting worthy causes and generous donors, and was an avid outdoorsman with a wide, self-taught knowledge of native plants and trees. He died March 3 at age 96. (Courtesy of Susan D. Sadecki)

By ANNE M. HAMILTON Special to The Courant

Extraordinary Life: Robert Merriman had a knack for connecting worthy causes with generous donors

Bob Merriman had a talent for connecting worthy causes and generous donors, and played a key role in establishing philanthropic groups that benefited thousands of people. He was an avid outdoorsman with a wide, self-taught knowledge of native plants and trees. He continued to pursue both passions into his 10th decade.

Robert S. Merriman died March 3, at age 96. He had lived in Burlington since 1955.

His approach to philanthropy began while he was director of public relations and development for St. Joseph College (now the University of St. Joseph) in West Hartford. It was a new position, he was a male in a women's college, and he was Protestant, not Roman Catholic.

Before that, after serving in the Army, he worked in sales at New Departure, a Bristol-based General Motors subsidiary that made ball bearings for bicycle coaster brakes, and he traveled frequently for the job. He met his wife, Carmen Valentine, on a sales call in a store in Columbus, Ohio, and subsequently

lived there for three years. When he learned in the 1960s that his division was moving to Sandusky, Ohio, his time in the state persuaded him he didn't want to stay there.

More significantly, he wanted to switch careers — a somewhat precarious step for a man in his 40s with four small children, but his wife was running the training program at G. Fox in Hartford and supported his plan. It took nearly a year to find another job, but he did — at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, which provides grants to non-profit-agencies in the Hartford area. There, he discovered that he enjoyed working in the field of philanthropy, helping connect donors with the right recipients.

He then spent several years at St. Joseph, and Merriman realized that while there were many corporate and individual donors willing to make gifts, there was no way to evaluate the recipients. Often, small groups had tax-exempt status but little experience in preparing a budget or a business plan, and there was no objective analysis of the efficacy of those groups.

So, in 1969, Merriman and prominent business and civic leaders — including representatives of the Knox Foundation, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, several big banks and the Suisman Foundation — formed the Coordinating Council for Foundations. Other local foundations later joined, and Merriman became the executive director of what was a clearinghouse for Hartford philanthropy.

"There were people with money to give away and organizations that needed money," said David Merriman, his son.

The problem was how best to match the two parties.

"He began by bringing [funders] together to see how they could have a greater impact by working together," said Nancy Roberts, a former president of the Connecticut Council for Philanthropy, the coordinating council's successor. After vetting the applicants, the group essentially decided who the grant recipients would be.

"The funders came together and had a greater impact because of Bob Merriman's vision," Roberts said, "not only raising the message of what philanthropy is, but having a greater impact because of people working together."

Merriman left the organization in the late 1970's, and along with others, founded the Main Street Foundation in Bristol to give grants to organizations in nearby towns.

"He was very energetic," said Sherwood Anderson, a Bristol lawyer who was involved in setting up the foundation. "He was always thinking up new ways to help the community."

Merriman's approach to new projects or raising money was indirect. "His way of starting a fundraising event was to say, 'I've been thinking this would be a good idea.' If you get three to five people talking like that ..." said his son. "He'd listen to people and let them be more than what they thought they could be. Even if the effort isn't successful, you support the effort, because the effort is the most important thing."

Today, the Main Street Foundation has assets of \$38 million, according to Susan Sadecki, president of the organization. When she took that position several years ago, she said, Merriman was the first founder to visit her office and offer his help.

"He was an expert on ... how to run a community foundation, how to choose the right members and use money for the right stuff," Sadecki said. "We will benefit into the future. You don't forget what Bob Merriman told you: 'You might want to think of it this way.'"

Merriman was born on July 31, 1918, the son of George Merriman, a Yale educated mathematics teacher. He grew up in Bristol and spent summers at camp in New Hampshire, where he cultivated his love of hiking and boating. He graduated from Hamilton College in New York State and served in the Army.

As a lover of the outdoors, Merriman used to hike in Sessions Woods in Burlington, a wildlife management area run by the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, but he wanted to increase its use by local residents. He gathered some like-minded people, and they formed Friends of Sessions Woods, which organizes nature programs on topics such as mushrooms, raptors and bluebirds.

"Bob was always in the background," said Elmer Madsen, a Burlington resident. "He had a good knowledge of how to raise funds and get things organized."

Years ago, Merriman decided to do something about the lack of an adequate space for the small library in a one-room schoolhouse in Burlington, so he took action.

"He rallied people to canvass neighbors to help build the first library [building] ever in town," said Janet Schwartz, a town resident.

A new library was built in the 1960's exclusively with private donations to the group he had formed, the Friends of the Burlington Library. His advice and contacts were essential. "Without him, we wouldn't have been able to raise the money to build the building," said Anne Walluk, the former librarian.

About four years ago, Merriman asked a group to help form a foundation that would make grants to organizations that help Burlington residents. The large, 19th century bell he owned became the logo of the Burlington Bell Community Fund, which operates under the aegis of the Main Street Foundation. At the time, Merriman was in his early 90s.

"He knew who to ask to get things done," said Schwartz, who is chairwoman of the fund's advisory council. "He was a gentleman and a gentle man."

Merriman made full use of the 40 acres he owned in Burlington. He planted tiny evergreen saplings, and with the help of his four children, raised them as Christmas trees, which he sold for more than 50 years. He regularly cut pussy willow branches and sold them at an honor box at a stand on his property. Merriman also made a practice of visiting older people, bringing along either greens or pussy willows. More importantly, he would spend time talking with the recipients, many of whom were parents of the children he had grown up with in Bristol.

Together with his wife, he started a landscaping business, and concentrated on planting indigenous species. He loved canoeing and kayaking, and, also with his wife, kayaked 1,000 miles on the Yukon River in Alaska, eating food Carmen had dried at home. In 1988, he spent two years planning a canoe trip to China. He had to obtain visas and disclose his itinerary, and learned some rudimentary Chinese. He found out there were no canoes in China, so he took an inflatable tandem kayak. The government official who accompanied them throughout the trip would head each night to a hotel, while the Merrimans camped in tents next to the river.

China had just recently opened up to outsiders, and the couple navigated rivers where Westerners — and canoes — had never been seen. On their return, some friends begged him to lead a similar trip, but the violent protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989 put an end to that project. His last big trip was through the Florida Everglades in the late 1990's.

In his younger years, he made annual winter camping trips on Mt. Washington with his wife, four children and a dog. "We'd carry everything," said David Merriman. "Things weren't as warm or as light [as they are today]. There were some cold campouts."

Merriman is survived by his daughter, Valentine Merriman, his sons, David and Macy, his daughter-in-law, Migdalia Merriman, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He was predeceased by a son, Jeffrey, and his wife, who died in 2011.

"He was equal parts philanthropist — on a very micro level, and the other part, an environmentalist," said his daughter. "His love of the natural world ... drove him his whole life."

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