

Man celebrates 100 years of life in the Town of Rye

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Imagine attending the first movie theatre in Port Chester back in 1918. William Peterson doesn't have to imagine what it was like: he was there.

Peterson, who celebrated his 100th birthday on Dec. 12, attended movies at the first moving picture house in Port Chester, the Nickelette, and, having lived in the Town of Rye his whole life, has seen quite a few things come and go in Port Chester.

"It's changed quite a bit," said Peterson, who was born on Oak Street and attended Washington Elementary School and Port Chester High School. While Peterson remembers the trolleys that used to run down Main Street, he isn't nostalgic about them. For him they were just another form of transportation, like a car or a bus or a horse-drawn wagon.

This seems to be Peterson's attitude about many of the changes he's seen in his lifetime: they didn't really seem to faze him. "I just went along with the flow," Peterson said. "I didn't think about the changes [when they were happening]. It was just something new."

This also goes for people who are now seen as historical figures in American history, such as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, Jr. "At the time we didn't think we were living through something historic," he said. "They were just people."

Peterson currently resides at the Port Chester Nursing and Rehabilitation Centre, but up until last spring, he was still living in the house he built at 35 Garibaldi Place in Rye Brook. It is right next door to the house his father built and where he grew up. Both are across the street from the Posillipo Center.



Peterson had two daughters with his wife Mary, who died in 1993, and he put his carpentry skills to work helping build houses for both of them: Vivian, who died in 1975, and Marian, who lives in White Plains.

In addition to being a carpenter, Peterson had several jobs during his life, including working at the Life Savers manufacturing plant on North Main Street. "I was what you'd call a 'spinner,'" he said. "The candy comes through a machine and you spin it with your hand." The candy had to be stretched and twirled before being cut into the recognizable shape everyone knows today. "It was a nice job," Peterson said.

Even after Peterson retired, he remained involved in the community. "He was one of the volunteers... for the Posillipo Center," said his daughter Marian Wiggins, 79.

In 2005, Peterson was honored by the Rye Brook Seniors as the Posillipo Center Volunteer of the Year for the time he spent helping out there, often by playing the piano. "All of [our] family was musical except me," Wiggins said.

Peterson had eight siblings, including a sister who is still alive and attended his birthday party on Dec. 19 at the Port Chester Nursing and Rehabilitation Centre. Also present at the party were his daughter Marian, his four granddaughters, his four great-granddaughters and his six great-great-granddaughters.

"[He] lived to see [his] fifth generation," Wiggins said. "I think that's really interesting." "Did I ever think I'd live to be 100? At one time I thought I wouldn't live to be 30," Peterson said. "I never thought I'd live to be 100." "Thirty was old for him at one time," Wiggins added.

Peterson said he doesn't know why he's lived as long as he has, but Port Chester resident Ron Weckessar said he thinks Peterson's longevity is due to the fact that he worked in the garden at his home every day for years.

Weckessar met Peterson seven years ago when he was working on an article about the "Keyhole"—the undeveloped land behind the Rye Ridge Shopping Center. "It was sheer happenstance," Weckessar said. He was driving down Garibaldi Place when he saw an elderly gentleman sitting in a lawn chair and decided that maybe he would be able to provide some history.

"I just went up to him and asked him if he'd be willing to provide information for an article I was writing about the Keyhole," Weckessar said. Sure enough, Peterson was a font of information and they walked down to the area.

"He was 93 and he just walked over there with me as if it was nothing," Weckessar said. "He showed me where they used to cut ice from the pond in the days before refrigeration to distribute throughout the village."

After that first time, Weckessar often talked to Peterson for background information on articles. "He provided much information for the articles I wrote on the history of the Village [of Port Chester]," Weckessar said.

After living in the Town of Rye his whole life, Peterson had a lot of information to provide. "I made my living here, so that's why I stayed," Peterson said. "I had no reason to go anywhere else."