

John Thoren Parsons

TRAVERSE CITY — John Thoren Parsons, born into the Swedish Lutheran community in Detroit on Oct. 11, 1913, died peacefully in Traverse City on April 18, 2007.

John grew up on the shop floor in an era when American industry was young and visionary. His beliefs in engineering and God were complementary and equally logical.

John's first memory, at age 3, was filing a piece of iron. He learned to tell metals by their smell, the way some people can distinguish flowers. Working with his father, Carl, brother, Henry, and another Swede, Axel Brogren, he was intrigued by the physical world of metal and machinery. Later, especially through the formal engineering skill of his friend, Frank Stulen, he envisioned a new world of manufacturing — metal working using numerical control - the forerunner of today's computer aided manufacturing.

John was a romantic. His mother was beautiful and his dad bowled with Babe Ruth. He loved to dance, played handball at the DAC, drove too fast, married a good looking young singer named Betty Mae Shaw, corresponded with his favorite poet, Robert Frost, played the violin, mandolin, piano, trumpet and accordion, bought six P-38 fighters and two Bell helicopters, and constantly whistled or sang. He was a legendary telephoner who organized phone numbers by time zone so he would have someone to talk with 24 hours a day; he called Tom Watson to talk shop.

For 40 years, John worked at Parsons Corporation with an extraordinarily creative group of men and women, each of whose name he knew and story he loved. The corporation moved to Traverse City during World War II as part of the armaments industry dispersal and at its peak expanded with plants in Detroit and Stockton, Calif., as well as license relationships in England, France and Sweden. The corporation was the largest producer of helicopter blades in the world, having established an early, personal relationship with Igor Sikorsky. The Traverse plant would later produce the massive fuel tanks for the Saturn booster rocket that launched the moon exploration capsules.

When John was young and strong, he was active with Betty in civic life, including Munson Medical Center Board, 1945 to 1951; All Faiths Chapel founding chair, 1963; founding board of the BOGI Youth Center, 1947; Boy Scouts of America Scenic Trails Council president, 1947; Traverse City Industrial Fund founding member; ACLU of Michigan board; Immanuel Lutheran Church Board president; Bethlehem Lutheran Church board; American Swedish Historical Museum, Philadelphia, and others.

Toward the end of his career, John was recognized by the Society of Manufacturing Engineers as the "Father of the Second Industrial Revolution." He received the National Medal of Technology (President Reagan, White House, 1985); The University of Michigan Honorary Doctorate of Engineering (1989); Society of Manufacturing Engineers Founders Award (1982); Lake Superior State University Honorary Doctorate of Humanities (1997) and was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame (Akron 1993). His work was chronicled in trade magazines and books (Knopf: MIT Publishing) and he was specially honored by the Bunsha Group in Tokyo, Japan. His papers are archived at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va.

Most important to John were his wife, Elizabeth, deceased 2005; son, Carl, deceased 1991; sons, John (Judy) of Hagerstown, Md., Robert (Diane) and Grant (Paulette) of Traverse City, David (Judy Diers) of Brooklyn, N.Y.; daughter, Meredith (David McComb) of Bolton Landing, N.Y.; and his grandchildren, Mike, Siri, Brian, Emmy, Margaret and Liv. He fostered and pestered all their lives with a deep, unquestioning love. His native family, all of whom are deceased, included father, Carl; mother, Edith Thoren; sister, Ruth Heldgerd; brother/mentor/best friend, Henry; and sister, Betty Linden.

A memorial service will be held at Bethlehem Lutheran Church on Tuesday, April 24, at noon. Visitation will be at Reynolds-Jonkhoff Funeral Home on Monday, April 23, from 5 to 7 p.m.

Memorials may be directed to the Grand Traverse Pavilions or the John Parsons and Frank Stulen M-Tech Center at Northwestern Michigan College, Traverse City.

The family is being served by the Reynolds-Jonkhoff Funeral Home; www.reynolds-jonkhoff.com.

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