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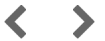
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Charles William Coss

Janet Heim Jul 4, 2015



Submitted photo

Charles Coss with his daughters Megan Coss, left, and Susan Coss at Lake Tahoe in 1994

Editor's Note

Each Sunday, The Herald-Mail runs "A Life Remembered." Each story in this continuing series takes a look back — through the eyes of family, friends, co-workers and others — at a member of the community who died recently. Today's "A Life Remembered" is about Charles William Coss, who died June 17 at the age of 87. His obituary was published in the June 23 edition of The Herald-Mail.

MORE INFORMATION



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Charles William Coss, 87

Charles "Charlie" Coss was born in the Hagerstown area, and, other than time away for military service, he lived his entire life in Maryland.

Known as Charlie by work colleagues and Bud by family and friends, his roots began in a family of truck farmers, with military service that afforded him a college education, which led to a career in politics and public service in the federal government.

Charlie experienced life in much of the state. He grew up on the Eastern Shore, spent the bulk of his career in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., lived in Frederick County, then spent his retirement years on Reno Monument Road in Boonsboro.

His life was influenced by two passions — politics and working the land.

The oldest son of Charles and Virginia Huff Coss, the younger Charles, his brother, Dick Coss, now of Raleigh, N.C., and sister Mary Hedges, who lives in the Smithsburg area, were raised on the farm their father managed for eight years in Kennedyville, Md., which is about eight miles from Chestertown.

"The Coss family were truck farmers for generations and

generations," said daughter, Susan Coss of Alameda, Calif., during a telephone interview.

She said the Coss family — whose family home and land were on Leitersburg Pike — was luckier than many during the Depression because they had employment and food.

Still, Charlie was deeply influenced by the post-Depression programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, such as the Works Progress Administration, which provided economic development and put Americans to work.

During the time Charlie's family lived on the Eastern Shore, German prisoners of war were housed there and worked on the farm, which also included poultry. It provided unique experience for the Coss males, who worked in the fields with the Germans, Mary said in a telephone interview.

She said the family ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together. She recalls the dinner conversations, mainly between Charlie and their father, as they processed the events of the day.

Charlie graduated from Chestertown High School in 1945 and joined the U.S. Army just as the war was ending. Charlie never saw combat, instead serving with a unit that documented the history of the war in the Pacific and was under the leadership of James M. Cain, who became a well-known author.

"It gave him a different look at the Pacific Theater and war, being in Japan," Susan said.

Following his military service, Charlie attended Washington College in Chestertown on the GI Bill. His family had since

returned to Hagerstown after the farm his father managed was sold. After graduation in the early 1950s, Charlie went back to Hagerstown.

Prior to and after their time on the Eastern Shore, Charlie's father was employed at the state prison, working with prisoners at the correctional facility's farm, Mary said.

Charlie grew up in a family that was not politically active, but felt strongly about issues, Susan said. His father was from a large Mennonite family, but the Coss children were raised Methodist.

Getting involved

After growing up with the WPA and other public-works programs at home and hearing about post-war construction in Europe, Charlie wanted to get involved.

"What was striking to me about my father's life was how present he was at these incredible moments in history. Everything this generation saw," including wars and social changes, Susan said.

It was with the help of his uncles on his father's side and connections made at South End Tavern — which Susan describes as a "hotbed of politics" at the time — that Charlie got involved in local politics and was elected to the Maryland House of Delegates for three years, starting in 1959.

"He was the first in the family to go headfirst into politics," Susan said.

Charlie was splitting his time between Hagerstown and Annapolis, then later between Hagerstown and Washington, D.C.

Mary Lou Springer also went to Washington College, a member of the Class of 1962. She and Charlie married in 1964. They had two daughters and were married for 39 years before divorcing.

Susan and her younger sister, Megan, grew up in Chevy Chase Md., but they visited both sets of grandparents, who were from Hagerstown.

In 1962, Charlie began an almost 30-year career with the federal government focused on economic redevelopment in challenged areas.

Through his work with the Area Redevelopment Administration, the Coastal Plains Commission and the Public Works Administration, he worked on projects that included the Ozark Folk Center, Pike Place Market in Seattle and other redevelopment projects that revitalized depressed coastal areas and downtowns, and created jobs.

'Amazing gardens'

Even while living in Chevy Chase, Charlie never forgot his agricultural roots. At Mary Lou's urging, Charlie got permission to work a vacant lot for several years, his antidote to a stressful job

Susan said the empty lot was "sandwiched between the home of Sandra Day O'Connor and the Ourismans," a prominent car-dealing family in the Washington, D.C., area.

"He never lost touch with the Earth," Susan said. "He expressed that through amazing gardens in our yard."

Through his "pretty significant garden," Charlie developed a

rapport with their gardeners. Susan said that it was unusual to see "a guy toiling in his garden after work with a broken straw hat and his black socks" in the prestigious suburb.

"Working in the government at the higher levels is not without stress, with changing administrations, especially when you have strong political views yourself," Susan said.

Charlie's final years were during the Reagan administration. It was difficult for him, as director of the Public Works Administration, to be part of the dismantling of the public-works programs that were the core of the FDR programs in which Charlie so strongly believed, Susan said.

Still politically engaged

A move to Frederick, Md., after his retirement from the federal government in 1987 led Charlie to a position working under Mayor Ron Young. He was involved with economic-development projects, including Carroll Creek.

From about 1994 until they separated in 2001, Charlie and Mary Lou lived on a few acres on Reno Monument Road in Boonsboro where Charlie grew mostly vegetables and some flowers that he sold at a market in Rockville, Md., for six years.

"He took tremendous pride in his tomatoes," Susan said.

Besides working in his garden, Charlie loved road trips and summer vacations at Emerald Isle on the Outer Banks, which Susan described as wonderful experiences that broadened her view and gave her confidence to explore the world.

He also enjoyed conversations with the family about current events and politics.

"With me, my father was so politically engaged. Growing up in D.C. gave me experiences," said Susan, who clearly recalls events like Watergate.

She remembered the time her father hosted a party in their backyard attended by Jimmy Carter, who was then governor of Georgia and whom Charlie supported during his presidential campaign.

From 2001 on, Charlie lived in Frederick, then Reisterstown, Md then with his daughter, Megan Coss and her son, Isaiah, in Silver Spring, Md., until her death in September 2012.

Most recently he was at Homewood, then Somerford House & Place of Hagerstown.

"My father lived an extraordinary life," Susan said.

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