

## MISTER REMBRANDT, RON HARALDSON

By Ed Nielsen



Every town has a family who steps up whenever anyone needs a hand up or a handout. For Rembrandt, the Haraldsons are that family. Yet much of what they do is not generally known. They do what's right just because it's right and don't seek any recognition for it. In fact, they try to stay under everyone's radar and would be uncomfortable receiving accolades.

The Haraldson family has been associated with The First National Bank of Rembrandt since 1906. We could call them pillars of the community, but that would be an understatement. They are the town's bedrock, one of its most stable entities, and a real treasure.

The family patriarch is Ronald—Ron or Ronnie to all who know him in the slightest. After attending college, in 1950 Ron began working in the bank with his father, Lloyd. He's been there ever since, except for a four-year enlistment in the Air Force that began during the Korean Conflict. He passed the banking baton to his sons decades ago but still comes into his office on a daily basis. His wife Janet put in her hours at the family business, too, until just a few years ago. He is a member of RHS Class of 1947. He celebrated his 65<sup>th</sup> class reunion this summer with classmate Mitchell "Bud" Canoy at his side.

Bud advises, "Ron and I have been best friends since we were five or six years old. He's probably the first playmate I ever had and, boy, did we do some wild things as children. For example, we'd jump off the top of railroad boxcars onto a sand pile. That's quite a drop! When I think about some of the things we did, I just have to shake my head and wonder how we weren't seriously injured.

"We've always had similar interests," he continues, "such as hunting and fishing. When the Korean Conflict broke out, I went to Storm Lake to talk to the Air Force recruiter. I was eligible for the draft, while Ron was married and probably wouldn't have been called up. But Ron went along, just to keep me company, and he ended up enlisting, too. I wish I could have been there when he broke that news to Janet!"

Bud concludes, "I live near Cedar Rapids now, but have to go back to Rembrandt at least once a year to see Ron and relive old times."

Many people who used to live in Rembrandt say, "I stopped at the bank." We all know what that means, but it has to be explained to people who aren't from there. The bank isn't just a place to do business. It's the social center or hub of the whole town and surrounding area.

Jim Haraldson is now the bank's third-generation President and his sister Valerie (Haraldson) Mosbo is also a regular employee. Val tells us, "Ron and his father have always been about helping and supporting young people, and Jim operates in the same mode."

Ratifying that point, Keith Stroup, a 1960 Rembrandt High graduate, had this to say: "After high school I started college thanks to an unsecured loan that the Haraldsons gave me. I remember going into the bank and asking for the loan. Mr. [Lloyd] Haraldson asked what it was for and when I told him he simply said yes. That surprised me because he never asked me how I was going to pay it back or when! I look back on that and know that to him it was not about the banking business, but about helping a young boy get started in college. He was willing to take the risk. Amazing!"

A 1963 RHS graduate had a similar experience with the younger Haraldson. "My dad told me, 'Ronnie wants to talk to you,'" she remembers. "When I went to the bank to see him, Ronnie said something like, 'Now that you've graduated from college and have a teaching job this fall, you'll be having some expenses. We'll set up a checking account for you. Just write checks for whatever you need.' Nothing was ever put in writing. I didn't realize that wasn't normal until years later. Of course, I repaid the money as quickly as possible."

She adds, "I keep telling Janet and Ronnie that they are the ones who have kept Rembrandt going, and that we appreciate having Rembrandt to come back to. And I also tell Ronnie that I'm sure nobody has any idea how many kids the bank has helped go to college, in their careers, etc. He just nods and passes it off."

Vaughan, another of Janet and Ron's sons, is the silent partner in the Rembrandt Grille. He helped the current and past operators get their businesses up and running. A small town like Rembrandt, population: 200 or so souls, would be hard pressed to remain viable without an establishment of that sort in which its citizens can dine and congregate. In 1988, Vaughan acquired land for the George Engebretson Little League Field subsequently erected at the east edge of town. The Haraldson legacy continues.

Banking is not all benevolence, not even at First National. For example, there were bank robbers to contend with, as Barb (McKibben) Binder, RHS class of '72, explains. "My childhood was the era of westerns on television. *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, and *Rawhide* were some of our favorites. They always had a common theme: the good guys wore white hats, and the bad guys wore black. And most importantly, the good guys always won! This influenced our manner of play with our ponies.

"We were always the good guys," she continues, "except when Lloyd Haraldson said we could rob the bank. This happened in the early 60's, when we were around eight years old. Lloyd was the town's banker, and we always rode our ponies with his grandkids, our neighbors. On one occasion, we rode into town, ran into the bank with our toy guns drawn, threatened to shoot anyone who tried to stop us, and 'robbed the bank.' I still have this mental image of Lloyd sitting by his big oak desk, toothpick in his mouth, laughing at the robbery. Ronnie soon joined him, laughing just as hard, while trying to conduct banking business during the robbery. Lloyd actually had a bag of pennies on the floor by his desk, waiting for the robbers. (We did give the money back)."

The Haraldsons are the epitome of people persons, very caring. A gentleman who asked to remain anonymous wants to include the following comment: "I appreciated Ronnie coming to my dad's funeral, even though it was out of town. Most people appreciate that he takes the time to attend so many funerals. I found out later that he has tons of those memorial programs from all those services. Maybe that's one of his ways of keeping people's memories alive."

Another person wanted to comment, yet remain anonymous for reasons that will become apparent: "Ronnie is one of the kindest people I have known. I don't think I have ever seen him when he didn't warmly greet me with a great big smile. I learned something rather quickly after leaving the area: Other banks really *care* if you are overdrawn!"

David "Harry" Haraldson, Janet and Ron's third son, operates Harry's Lawn Service and does his part in keeping Rembrandt beautiful. He also pitches in at the bank in whatever capacity is needed.

Getting back to Val, she's the brains and much of the brawn behind the wonderful RHS all-class reunions, although she shrugs off any praise for her efforts. She maintains the alumni roster and sees that all get annual invitations, while the bank picks up the tab for

the printing and postage. As with the rest of the Haraldson family, she prefers to operate quietly in the background.

Regarding her work at the bank, she tells us, "Aside from my duties as Head Bookkeeper, I wash a mean window as well. I don't mind, really I don't, because years ago my dad had to empty the spittoons when we were in the old bank building, so washing windows is nothing. Speaking of the old bank, we had to sift the sand in the ashtrays to clear out the cigarette butts and ashes every day. And who could forget sweeping compound? Oh my!"

"The Haraldson family has done its best to save Rembrandt from becoming a ghost town," says Betty (Foval) Hoskins, another 1960 RHS grad. "They are a real community bank. Like his father Lloyd, Ron goes out of his way to help individuals in the community, such as when he offered my sister and me first chance to buy my mother's house when it came up for sale some years after she died. Such a phone call is typical of Ron. In fact, the bank family bought a lot of houses to fix up and rent out, thus preserving the little town. I am very grateful for that."

"I've always thought of Ronnie as a walking encyclopedia of knowledge about Rembrandt and Rembrandt people," Helene (Ducas) Viall says, "I am constantly amazed by what he knows and remembers. Ronnie really cares about individual people and their families, and he really cares about the town of Rembrandt. Obviously, he knows what he's doing in the business world, to run such a successful bank for so long. But he's so humble and kind and gentle in the process."

Any town would be lucky to have a family like the Haraldsons in their midst.