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Dan and Leo O'Brien Jr about 1935-36 at 113 Patchen Road.



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Three Generations, Two Brothers, One Vision: The O'Brien Brothers, Their Commitment to Community, and their South Burlington Legacy

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From farms to modern family homes, dirt to density, cows to commercial —no matter how Leo O'Brien Jr. and Daniel John O'Brien looked at it, one thing was for certain: times in South Burlington were changing. So in the late 1960's, they had to make a choice.

They chose to be visionaries.

In their commitment to creating community, as developers, the brothers would form a team that would become one of the most well-known in the area and leave an O'Brien family legacy for South Burlington.

This effort became known as the O'Brien Brother's Agency, which originally launched in 1958 as a farming and livestock business, and has since been serving surrounding communities for nearly 60 years as a premier provider of commercial/industrial, residential, and housing opportunities.

The Beginning

South Burlington, the second largest city in Vermont, has long been a desirable place to live, to learn, to work, and to recreate. As the city—technically a town up until 1971—continued to grow and morph into what it is today, the O'Brien family has been a constant throughout the years.

The O'Brien story traces as far back as the late 1800's, when the brothers' grandfather, Daniel O'Brien, moved to Williston Road in 1890 with his wife Bridget O'Keefe and their children. South Burlington was still a fairly new town, only having been separated from Burlington and named South Burlington in 1865.

Daniel lived his life as a butcher and committed himself to a number of civic duties. He was a state representative from South Burlington for nine terms (18 years) from 1900-1925, a Justice of the Peace, Selectman between 1890-1902, a town moderator, overseer of the poor, and school director. He passed away in 1927, years after Bridget's untimely passing in 1901.

He left behind his son, Leo Sr., who was born in 1895. Leo Sr. spent his days working as a cattle dealer buying and selling cows locally and as far away as Ontario, Canada. As strong supporters of the Plains School, which evolved into Central School, he and Mabel would often donate food and wood to heat the school.

Like his father, his service extended beyond his vocation. Leo Sr. was a chairman of the South Burlington Democratic Town Committee, a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1956, a member of the Chittenden County Democratic Committee, member of the Board of Civil Authority, and Justice of the Peace in South Burlington. As chairman of the South Burlington Board of Water Commissioners, he was instrumental in extending public water and sewer from Burlington to the South Burlington community.

In 1928, Leo Sr. purchased a home and farm on Patchen Road. He married Mabel Hayes in 1930, and it was in this home where they raised their sons, Dan and Leo Jr., their daughter Rita, and nephew Paul Casey.

Although Leo Sr. passed away in 1957, Mabel remained in the home for over a decade and enjoyed the company of her family, including her children and grandchildren. Her son Dan married Sandra Corey in 1967, and they lived with her until 1968 when she sold the house and land to South Burlington. At that time, she moved with her son Dan and his young family to their new home on Old Farm Road. Mabel passed away in 1975.

The O'Brien homestead on Patchen Road would later become known as The Leo O'Brien Sr. Civic Center and the land became Jaycee Park— home to many recreational activities and a popular meeting spot for clubs, groups, and programs. Recent plans for the park resulted in the historic building being demolished in May 2017; the land was reseeded and currently provides green space while future plans for the front of the park are being explored.

Shortly after Leo Sr.'s passing, his sons, Dan and Leo Jr., would co-found O'Brien Brothers Agency.

The O'Brien Brothers: Farm Life and Commitment to Community

From the get-go, the brothers were born into an age of perseverance, hard work, and self-sustainability. Leo Jr. and Dan were born in 1931 and 1933, respectively—a few years into The Great Depression.

If you were to ask them about their life on a farm, they would tell you about when they used to herd neighbor Mr. McKenzie's cattle from the corner of Dorset Street and Williston Road, down to White Street and across the airport property so that they could graze along the Winooski River.

They would tell you about their chores before and after school, like feeding and milking the cows and mucking out the stalls. They attended Central School before moving onto Cathedral High School in Burlington; South Burlington High School did not yet exist. Leo would later go on to attend Saint Michael's College in 1949, but only for a brief while; he enlisted in the US Navy during the Korean War in 1950, and returned in 1954 to attend the University of Vermont and graduate with a BA in economics and political science. Dan, after graduating from Cathedral High School, immediately entered the farming and cattle business with his father.

The brothers remember when their father purchased land on Old Farm Road in 1944 to expand his cattle and farming business. It was this property where Leo and his wife Stella Cotrupi would make their home in 1959. They cared for the farmhouse, the land, a herd of nearly 80 cows, and their six children. Stella passed away in 1978. In 1992 Leo married Bonnie McCormick who has always been supportive of his family and his efforts.

Dan followed suit and built a home next to Leo in 1968 where he, his wife Sandra Corey, his mother Mabel, and five children resided. All 11 children helped with the farm.

"We grew up playing in the hayloft, feeding the cows, and cleaning the stalls. In the summer, we'd hay the fields and ride on the hay wagons," said Maureen O'Brien, Leo's eldest child. "We were lucky to grow up in such a rural setting yet still be in South Burlington. Our friends would offer to come help work the farm, just for the experience."

Leo III eventually took over the farming operations in the early 1980's. Even with a change of hands, the traditions of a tightly-woven family continued. Mabel, Stella, and then Sandra would host dinners every Sunday.

During the early 1960's, the children would also help drive the cows from their farm down to Potash Brook near Williston Road in the summertime. There was no place to cross Kennedy Drive because such a road—dirt or asphalt—did not exist; Kennedy Drive eventually was built around 1967. In 1986, the last of the cows on Old Farm Road would leave as part of the USDA Whole Herd Buyout Program of 1985.

Statesmen

All the while, like the generations before them, the O'Brien brothers also dedicated their lives to public service.

Leo participated in a number of town and county boards and commissions, and he received the nomination to run for Governor for the State of Vermont in 1970 against Deane C. Davis. Although he lost the election, he filled a plethora of other roles, including Special Assistant to Governor Thomas Salmon, Commissioner of Agriculture for the State of Vermont, a Special Assistant to US Senator Patrick Leahy, a Trustee of the University of Vermont and State Agriculture College, a Member of the National Dairy Board, Trustee of the Medical Center Hospital of Vermont, a director/chairperson of Merchants Bank, and director of Merchants Bancshares Holding Company.

Dan went on to become a prominent Democratic voice, having served on the town, county, state, and national Democratic National Committees, the latter of which he served as the Vermont Chair. In 1977, he was invited to participate in a White House Briefing by President Jimmy Carter about the Panama Canal Treaties. He was chairman of the Governor's Commission of Medical Care for the State of Vermont. He was also a Chairman of the Vermont Department of Liquor Control for nearly 30 years.

Their children continue to carry the torch, some in the business, others in the community, some in both. Of the 11 children, all but two reside in Vermont and while several of them grew up in the family business, they have all moved on to enjoy careers outside of the family business. While none of them are currently employees of the company, most have served on a rotating basis on the board of directors, which oversees the company.

A New Dawn for Development

In 1958, the O'Brien Brother's Agency was founded as a farming and livestock business. They purchased, ran, and owned farms in South Burlington, Williston, Shelburne, Milton, Colchester, and Hinesburg. Up until 1985, they continued farming and selling cattle. It was only a matter of time before the landscape began to change. There was a demand for housing, especially after World War II when people sought employment in the region.

Having grown up in the farming business, the brothers made a respectful transition and paid tribute to fellow farmers by naming roads after former landowners, farmers, and even the men who worked the lands as farm hands. By the late 60's, they shifted the focus toward real estate brokerage.

The first development under O'Brien Brothers Agency was Forest Park in 1968, which consisted of 36 townhouses and the Timberlane Medical Complex in South Burlington.

Recognizing the needs of the community, in 1978, the brothers went on to build the first senior and family housing projects through the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Section-8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, which provides eligible families and individuals with rental assistance with affordable housing. Through this program, the business developed the 76-unit Country Park residences for the elderly, as well as Whitcomb Woods in Essex Junction and McKenzie House in Burlington. This generated over 200 units, which, at one point, made O'Brien Brothers Agency the largest non-governmental provider of subsidized housing in the state.

For the O'Brien's, family was, and still is, the heart of any home. So it was only natural that they would gradually build up their residential portfolio and provide people with a place to cherish and raise a family. The Foxcroft Townhouses (condominiums and single family homes on Hayes Avenue, where Maureen resided for over 20 years), Valley Ridge single-family homes development, Stonington condos, Rye apartments, the O'Brien Farm units, among many others, are testament to their core values to not just create a house, but a home.

In the late 90's, they broke out into the commercial and light industrial market with the addition of office buildings on Kimball Avenue and Williston Road as well as the Production Park industrial development.

Through it all, the family weathered two interest rate hikes and are continually adapting to an ever-changing market—but that's not where this story ends. Although the O'Brien Brothers Agency can claim an impressive collection of projects, its work is far from over.

Chittenden County's low vacancy rates and high rental demands have resulted in potential buyers, renters, and workers from leaving the county in search of financially-feasible options elsewhere. In response, members of local and state government, businesses, and housing nonprofits formed a coalition last year, "Building Homes Together" to increase housing production with a goal of 3,500 homes over the course of five years.

O'Brien Brothers Agency is seizing the opportunity.

Under the current CEO Evan Langfeldt, the agency has a master plan to develop nearly 40 acres with a maximum of 458 housing units, 45,000 square feet of office space, a park and other pedestrian amenities between Kennedy Drive, Kimball Avenue, and Old Farm Road—the very land many O'Brien family members grew up on.

Dan O'Brien's mantra was always to reflect on the long-term impact of a finished project. Will you be proud of it in 20 years? Would you live near it? Would you own it with pride when someone asks who created it?

With this mindset—like the Leo O'Brien Sr. Civic Center and all the developments from the family-owned business-- this project may be South Burlington's biggest gift yet.

SOURCE: Miranda Jonswold, Correspondent