

Former barber cutting back on stress in retirement

Special to Conley Media

OCONOMOWOC — Don Schmitt epitomizes the Wisconsin spirit. He values fish fries, polkas and bleeds green and gold for the Green Bay Packers. There is one other thing that Don values above almost all else, a clean haircut and a nicely groomed beard.

Don was born and raised in Oconomowoc. In fact he was born in a house that resides only blocks from his current apartment in Lake Terrace. Due to the irony of proximity, Don noted “it’s almost like I’ve come full circle from where I started.”

The term Packer Backer might have been coined when referring to a fan like Don. He has been a season ticket holder since 1958 and has attended every Packer Super Bowl. His seats are the envy of almost everyone in Wisconsin: 20 yard line, 32 rows up. His seats are right across from Bart Starr’s retired number, directly behind the Packer bench and perfectly positioned to see the Packers burst through the tunnel at

every home game.

Don joined the Navy after high school graduation. During his allotted one week break over Christmas, Don returned to Oconomowoc and married his high school sweetheart Mary Ann. They honeymooned for two days before Don had to return for duty. They remained married for 62 years until she passed away. After his term of service, Don entered barber college. It was a craft he admired since his childhood paper route days.

“My paper route included a barber shop downtown and when I delivered there, I’d ask the barber ‘how do you get a part like that?’ and he said you go to barber college.”

Don followed his advice and gave men clean hair-line parts for 62 years in downtown Oconomowoc. Over the course of his career, Don established many regulars and was seen by appointment only,



Schmitt

“It’s a profession like a bartender, people tell you everything. It didn’t feel like a job, it was just like visiting with buddies, then eventually we felt like family.”

— Don Schmitt,
Former Oconomowoc barber

servicing regulars every two to three weeks.

Due to the frequency of appointments, Don and his clients formed close-knit friendships. “It’s a profession like a bartender, people tell you everything. It didn’t feel like a job, it was just like visiting with buddies, then eventually we felt like family,” he said.

Don ran his business like a tight ship, rotating clients every 20 minutes for a haircut and every 45-60 minutes for a cut, wash and style. Due to his profession, Don had front row seats to every passing hairstyle and fad. He enjoyed the challenge, saying “it kept things interesting,” and embraced the

new styles that every decade would bring. He prided himself on not having the kind of barbershop where everyone would emerge with the same look. “I changed with the times. It kept my business alive and it gave me pride to give each individual a cut and style that they could be proud of.”

Don never missed a day of work in 62 years. He worked on his feet five days each week, from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. and often walked around Lake Fowler in the early morning hours prior to work. Sundays were reserved for church and family, and would usually include a big dinner shared with friends.

Family still remains the center of Don’s world. Don’s son, Brian, and his family live in San Diego where Brian is an architect. His two grandchildren, Kyle and Erin, both finished college and are figuring out their next steps.

“They have their whole lives ahead of them and it will be fun to watch what happens,” he said.

Of all the memory-filled Packer possessions Don

has, the ticket stubs, autographs and programs from the Super Bowls, Don’s most prized possession is the framed photograph of his grandchildren that hangs on the wall.

In retirement, Don still keeps in touch with many of his former clients. His social calendar is full with lunch dates and coffee meet-ups as he nurtures friendships spanning decades. He now enjoys the leisurely pace of not watching his clock and trying to fit in a trim every 20 minutes. He also still enjoys his Sundays at church.

“I sit in the back pew so I can check out the men’s haircuts,” he said.

And although he prefers the more modest players of the past over the flashy overpaid athletes of today, he still faithfully cheers for the green and gold. Asked who his favorite Packer player is of all time, he doesn’t miss a beat and says, “Bart Starr...because he was a gentleman.” And as the saying goes: it takes one to know one.