

Frederick business titan turns 100

By Ike Wilson News-Post Staff | Posted: Saturday, April 27, 2013 2:00 am

M. Robert Ritchie started out selling newspapers for 2 cents.

A life of entrepreneurship ensued, and the builder of Holly Hills Country Club in Ijamsville, who celebrates his 100th birthday today, was described Friday by a friend and colleague as "the last of Frederick's business titans."

Ritchie was born April 27, 1913, in downtown Frederick. After graduating from Frederick High School, he began selling insurance and eventually formed Ritchie Associates Insurance Co.

"He would go door to door selling insurance, cold turkey," said Harriette Ritchie, his wife of 74 years. She turns 99 in May.

Back then, consumer loans were hard to get, Ritchie said, so he established Investors Loan Corp. on a \$1 million bank loan and a handshake. The business grew to 54 offices in several states. After a successful banking career, Ritchie built Holly Hills Country Club.

The project was a big deal in Frederick, real estate developer Earl "Rocky" Mackintosh said.

"He was almost exclusively responsible for building the country club," Mackintosh said. "It was his vision, his dream. To bring a country club to Frederick County was met with great excitement."

The project was a far cry from the Veterans of Foreign Wars nine-hole golf course, and marked the beginning of the golf expansion in Frederick County, Mackintosh said.

Ritchie said he didn't golf, but he built the course because "it is a good, clean, healthy sport, and it puts you outdoors. I like being outdoors. I enjoyed walking in the woods."

Robin L. Jeffs, Ritchie's executive assistant, said she used to describe working for the philanthropist as being in the "Ritchie academy" because she learned so much about the stock market, real estate, animals and nature, and the intricacies of development.

Ritchie believed in owning land, Jeffs said, and at one time, owned about 1,000 acres in Ijamsville.

A Navy veteran, Ritchie came from humble beginnings. His mother and father worked, and he helped support his family as a young boy, Jeffs said.

"He never believed in retirement. He believed when you retire, you die," Jeffs said.

Ritchie attributes his success to thrift, hard work, saving money and appreciating the compound interest financial philosophy, he said.

"He made a lot of money," said Bob Hooper, a family friend and investment broker who worked with Ritchie for many years, "but the good news is he's given so much of it back. I know that because I worked with him on many of them.

"Mr. Ritchie was a key part of the greatest generation. I call him the last of the titans because he's given back to so many organizations."

"That's because there was a need," Ritchie said Friday. "There were things that needed to be done."

Ritchie's generosity has benefited The Community Foundation of Frederick County, YMCA, Frederick Memorial Hospital, Heartly House, Community Living, Hope Alive, Patty Pollatos Fund, Frederick Rescue Mission, United Way, Frederick Community College and Hood College.

Responding to Hooper's titan characterization, Harriette Ritchie said, "I think that's about right. And he has a good wit. He is a good guy. I watched the pennies turn into millions."

Ritchie said Franklin D. Roosevelt is his favorite president.

"He favored small businesses, and he established programs to help poor people, and I liked that," he said. "Poor people should live a decent life, too."

He liked the Monocacy River when he was a boy, Ritchie said; he made a canoe and also rode his bike from Frederick to Adamstown.

Jeffs said Ritchie enjoyed riding horses at Holly Hills Farm and spending time on his boat, the Holly, for many years. He loves nature and had a passion for raising champion Shorthorn cattle.

Ritchie is now building the Manor at Holly Hills — an exclusive housing development in Ijamsville consisting of 21 lots on 187 acres.

"He wanted this to be kind of his legacy to leave a very high-end housing community," Mackintosh said.

Half the lots have already been sold, and construction will begin in the next four months.

"Mr. Ritchie was a visionary as a young man and has continued to amaze many with his ideas and wisdom," Jeffs said. "As my boss he has inspired me to dream big and work hard. He is charitable and always encourages young people to pursue their dreams."

The Ritchies have three daughters, Ann White, Jane Daus, and Susan LaBrush, eight grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren.