

Gerald Wendel “Gerry” Frank (1923–2022)

By Barbara Mahoney

In 2000, Governor John Kitzhaber named Gerry W. Frank Oregon’s Premier Citizen, reflecting his decades of civic commitment to the State of Oregon. A longtime chief of staff to Sen. Mark Hatfield, Frank was a business leader, a guidebook writer, a philanthropist, and a chocolate connoisseur. He wrote a column for the *Oregonian* for almost thirty years and was one of the longest serving trustees of Willamette University in Salem.

Gerald Wendel Frank was born in Portland on September 21, 1923, to Aaron M. Frank and Ruth R. Rosenfeld Frank, part of the family that founded the Meier & Frank department store. He attended Lincoln High School in Portland and then Stanford University for two years before he was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943. While serving as a sergeant major in Europe, he was selected to study for a term at Cambridge University. When he was released from the army in 1945, he returned to Cambridge, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in economics in 1948 and a master’s degree in politics in 1950.

Returning to Oregon, Frank joined the family business. In 1954, he established and then managed the Meier & Frank store in Salem, the company’s first branch, which opened in 1955. “In preparation for the opening,” the *Statesman Journal* reported on March 13, 2022, he “spent a year traveling the world looking at new stores, shopping centers and parking garages [and] visited department stores in London, Paris and Rome to get ideas for merchandise display.” He soon became a prominent presence in Salem, where he was involved in several civic endeavors, including the United Way and the Chamber of Commerce.

After Meier & Frank was sold to the May Company in 1966, Frank turned to politics, which he had a deep interest in. His great-uncle, Julius Meier, had been Oregon governor from 1931 to 1935, and Frank had managed Mark Hatfield’s successful campaigns for governor in 1958 and 1962. With Hatfield’s election to the U.S. Senate in 1966, he became the senator’s chief of staff, a position he held until 1992. Hatfield later remembered Gerry Frank as “constantly fielding press, publicity, staff, constituents, I still can’t figure how he did it. He gave more time and resources to Oregon than most will ever know.”

Frank served on the boards of the Boy Scouts of America, the Oregon Historical Society, and Special Olympics Oregon and helped raise money for organizations such as the Oregon Garden, the Oregon Symphony, and the High Desert Museum. The *Oregon Statesman* reported that he “donated \$1 million to help build the [Salvation Army] Kroc Center in north Salem.”

From 1959 to 2019, Frank was the only judge for the Gerry Frank Chocolate Layer Cake Contest at the Oregon State Fair, where he reportedly “ate 100 to 200 forkfuls of chocolate cake in just a few hours.” Perhaps influenced by that experience, he founded Gerry Frank’s Konditorei cake shop and restaurant on Southeast Commercial and Kearney in Salem in 1982. He sold the Konditorei in 2017.

Frank published a number of books including *Where to Find It, Buy It, Eat It in New York* (1980), *Gerry Frank’s Oregon* (2012), and *Our Little Black Book of Shopping Secrets* (1991). From 1988 until 1995, he wrote a weekly column, “Friday Surprise,” for the *Oregonian*, which gave him a platform for expressing his observations, political and otherwise. He described the Senate as “not that much different from many other organizations....There were those who were really concerned with the plight of the minorities, the poor, the elderly and the infirm. But there were also those who seemed to be in over their heads in an institution that exerted so much influence on our daily lives. Some were more concerned with their position than their obligations.”

Frank received the Salem First Citizen award in 1964, the Glenn Jackson Medallion Award in 1984, and an Honorary Doctorate of Public Service from Willamette University in 2017.

Gerry Frank died on March 13, 2022, when he was ninety-eight years old. He left a significant collection of memorabilia to the Oregon Historical Society, including over a hundred leatherbound scrapbooks documenting Oregon business, politics, and culture during twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The Gerry Frank Salem Rotary Amphitheater was named in his honor.

Sources

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