

The 95th birthdays of two Oscar Edward Johnsons

I will never forget Grampa Oscar's 95th birthday at the Episcopalian Home in St. Paul where his main enterprise was caring for the rose bushes and sitting as sole male at the head of a dinner table comprised of a gaggle of competing fawning little old ladies. I was in law school then, not far away, and my main task from Grampa's perspective was driving him once a month to the liquor store to get himself a fresh bottle of bourbon or sherry. If the Twins were playing on TV, he'd open the fresh bottle and we'd share a drink for a few innings, and then I'd leave. He seemed glad to see me go, that was enough for a visit.

He was in great spirits on his 95th birthday and enjoyed the little party we made for him with great-granddaughter Hillery present, and as I was leaving at the end of the day he said to me something to the effect that he had had a wonderful day, it was great to have made it all the way to 95, but now he was ready to die. Saying it matter-of-factly. And a few weeks later that's exactly what he did, the cold he caught on his birthday became pneumonia, and that was that.

He was such a fine, strong, true, gracious, kind, polite and gentle man, a lover and caretaker of roses, a driver of big coal-burning steam locomotives, a reader of newspapers printed in Swedish, a deeply religious man who kept most of that to himself, a deacon of the church in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin where there, too, he cared for the grounds and the flowers.

Every summer, he took his grandchildren, one by one or in twos, fishing in his small boat with the putt-putt outboard motor, showed them how to put a worm on a hook and how to clean a fish, the head and guts dumped on old newspapers, and then he fried them all up crisp in lots of butter for breakfast. Unspeakably delicious.

Our Dad, Oscar Edward Johnson, Jr., "Ed," was born 95 years ago today, October 8, 1920. Grampa's birthday was always just a week later, October 15, and because of that, I never forget Hans von Mende's birthday, too, also October 15.

When you read about the senseless mass murders by gun as happened as recently as last week in Roseburg, Oregon, people rarely take into account that the senseless loss of a dearly beloved one from something as crazy as that lasts, for those forever deprived of the victims, each and every day thereafter for the rest of their lives. My tears for our lost father are as fresh and salty today as the ones that ran back on February 12, 1966.

There is never a past to that, only an enduring present.

He could have made it to 95, too. He and we were cheated of possibly another 50 years to his life. Our kids have no memories of him as we do of our Grampa Oscar.

Still, for us, our Dad remains in memory forever young, and always quick to memory.