



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Jimmy Frank, 105, waves from the screened porch of his Watkins Glen home Feb. 26 as friends walk by. With him is friend Michael Yuhasz, who met Frank 23 years ago through the Rotary and who visits Frank every afternoon to talk and smoke a cigar. Below, Frank said he started smoking cigars when he was 21.

Jovial 105-year-old Tier resident feels 'just right'

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

WATKINS GLEN — When he turned 80 years old, Jimmy Frank — sensing that he didn't have much time left on earth — abandoned his retirement home in Florida so he could spend his final days in his hometown.

That was 25 years ago. As it turned out, Frank's planning was very premature.

These days, Frank appears as alive and well as ever. If you need verification, pay a visit to Frank's home on Second Street, one block over from where he grew up. Chances are, you'll hear his hearty laughter cutting through a heavy cloud of cigar smoke as he relaxes with his friends.

"Hi, Jack!" Frank shouted on a recent Friday morning as he greeted Jack Callanan, a retired Schuyler County judge, with a big wave. Callanan stops regularly at Frank's house to deliver the daily newspaper.

Frank glanced through the paper as he enjoyed a cigar with another pal, Michael Yuhasz. Then he quickly scanned his mail and offered a concise assessment of the contents.

"Junk," Frank commented as he tossed the envelopes away, touching off a big

laugh from his visitors.

Sounds like somebody with the youthful enthusiasm of a 15-year-old, not a 105-year-old, doesn't it?

"I'm just right," Frank crowed. "I don't know, I feel perfect today."

Frank's sunny outlook and humorous insights help brighten up the day for anybody who stop in for a chat, said Georgia Paladino, another frequent visitor.

"He doesn't get out as much as he used to. But he's still got his brain, I want to tell you," Paladino remarked.

Although Frank is nearly deaf and has trouble walking, Connie Alexander, Frank's only child, agreed that her dad is still razor-sharp.

"He's got every marble that God ever gave him," said Alexander, who teaches at a private boarding school in Dallas, Texas.

Frank's down-to-earth congeniality hasn't wavered either, Alexander added.

"The thing that's so endearing about him is, here's a person who really knows who he is," she said. "He puts on no airs."

The son of immigrant parents from Italy, Frank is a genuine Yankee Doodle Dandy, born on the Fourth of July, 1892. After he grew up, he became well-known throughout the Southern Tier for the clothing stores he operated in Watkins



Glen and Elmira.

Frank got a foothold in the clothing business, he noted, by serving as translator for the many Italian laborers who did not know English.

"They couldn't tell if they were ordering work shirts or pairs of socks," Frank commented.

Frank became a full-time clothier upon returning from Europe, where he had served in the U.S. Army in World War I. His business dealings took him all over the United States and brought him in touch with several well-known politicians and other celebrities, including legendary University of Notre Dame football coach Knute Rockne.

Frank did not get married until he was in his 40s. His wife, Jeanne — who died in 1981 — and he adopted their only child, Connie, in the mid-1940s.

Because of his last name, he was often mistaken for being Jewish — in a time when Jews were heavily discriminated against. Ironically, he pointed out, his father had changed the family's last name from Pompeo because Italian-Americans faced similar prejudices. In fact, Frank said, one of the only ways to prove he wasn't Jewish was by displaying his Knights of Columbus membership card.

Although Frank is also a member of the local Rotary and Elks, his longest affiliation in a civic organization is with the Knights of Columbus. On Frank's living-room wall hangs a citation from the Elmira Knights, congratulating him for his 83 years in the organization.

"It's 84 now," Frank remarked.

A cap proclaiming the 100th anniversary of the Elmira Knights (1897-1997) rests on a shelf behind Frank's easy chair. Next to the cap is a plaque bearing the image of author and former Elmira resident Mark Twain, along with an apt saying of Twain's: "I smoke in moderation — only one cigar at a time."

"I asked Jimmy a few years ago, 'How many cigars do you smoke a day?' He said, 'As many as I can get in,'" Judy Shafer recalled. She and Paladino are among several parishioners from St. Mary of the Lake Church who visit Frank regularly.

Along with his penchant for cigars, Frank is also partial to hot peppers. His daily breakfast, he said with enthusiasm, includes "bacon and eggs; juice; potatoes; and a pepper — a hot pepper."

"I got known as the hot pepper guy," Frank said, laughing. "People are always bringing them in. I don't understand it."

Asked if hot peppers are the key to his longevity, he tossed his hands in the air and said, "It must be."

Shafer said that Frank drove a car until he was 95, and Alexander added that he weeded his garden daily until about four or five years ago. And Barbara Frank, a niece, noted that before Frank had a bout with pneumonia this past Christmas, he hardly ever used medicine.

Frank still watches daily Mass on the Eternal Word Television Network. And every year he is honored over the airwaves on his birthday, when St. Mary of the Lake Church displays a congratulatory banner during its weekly television Mass.

Alexander noted her father's congeniality should serve as a reminder that senior citizens should be valued, not ignored, by society.

"Sometimes I resent that when people know how old a person is, they perceive there's something wrong with their brain and they're hard of hearing," Alexander said. "I think he's got a wonderful view on life."

Wonderful, yet simple. Asked how he feels about having lived such a long life, Frank quickly replied with his customary smile, "Oh, yes. I'm satisfied, yes."

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