

Waitman Taylor, a dedicated Two County Public Servant



By Dave Taylor

Listening to Waitman Taylor tell the stories of his family is like listening to a highlight reel of the county's history, with he or his family having a hand in many of the milestones, but Taylor says it's all a matter of taking advantage of opportunities.

Last Friday, as Taylor, who turned 90 on September 18, sat in the kitchen of the caretaker's home beside the plantation home his great grandfather John Beauchamp built in 1842, he was surrounded by photos, and mementos of his and his family's accomplishments as he looked back on his own life.

He was born in 1927 in a house along the river where industries now sit. His father, C. Waitman Taylor, Sr., was crucial in bringing that industry here, and taught his son to push ahead and be ready when opportunities come.

Taylor, Sr. had been a state representative in the 1940s and 1950s and taught his son never to give up when things got tough, like during the Great Depression when he was running dealerships for Ford and John Deere, a Standard oil distributor, and Taylor Funeral Home.

"He lost practically everything but he refused to take bankruptcy," Taylor, Jr. said. "He really was just getting back on his feet and then the 1937 flood hit.

"Our home had six feet of water in it, Dad's business had six feet of water, and the funeral home had six feet of water. So he was knocked flat again, but he never gave up," he said.

Pointing to his dad's bad luck in timing, he told how he sold his Ford dealership in July of 1945 because he feared World War II would drag on, but the war ended just six weeks later and the car business boomed.

"He said, 'Well I missed it but I've got to keep going.'"

Those lessons were impressed upon him again after Taylor, Jr. got his first big job with General Electric, after having served in the Air Force and gone back to UK for a business administration degree.

"In 1952 I said, 'Dad I got a job at G.E.' He said, 'What are you going to do if something happens to General Electric?'"

His dad had seen too many things go wrong in business and also warned his son that once a younger, cheaper worker came along he could be replaced.

"He said you better have something else," Taylor said. "He kept hammering it into me, so I started looking around, mainly to get him off my back."

"So I found some farm land, 100 acres, right across from where the airport is," he said.

Then another 100 acres came available nearby and he bought it too.

Years later word spread that W.R. Grace was looking for a place to build a new plant and Taylor, Sr. gathered local farmers and assured the company that the land was not only good but available. After the company chose Owensboro, Harvey Aluminum got

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the same treatment, but this time it worked.

"Dad did this at his own expense: he went out and got all the options for this land, where Aleris is now," he said.

Taylor Jr. followed in his dad's footsteps by going into local politics, serving as a city commissioner in Owensboro and mayor pro tempore before being elected mayor in 1972.

G.E. and Texas Gas both put employees up for elected office after an upheaval in Owensboro in the 1950s that saw the mayor indicted for stealing and the town rife with crime, after which the two companies pushed to clean up the city where they hoped to bring in more workers.

A new government with a mayor and city commissioners was installed and company employees were encouraged to run.

In 1969, Taylor's boss came and convinced him to run.

"He came to me and he said 'Taylor, you ain't much, but you're running for city commissioner,'" he said.

He was later elected mayor from 1972 to 1975.

In 1976 he moved to Texas Gas, where he eventually became vice president, the position he held when he retired at 65.

From there he went to work for Daviess County, leading their industrial foundation.

"Every time we had an industrial project

in Owensboro I'd say let me show you Hancock County just in case it doesn't work here," he said.

"I said God was good to Hancock County but a lot of people didn't recognize it."

Later he took a position with what was then Owensboro Daviess County Hospital, as their director of development, and he just retired from that role in 2012 at age 86.

Aside from directing industry toward the county in his official capacities, Taylor has also been important to the growth of the county personally, both by selling land to developers for projects like Windward Heights subdivision, and giving away land

to industries, schools and even the country club.

"They were working on getting a golf course here but the golf course didn't have an entrance," he said, "and so I said I wanted the golf course next to my land so I said I'll give you an acre for the entrance."

"Sometimes you can give something away and it benefits you too," he said.

He sold the land for the subdivision cheaper than some thought he should, but he wanted to sell while he had a buyer, but he also knew it would help out the county overall.

"I wanted Hancock County to have some good housing when (workers) came here," he said.

"I thought it was real important for Hancock County, if you get them when they first move here you've got a good chance of keeping them in the county. But if they move some place else, Tell City or Owensboro, then they don't like to come back," he said.

Taylor, now retired, still owns 240 acres in the county and is still game for any opportunities that come along.

"I look back, I made some mistakes in investments, but I also did well," he said.

"If you're out there taking chances you're going to make mistakes," he said. "I bor-

rowed a lot of money, and a couple of times I was right."

"But you have to be out there when something happens to benefit from it," he said.

Opportunities come with risk, but he's not leaving his or his family's future up to chance because he's got a will and a fully laid out plan for the end of his life, whenever it comes.

"You'd be surprised at the people who don't have wills," he said.

His family ran the funeral home and they saw repeated instances where families were left with no ideas of what to do when someone died.

"They don't want to face the reality of mortality," he said, so they ignore it.

"My mom was the most Christian woman in the world and she didn't want to face dying," he said. "We said mom you've got to have a will. Otherwise the state takes it over, the family has no say or anything else."

"Another thing I found was I'm just amazed at the number of husbands that don't tell their wives anything about their business or what they have or anything else, and they really do everybody a great injustice," he said.

"My wife knows everything, I've written out everything," he said. "She's even got my obituary and everything. I have her obituary and the pictures."

"I think it's really important that the husband involve the wife in everything so that she knows what's going on. It's for the benefit of the family, it's that simple."

"My family knows exactly what I want," he said.

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