

Anritter sisters' gift keeps on giving



By Roger Whittle
Public Opinion Editor

Since its beginnings 40 years ago, the Watertown Community Foundation has been blessed with many gifts, and Executive Director Jan DeBerg is fond of saying that every gift the Foundation receives is special and appreciated, regardless of the size.

One gift, however, stands out. It's not because it was the largest gift ever received – even though it was, at \$3.2 million – it's because of the story behind the gift.

The multi-million dollar gift came from sisters Ruby and Dorothy Anritter, who lived most of their lives in Watertown, each passing away at 108 years old in 2011 and 2013, respectively. The sisters never married and shared the house they grew up in until moving to Jenkins Living Center in 2005.

Both women worked as secretaries their entire adult lives – Ruby for the Watertown School superintendent's office and Dorothy for the Austin Hinderaker Law Firm.

The two women lived an outwardly frugal life, didn't spend money unnecessarily, sewed their own clothes and favored basic transportation over flashy automobiles. An article in the Community Foundation newsletter said: "Whether it was from living through the Great Depression or their upbringing, Ruby and Dorothy learned along the way not to waste anything and that a penny earned was, indeed, a penny saved. Yes, they saved those pennies ... and everything else."



Courtesy photos

Shown above and below are photos from the Anritter sisters' birthday parties.



Yet, even their closest friends had no idea of the wealth the sisters were able to amass. Jim and Bonnie Morgans were their neighbors since the mid-1960s and became quite close to the women.

"Whenever they needed something done that they couldn't handle, they would call us," Bonnie Morgans told the Public Opinion after the sisters' gift was announced. "In the winter, we would shovel their sidewalk."

Morgans recalls visiting Dorothy at Jenkins shortly after Ruby's death, when Dorothy told her the sisters had made a pact that when one of them died, the other would keep living in the same room they had shared.

"(Dorothy) said she would stay in the room as long as she could afford it," Morgans said.

That comment concerned Morgans, who was sure that her friend would soon go broke from paying the extra rent. "I was so concerned that I went to the administrator at Jenkins and asked if they could lower her rent," she said.

After Dorothy's death, however, Morgans realized how unnecessary that request was.

"Nobody knew," she said. "Absolutely nobody knew."

Now, however, everybody knows.

The sisters' \$3.2 million bequest, received in 2014, established the Dorothy and Ruby Antritter Fund, which has annual designated grants awarded to the Watertown

Area Community Foundation, Prairie Lakes Healthcare Foundation, the Human Service Agency and the First Congregational Church of Watertown.

Here is a breakdown of the total amount given since the fund started awarding grants in 2015:

■ Community Foundation – \$402,830;

■ Human Services Agency – \$219,725;

■ Prairie Lakes Foundation – \$73,240;

■ First Congregational Church – \$36,621.

"The funds that come to the Watertown Area Community Foundation are unrestricted and help us greatly in meeting the ever-changing needs of our commu-

So far that has meant thousands of dollars in grants including grants to the Salvation Army for appliances and for the Sandwich Ministry. The largest grant in the Community Foundation's history, \$500,000 to the Boys & Girls Club Capital Campaign, was made possible largely due to the Antritter Fund.

"Watertown and the Foundation have so many reasons to be thankful to the Antritter sisters still today and for future generations to come," DeBerg said. "As we celebrate 40 years of looking forward and giving back, we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the sisters. They led ordinary lives, but made an extraordinary gift.

"Their story is truly inspirational and shows each and every one of us that we can make a difference."

Alison Gilbertson, executive director of the Prairie Lakes Healthcare Foundation, agreed about the importance of the sisters' gift.

"These unrestricted gifts are designated to our general fund called 'Give Tomorrow,' and we used those monies in the area of greatest need at the time," she said. "It gives us resources for multiple departments for both enhancements and growth."

One example of where some of those funds were used was in support of the therapy pool at Prairie Lakes' new specialty clinic.

"We want to make sure we have a thriving healthcare system, not only for Watertown, but for the region. Many times the growth or enhancements that have been done at Prairie Lakes has been done with the help of our Give Tomorrow unrestricted fund.

Gilbertson had the opportunity to meet the Antritters once. "They left an impression," she said. "What nice women, and what a wonderful relationship they had."

They and other gifts to the Foundation have had a part in helping the Prairie Lakes Healthcare System maintain its independence, Gilbertson added. "We don't need to be part of a larger healthcare system. If we weren't independent, I fear that people would have to

drive a long distance for some specialties we have here at home."

Dr. Charles Sherman, the soon-to-retire CEO of the Human Service Agency in Watertown, enjoyed a 16-year friendship with the sisters, and was also among those who had no clue of their wealth. Sherman still has a pair of carved ducks hanging on his office wall that was a gift from the sisters when they moved to Jenkins. The ducks were carved by their father.

He is leaving with HSA in much better financial shape, thanks to the sisters' bequest.

"The Human Service Agency Foundation has used most of the Antritter donations to purchase a commercial building in Sisseton, where our mental health center operates a full-time office," Sherman said. "We have four full-time mental health and chemical dependency professionals in this office.

"The Human Service Agency then rents the office space from the HSA Foundation as a means of augmenting the HSA Foundation. The Foundation gets a better return on their investment funds and the agency pays a lower rent than was previously the case.

"I think Dorothy and Ruby would be pleased with this creative financial arrangement."