

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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Howard Pratt was 99 years young! What a paradox - 99 years young! Perhaps these words by Oscar Wilde describe it best:

"The soul is born old
and grows young.

That is the comedy of life

The body is born young
and grows old

That is life's tragedy."

Howard Pratt was certainly young in spirit. He lived a quality life because of his attitude towards life. He thought young and he acted young because he believed in the future. He took care of his body. He did not abuse it with tobacco or alcohol. He perceived his diet as being a key to health. All of this was important to him because he had so much more to do. Howard Pratt's life is an example of how to keep young by keeping an active interest in many different projects and events. Howard proved that age is all the mind. There may have been snow on the roof but that's not to say there wasn't a roaring fire in the furnace.

We all know Howard's main interest was in history. You may say, "What is youthful about that?" Well, someone once said, "Those who have no past, have no future." Howard had a future. It is in the unborn children of tomorrow who will read his books and inherit through his chronicles a closer view of their past. Yes, Howard had a future with yet a fourth book in the works, the previous three being: "Memories of Life on the Ridge," published by the Orleans County Historical Association in 1978, "Saga on the Ridge," published in 1983 and "Life on the Ridge," published in 1987. These books are the culmination of his life experiences and research into the past. Ninety-nine years is a long time, but it's a life without end for Howard. Indeed, his thoughts were always on tomorrow.

Why, even two years ago he was setting out beach trees. Last spring, when a car skinned three-quarters of the bark off a very old evergreen tree in front of his house, Howard became concerned about making sure the tree would not die. Four years ago when Dee Robinson and I were co-chairmen for the Historic Gaines Jubilee, we jokingly said to Howard that he ought to be the chairman for the bicentennial at Gaines in 2009. His reply was, "I'm not sure I'll be around then." That comment amused everyone just because he wasn't sure. Howard certainly wanted and expected to make a hundred years plus - he still had a lot to give because he was in love with life.

I first really got to know him back in 1959 when Gaines celebrated its sesquicentennial. I remember him in the organizational days of the Cobbles-



tone Society 28 years ago. His devotion to interpreting the past to hundreds of children at the Cobblestone school extended for over a decade. I saw his keen interest in Lincoln manifest itself into impersonation of the great emancipator. I've heard him lecture with unsurpassed zeal about the old ways and the old Ridge Road - his home. I recall the mother/son art exhibit he had several years ago showing his mother's paintings along with his own. I saw him as a craftsman in chaircaning along with rows of chairs for sale on his front lawn. Yes, I remember Howard as retired teacher, farmer and historian of Gaines which extended over 30 years. He was a family man in the role of sibling, husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. But most of all, I knew Howard best as a Unitarian-Universalist. He was there regularly on Sundays and when his sister Florence was alive, he made sure she got there too. He sometimes fell asleep, but usually heard more than you thought he did. He always extended the right hand of fellowship and yes, he liked to flirt with the young ladies.

In his church he lived up to its faith by believing in himself and others. He took a positive outlook on life through the joys and hopes of his religion. Within this tradition there is no Hell. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil; For thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." We can only conclude that Death Is An Illusion. J. Howard Pratt, through his own indomitable self will live on for he is still at work, at his hand to the plow and his face to the future.