

Raymond Harrison Frost

b. November 15, 1892 (Worcester, MA)

d. November 7, 1982 (Portland, ME)

Ray

A Biography by Paul W. Frost and Roger W. Frost

Through most of his ninety years Raymond Harrison Frost was known as “Ray,” a go-getter, a doer, a daredevil, a hard worker, and a guy who lived the Rotary motto of “Service Above Self.” Ray was a twenty-year member of the South Portland School Board, and a founder of businesses as well as the South Portland District Nursing Association and Rotary Clubs (South Portland-Cape Elizabeth and Kennebunk).

Ray was Roger’s uncle and a good friend. When Roger was eleven, Ray taught him to swim by throwing him off the dock at Salt Pond (Point Judith, RI), then diving into the water beside him. Soon Roger was swimming over a mile.

Ray was Paul’s dad. When Paul was eleven, Ray took a gentler approach, but he was determined Paul would learn to swim. Ray rented a cottage at Higgins Beach for the whole summer. Every night after work, he took Paul and the other kids on the street to a tide pool and taught swimming. Every other kid on the street learned to swim. Despite extra lessons Paul did not. In the fall Ray arranged private lessons for Paul with Harold Paulson, the coach of the national champion Portland Boys Club Swimming Team. During the first lesson as Ray sat next to Harold while Paul practiced kicking, Harold told Ray he, too, had not been able to teach his own son to swim. On the way home when Ray shared this liberating news with Paul, they laughed with shared joy.

During World War 2 when Roger was struggling with the math of navigation and gunnery at the Naval ROTC at Brown University, Ray taught him techniques to estimate right answers. Roger could then determine the correct formula to apply to the problem.

In 1963 after serving in the Army, Paul took a Teaching Elementary Mathematics course at Gorham State Teachers College. Ray helped Paul get through the word problems with the same techniques he’d used with Roger.

Ray loved golf, but, wasn’t much good at it; he loved bridge and was very good at it. Other players vied to be his partner in duplicate bridge tournaments at the Portland Country Club. In any deal after a few tricks were played, Ray developed a pretty accurate picture of what the other player’s hands looked like. His wife Lil (Paul’s mom) and his wife Dottie (Paul’s stepmom) both periodically accused Ray of “playing bridge for blood.” They had some justification. He played with intensity and passion, but he was a good teacher and a student of the game. He taught Paul to play from scratch. Because after any deal he could recall key bids and plays, he was able to improve the game of many players. “It would have been good during the bidding to mention that minor suit, then I could have bid higher.” “Better strategy to lay off the first trick in that suit so the bid winner doesn’t know your hand is that strong, and he’s got to keep guessing where the queen is.” He read books about bridge by Ely Culbertson and Charles Goren. Every Sunday he set up the four hands of the Goren bridge problem shown in the Portland Press Herald and worked out how to play the bid winner’s hand successfully.

For a while during WW2 he played in weekly neighborhood penny ante polka games. His ability to count cards and knowledge of the odds for acquiring three of a kind, a straight or a flush pretty much assured that two or three times a month, he would win the two dollars needed to take his family to a movie. After a year of winning so frequently and occasionally throwing a hand to reduce his winnings, he gave it up. Given the skill level of his opponents, he didn't think it was fair and thus, he didn't get any fun out of it.

Ray used to tell Dottie about standing on a box selling fireworks for his father's company. Business was in his blood at an early age. School was not. Ray dropped out in ninth grade shortly after he and his fellow cast offs from basketball team tryouts beat the varsity. He and his brother Harold (Roger's dad) worked for the Frost Office Appliance Company. Neither of them went to college because their father F.E. Frost needed them in the business.

Ray worked successfully in Sales for F.E. and sold a complete filing system to Massachusetts Mutual Assurance Company, a national insurance company located in Worcester. He eventually was transferred to Portland, Maine as Manager of the Roberts Office Supply Company, which was owned by Frost Office Appliance Company. In his middle 20's, Ray had a falling out with his father and left the employ of Frost Office Appliance Company.

He and George Bilek founded Frost & Bilek Company, a distributor for A.B. Dick Mimeograph Company. (These copying machines used a spirit duplicator in a revolving drum with a typed stencil wrapped around the outside of the drum. They transferred ink from the inside of the drum, thru the stencil, and onto a blank sheet of paper.) Frost & Bilek was located at 10 Portland Street in Worcester adjacent to the Frost Stamp Works which moved to 6 Portland Street in 1945 after F.E. Frost died. Frost & Bilek's distributorship was so successful that A.B. Dick insisted one of the partners take the Portland, Maine distributorship. Ray had liked Portland during his time at Roberts.

Ray offered Lillian her choice. She could see he really wanted Portland and finally said, "Well, OK." Probably in 1939 Ray established the first A. B. Dick distributorship in Portland. 1940 sales: \$33,522; 1941 sales: \$ 49,154; (December 7, 1941 – Pearl Harbor) 1942 sales: \$34,617; 1943 sales: \$26,055. Once the US was in WW 2, Ray could only sell new mimeographs to the US Government and defense contractors. He traveled Maine from Kittery to Ft. Kent and Eastport to Bethel, picking up increasingly worn-out mimeographs and returning them, cleaned and refurbished. Spare parts were non-existent during the war years, Refurbishing often required ingenuity. Ray found a way to return even mimeographs customers had abandoned, running "like new." During summers Paul often accompanied Ray on these trips. Ray would listen tirelessly and ask questions as Paul recounted the story of the latest book he'd read.

Constraints on sales of new mimeographs shrank profits; increased income from maintenance didn't offset this loss. To support his family Ray was forced him to take an additional job running the printing department at the South Portland Shipbuilding Corporation which built merchant freighters called Liberty ships in its fourteen bays. Just after WW 2 ended, a guy named Kinney went to A.B. Dick headquarters and complained that Ray had been moonlighting, not tending to the distributorship for the last three years, and asked for the Portland distributorship. A.B. Dick gave Ray three months to hand the business over. Kinney got the post-war killing on mimeograph sales. Ray's son Paul swore, "Business, never!" Ray started Frost Mimeograph Company in 1946.

Frost Mimeo did mimeographing, multigraphing, and mailings until he sold it in 1962 when it grossed \$82,098 and had five other full time employees. In its heyday in 1955 Frost Mimeograph Co., located at 266 Middle St., Portland, won two international blue ribbons for mechanical perfection and artistic excellence in a field of 160 entries from the Mail Advertising Service International in Los Angeles. Footnote: Ray and George Bilek remained good friends. George would visit Ray once a year for a baked stuffed lobster and a round of golf to determine the winner of the Frost-Bilek Golf Championship trophy designed by Ray. Now, let's back up to other aspects of Ray's adventures.

When WW I came along, Ray enlisted in the Navy as a Seaman, Third Class. When he reached First Class, his commanding officer recommended him for Officers Candidate School at Newport, Rhode Island and asked him to take the qualifying exam. Determination and his natural aptitude for math carried him through this challenge despite his lack of a high school education. He became Ensign Frost. His first command was to take three Chris Craft type yachts from Newport down to the Florida Keys. He accomplished this mission and made friends for life with members of his crew. When WW 2 came along, Ray attempted to enlist again. He took it hard when he was turned down because of age. The recruiter admonished him, "Surely, someone as smart as you will figure out other ways to serve your country." As you have read, he did.

Ray was married three times. In the 20's he was courting Dottie Frost, later his third wife. He drew up plans and started to have a house built for them. When Dottie turned down his proposal of marriage, he married Hazel, a good dancer and, in his words, "a good number," meaning she was pretty. They lived together in the house Ray had intended for Dottie. A couple of years after marrying Hazel, Ray found his best friend's razor in their bathroom and promptly divorced her. Hazel pleaded with Ray's mother Edith to intervene, but to no avail. There were no children.

Ray married his second wife Lillian Worthington at 4:30 on September 20, 1934. We know because he telegraphed his younger sister Mabelle at 16 Delwood Rd. in Worcester. Lil was secretary to the President of Wright Steel & Wire in Worcester. In 1937 she bore him a son Paul. They lived in Leicester for a time before moving to Portland in 1939. Lil made many close friends while Bulletin Editor for Portland's Women of Rotary. In 1952 after a two-year unsuccessful battle with high blood pressure, Lil died. Ray went looking for a bride and a stepmother for fourteen-year-old Paul.

Before too long he made the trek to Shelburne Falls, MA home of his first sweetheart and heartbreaker, Dottie Frost. This time Dottie said, "Yes," and they spent many happy years together.

Ray was a good husband. He prepared his share of the meals and helped clean the house. He cared for Lil in every way possible during her frequent headaches and the constant worry she lived with as her blood pressure climbed. In his eighties he slept on the floor for two years to be near Dottie during the night when she was suffering from shingles. But Ray's wives did have to compete with Rotary.

Rotary was a big thing in Ray's life. He joined Rotary International in 1937 and stayed until he died 45 years later. He recorded thirty-seven years of perfect attendance. During much of this time he held down the Duplicating and Mailing classification in the Portland Rotary Club and led the singing. About 1961 Portland Rotary Club designated him as advisor to the newly forming South Portland-Cape Elizabeth Rotary Club. Ray became its founder. He served as its Secretary from 1968-69, its President from 1969-70, and its Secretary from 1970-77. He resigned at that time to serve as Secretary of Rotary International District #799 (a district that included Maine and part of New Brunswick) in 1977-78. Ray also founded a second club, the Kennebunk-Wells Rotary Club and was made a Life Member of that club in 1973.

Rotarians remembered Ray. On November 14, 1975 the South Portland-Cape Elizabeth Club celebrated a "Ray Frost Nite" during which Ray was made the club's first Paul Harris Fellow as a result of member donations to Rotary International. On this eve of his 84th birthday, Roger was there bringing greetings from the Worcester Rotary Club and his sister Betty was there from Rhode Island. Paul, his wife Elaine, and their son Ashley were there. People talked about Ray helping them out, encouraging them when they needed it, and about his pep. Ray drank it all in, but the remark he recalled most fondly from that evening came from his six-year-old grandson Ashley who said, "I am prouderer than anyone."

Rotarians remembered him in another Ray Frost Nite on September 17, 1980 when he was almost 87. That night he presented the South Portland-Cape Elizabeth Rotary Club with memorabilia he had accumulated over the years. They remembered him in 1981 when the club named its new trailer for selling Christmas trees the "Frost Mobile."

At the first meeting after his death, Sam Giftos, a friend and fellow Rotarian recalled, "He always more than fulfilled his duties at the Christmas Tree Sale, and we will all miss his lusty leading of the Railroad Song. Truly a fine man."

What did this lusty leading look like? Paul remembers it well. The program master of ceremonies signals it's time for singing. Ray, who's been waiting songbook in hand, pops to his feet, then searches frantically for a place to park his half smoked "63" cigar. Soon he jogs to the front of the room, announces the song, and cautions emphatically, "We don't want any shirkers." His left hand holds the songbook high as his right gives the ready signal. When his right hand comes down, Ray plunges in, "I been workin on the . . ." His voice is strong even before others join in. When enough singers are on board, he stops singing, moves toward any section of the room that sounds weak, and encourages slackers by singing right next to them. Sometimes in the move he loses his place and has to consult his songbook. His right arm, however, instinctively keeps the beat. Ray is a former drummer. In these events it was hard to tell whether his eyes or his feet danced more. Often it took two choruses, but Ray never failed to get everyone singing, and the second chorus was inevitably faster as well as louder.

His infectious enthusiasm surfaced in other ways. At the February 2, 1977 meeting Ray wore a black armband to symbolize his grief that the SP-CE Club had sunk to 50th place in attendance in District #799. Of course, this turned things around.

Ray loved a dare. One time he ate two pies at one sitting. He loved new things. He was the first to learn the crawl in Worcester and became the city's 100-yard swimming champion. He loved competition. In his late fifties he threw his shoulder out playing American handball at the YMCA with a forty-year-old.

He won medals as a rider for the Harley Davidson 24 Hour Endurance Team, completing all-night runs between Worcester and Chicago.

Throughout his life Ray made it a point to keep going: his pace brisker, his hands busier, and his thinking more forward looking than most of those around him. Never one to sit around, soon after he sold Frost Mimeo in 1961, he started a nineteen year twilight career as a jack-of-all-trades at Hodges Furniture and Appliances in South Portland. At 89 a few days before he died, friends found him chopping ice off his driveway.

In his lifetime Ray fixed a lot of machines and helped a lot of people. He often commented with a grin, "That's what life's all about."

Note: Ray is buried at the Maine Veteran's Memorial Cemetery, Mt. Vernon Road in Augusta in Section J, Row 9, Site 18.