

# Meet Charlevoix

## Ralph Hamilton

Ralph Hamilton says he's retired but this still-busy man keeps up his long interest in Charlevoix. Here's a little past and present about him.

**COURIER:** Are you a native of Charlevoix?

**HAMILTON:** Yes, I was born here in 1904 near where Meadow Lane now is. It was a racetrack then.

**COURIER:** Did you go to Charlevoix High School?

**HAMILTON:** I did but I quit in the 11th grade to go to business school in Grand Rapids.

**COURIER:** What was your first business venture?

**HAMILTON:** I had a pop stand on Belvedere Avenue near the Grey Gables. It was half way between the Belvedere Club and downtown so I got the kids coming and going from the Belvedere Club. With their parents' permission they'd sign charge slips and I'd collect at the end of the summer. I made enough money to pay my tuition at business college and I fry-cooked at the old Hermitage Hotel for board and room.

**COURIER:** Then what did you

**HAMILTON:** I came back to Charlevoix and worked with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for a while. I also navigated a private boat for a millionaire and spent a winter in Oklahoma with him. Then I worked at the Brown and Wallace gas station at the corner of Bridge and Belvedere. It was the first real gas station north of Traverse City. The others were just gas pumps along the sidewalk. I worked there 16 years. Then I went to the County Road Commission as a clerk for 24 years until I retired in 1969. During that time I was chairman for the dedication of the new bridge. I was also on the City Council for eight years.

**COURIER:** What do you do now?

**HAMILTON:** I'm still very active in the Kiwanis Club. I just returned from the Kiwanis convention where I was elected head of the Forney W. Clement Foundation, which is supported by Kiwanians. The Foundation has an annual budget of about \$80,000 and helps hospitalized

children. I've been secretary of the local club for umpteen years, was president once, and State Chairman and Lieutenant Governor of Division 20 (Northern Michigan.)

**COURIER:** What about the Historical Society?

**HAMILTON:** I'm treasurer of the Historical Society and have served as president. I helped re-activate the old society a few years ago. Right now we're busy selling Bob Miles' picture history of Charlevoix to raise funds for a museum. We've sold enough books to pay the printing costs so everything we take in from now on can go into the building fund.

**COURIER:** Do you still have an accounting business?

**HAMILTON:** I still have a few old accounts but I'm not taking any new ones. I made out my first income tax for a client in 1933.

**COURIER:** Do you have any hobbies?

**HAMILTON:** Stamp collecting.

**COURIER:** What about your early days in Charlevoix?

**HAMILTON:** My father, Sam

Hamilton, started the Hamilton & Sons Boat Company. He was also the first one to turn the railroad bridge over Round Lake. He came here from near Hamilton, Ontario as a child. He started the business with 20 rowboats and built Mackinaw sailing vessels and took parties out. My brothers and I rented out the row boats. My mother came from Kalamazoo as a young woman and worked as a waitress at the Belvedere Club, where Dad met her.

**COURIER:** What do you remember most about your childhood?

**HAMILTON:** One of my first impressions is a barefoot kid in a year of the seven-year locusts—their crunching under my feet. I couldn't get home fast enough to put on shoes.

**COURIER:** You and Mrs. Hamilton recently celebrated your fiftieth wedding anniversary. Were you married in Charlevoix?

**HAMILTON:** No, Margit and I were married in a little Indian church near Good Hart on August 16, 1926. I had an Indian as best man and a missionary performed the

ceremony. It took from 10 o'clock to 11 o'clock because I was High Mass and the Indians sing slowly. We had our wedding breakfast about noon at the Old Trail Tavern near Cross Village. We came back to Charlevoix that night and she went to Cincinnati to work and I went to Grand Rapids. We didn't see each other again until November. She originally came from St. George, Austria-Hungary.

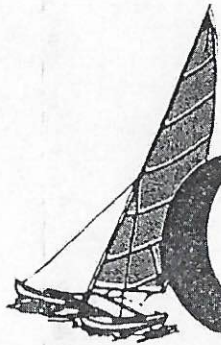
**COURIER:** Were your children all here for your wedding anniversary?

**HAMILTON:** Yes, we have three sons and seven grandchildren and they were all here.

**COURIER:** What do your sons do?

**HAMILTON:** The oldest, David A., is a professor at Northern Illinois University. His field is Library Science. Nicholas owns the Multi-City Service in Traverse City. I worked for the Courier some time as a printer and Linotype operator. Ralph retired from the Air Force where he taught Meteorology.

1997



# Charlevoix Courier

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## 'Mr. Charlevoix,' Ralph Hamilton dies

By Doug Drapal

The city of Charlevoix is sadder today as it mourns the passing of Ralph S. Hamilton.

Also known as "Mr. Charlevoix" and "Mr. Kiwanis," Mr. Hamilton bought smiles to the faces of friends and acquaintances with his quick wit, keen sense of humor, and colorful recollections of the history of the town he loved so well.

"He always had a smile on his face, a sparkle in his eye, and a laugh in his voice," said Mick Smith.

A true Charlevoix native, he was born in a house on West Garfield



Ralph S. Hamilton

Street on May 12, 1904. He died July 28, 1999 at Boulder Park Terrace Nursing Home.

Mr. Hamilton, and the late Bob

Miles, were known Charlevoix's foremost historians and storytellers. "Ralph was a very special piece of Charlevoix's history," said Ken Weller, a long-time friend and fellow Kiwanian. "He not only knew the detailed history of Charlevoix. He lived it. Ralph, himself, was an integral part of our community's history."

"He was just a very gentle fellow, a true gentleman" said Jeanine Wallace. "He was very funny, witty and charming. He always made you feel good when you talked with him. He would always walk away with a smile on his face."

Friends say he knew everything

about everybody in town because he loved Charlevoix, including all the year-around residents and "summer" people, too.

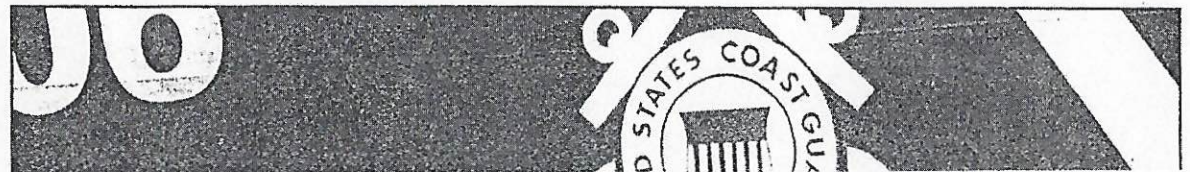
Hamilton's earliest stories go back to his days as a youngster living with his family on Belvedere Avenue. Ralph liked to say he was always dusty in those days because he ran barefoot along all the dirt streets in town. "Life was rough," he wrote in a letter to a great-grandson, "We went barefoot in the summer to save our shoes for winter." He also recalled that during the first decade of the 1900's, "There were only three cars in Charlevoix. One cranked on the side. All were

owned by the wealthy."

As a teenager, Ralph made a living helping the resorters with odd jobs. He also came up with ingenious and clever, money-making ideas. One time, Ralph and his brother, Ray, decided to hold a community dance and charge admission. They rented the old bank building on the corner of Bridge and Clinton Streets, hired a band from out of town, and invited one and all to come, dance, enjoy the music and have some fun. They anticipated a fine turnout and a big pay day.

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### Changing of the



# Town mourns passing of resident historian

## Hamilton

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Just before the crowd was to begin arriving, the band started to rehearse. The group played so poorly Ralph and Ray realized that nobody would come in if they heard that noise. Always the innovators, the brothers told the band to move quickly up to the third floor of the building and start playing there. Ralph set up a table and collected money at the first floor entrance. The way the boys figured it, by the time folks trudged up two more floors and heard the "music" they would have a captive audience. People would be joking, partying, having fun, and would soon forgive the lousy music. It worked. Not one person demanded a refund! Ralph and Ray laughed all the way to the bank, but their career as dance promoters was over.

Ralph later studied business and bookkeeping at McLaughlin-Davenport Business School in Grand Rapids and via correspondence courses by mail.

In 1926 he married Margit Cheney. The couple moved to Grand Rapids for a few years, and Ralph got a job selling insurance door-to-door. "Mom used to say she had to change the cardboard in his shoes every day," said son, Nick Hamilton. Pounding the pavement didn't suit the senior Hamilton.

During the Great Depression, Ralph left Charlevoix to learn the oil business in Oklahoma. He spent one winter working on a pipeline, at a gas station, and even got involved with some land purchases before realizing what was most important to him.

Come spring, Hamilton walked into the boss's office and declared, "I wouldn't give you one square foot of Michigan for the whole state of Oklahoma. I want to go home." And so he did.

Back in his hometown, Ralph got a job pumping gas and bookkeeping for Bill Wallace at the White Star Gas Station. The introduction of federal income tax provided another opportunity to earn a living. Ralph

*"He always had a smile on his face, a sparkle in his eye, and a laugh in his voice,"*

*-- Mick Smith,  
longtime friend*

career that would span more than 60 years.

"He was my first and only accountant for 35 years," said Jeanine Wallace. "I was audited twice and Ralph came with me to the IRS and proved that nothing was wrong." Ralph continued to work into his 90s because his clients would not let him quit. "He would tell me his eyes were going bad and he was going to retire," Wallace recalled with a laugh. "So I kept buying him stronger and stronger reading glasses."

Hamilton also served as deputy county clerk and road commission clerk for more than twenty years. In addition, he served two terms on the Charlevoix City Council.

Described as a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, Hamilton's office walls were covered with political buttons and photographs. He was also a prolific reader and an avid stamp collector, especially fond of first-day-issues.

In 1948 Hamilton became a charter member of the Charlevoix Kiwanis Club. The close association would last more than 50 years.

"He was 'Mr. Kiwanis'", said Merle Vandenburg, a fellow Kiwanian for more than 30 years. Merle recalled Ralph's initial effort to lead a Kiwanis fund-raising campaign to build a community pool more than 50 years ago. Once, when the pool project hit a snag, a new library was also being proposed for Charlevoix. Hamilton convinced club members to change their priority and donate the pool funds in order to add a much needed basement to the library plans.

Hamilton and the Kiwanis then

cut the ribbon at the dedication ceremony for the new Charlevoix Community Pool.

Hamilton served in most every official capacity while in Kiwanis including Lt. Governor for Division 22 in 1960. He remained active with the club and attended weekly luncheon meetings until two years ago.

Ralph was well known as a leader and motivator. "He never told you what to do, he led by example," said Ken Weller.

"He had an indomitable spirit and always steered even difficult discussions in a positive direction. If something was good for Charlevoix, Ralph was involved."

In 1972, Hamilton was elected president of the reorganized Charlevoix Historical Society and served in various capacities there for more than 20 years. To recognize his extraordinary contributions, the Historical Society established the prestigious Ralph Hamilton Circle. Contributors of at least \$100 are listed permanently on a plaque displayed at the Harsha House.

A highlight of Ralph's life occurred when Charlevoix Mayor Josh Barnes proclaimed April 22, 1997 "Ralph Hamilton Day." Ralph was feted by family, friends and community leaders at a dinner held in his honor at the Grey Gables in Charlevoix.

Nick Hamilton shared some final thoughts about his father. "I never heard him say a bad thing about anybody. He was just a great guy. I couldn't have asked for a better dad."

Good-bye, Mr. Charlevoix. We are all going to miss you.

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