

With Us Today: William F. Drueke



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The term "senior citizen" is a limited one, suggesting that the object's greatest distinction is that he or she is retired and more than 60 years old. That's misleading. The Grand Rapids area is filled with extraordinary "senior citizens" whose accomplishments and leadership make age irrelevant. Here is another in a series of articles about those special people in West Michigan.

His ancestry is German and William "Bill" Francis Drueke was endowed a strong work ethic.

But the family's roots are firmly planted in Grand Rapids where both his grandparents and parents were married in [St. Mary's Church](#) on the West Side.

Bill Drueke is blessed with boundless curiosity about how things work and patience to experiment until he solves problems.

Perhaps his greatest triumph came in semi-retirement when he bought a computer system and taught himself to produce an endless array of financial, family and household records, banners and a classification system for about a half-million photos and negatives.

Born at 120 Grand Ave. NE on Sept. 12, 1912, Bill was the second son of [William F. Sr. and Viola Smith Drueke](#).

The Druekes already had daughters Irene and Marian and son Joseph when Bill arrived. He was followed by [Jane](#) and Rosemary.



Grandpa ([Wm. Peter](#)) [Drueke](#) owned a local wholesale liquor business until Prohibition.

Bill's father became a salesman for a stationery company. It was a Drueke customer who saw a rum box (used to hold playing cards) and suggested that Drueke begin producing chess sets.

World War I had disrupted their importation.

Grand Rapids had plenty of skilled woodworkers so work could be jobbed-out.

Later, Drueke Sr. bought a small factory on Eastern Avenue SE. He added game tables, desks and occasional tables to the line.

But Al Stickley made him an offer as sales manager for the Stickley Furniture Co. that he couldn't turn down.

He phased out the game business in 1926. Later, he and Stickley parted after a contract dispute.

Grand Avenue was the unpaved eastern edge of the city. At about 3 years old, Bill began playing with Don DeBoer.

They have remained best friends for the last 80 years and visit daily.

Drueke's education began at Fountain Street School, but he missed classes most of the year because of the flu.

The following year he was enrolled in St. Andrew's School where he became an altar boy, walking to St. Andrew's Church to serve the 6 a.m. mass.

He and DeBoer were fascinated with sun pictures, especially after a neighbor taught them how to make the images more permanent.

"I bought my first camera - an old box camera - for a dollar and soon after [Father A.F. Zugelder](#) (his mother's cousin) gave me his old Eastman Kodak View camera with a 5-by-7 glass plate.

"I took lots of school pictures in the eighth grade. Later, my Uncle Crescence Smith found a beautiful 5-by-7 German view camera with a manual shutter that took both glass plates and cut film," he recalled.

Summers were spent at a cottage on Coldwater Lake near Beal City. By 1926, Bill had built his own dark room in the basement.

About this time, Consumers Power Company wired several homes free to promote use of electricity in homes.

"They installed electricity in our house. I watched and decided to place a wire carrying 110 volts under one of the steps to the upstairs.

"When my folks came upstairs to check on me, I had it rigged so a light blinked in my room, giving me time to turn off my light and climb into bed. Later, I could continue whatever I was doing," he continued.

"I read everything I could get my hands on about electricity, radios and cameras. I went to Central High School where my mother had graduated in 1902 and had many of the same teachers.

"Soon after I started at Central, I found out I was near-sighted and needed glasses. What impressed me most was that I could now see the leaves on the trees.

"Uncle Cresence worked in a dime store and taught Joe and I to make crystal radios using a penny matchbox, a crystal, wire and wax. I sold them for 25 cents a piece but if it didn't work, I had to give the money back," he added.

Grand Rapids' first radio station was [WASH](#), located in the Baxter Laundry Building on Fountain Street. Bill's radios operated within a radius of about two blocks of WASH.

The neighbors came into the station to answer phone requests for the orchestra and Drueke spent his lunch hours while in high school announcing organ music broadcast from area churches.

Like many businessmen, Drueke Sr. had bought stock on margin in 1926 and 1927. Following the 1929 stock market crash, he lost \$7,000 and sold hospital furniture for the next few years.

The crystal radio "business" had run its course and Bill sought another means of making pocket money.

"My pictures were good enough that people began inviting me to parties at private clubs where I'd take the pictures and then sell copies for 10 cents each."

There wasn't enough money in the school budget to publish Central's annual in 1931. Drueke was offered the job of taking all of the school pictures, except the individual portraits, for \$200, plus expenses.

It was a busy year. All organizations, games and dances were photographed. The school even got enough money together to send Drueke up in an open-cockpit plane to take aerial photos of Central and Houseman field.

"When we got over Central, the pilot dipped his wing so I could get a better shot. I didn't expect it and lost my lunch. The pilot dipped in the other direction over Houseman and I took the picture and prayed that both were good so I wouldn't have to go up again," he recalled.

Drueke was captain of the track team his senior year. He graduated in January 1932 and enrolled in a class at Grand Rapids Junior College (now Grand Rapids Community College). The rest of the day was spent re-establishing the Wm. F. Drueke and Sons business in their home.

Later, the corporate name became Wm. F. Drueke & Sons Inc. Although they were not named, Bill's sisters were also involved. Marian handled the office work on the third floor of the family home. In the basement, Jane and Rosemary packed orders. One of Bill's first jobs was going to the dime stores to buy used boxes for shipping orders.

They resumed making cribbage and chess sets. For a time, they imported chess pieces from France. After refinishing and repackaging them, the pieces were sold with the Drueke label.

By 1933, they were doing well enough to rent space in the Shaw Building. They added poker chips and

pipe racks, dice, dominoes, roulette racks, gavels and a variety of small hand games.

"Although a lot of work was contracted out to other companies, we did all wood finishing, leatherette boards, darts and dart boards, gold-leaf stamping and game cases. We needed a good folding chess board made of leatherette and clothboard so I designed and made a glue machine for the job and it did a great job," Drueke recalled.

In 1940, the company moved to Grand Rapids Casket Co. building at 601 Third St. NW.

"We returned the mortician's equipment and sawed up the soft wood used in making caskets into swivel bases for chip racks. Some woodworking machines came from the furniture factories and I designed others as we needed them. The addition of three plastic machines allowed them to make chess men, cribbage pegs and literally millions of interlocking poker chips," he said.

The family continued to vacation at the cottage near Beal City.

I was a short drive into Mount Pleasant and that summer he met Doris McLaughlin. His "toy" that summer was a recording machine that made wax records. Through the years he's experimented with hundreds of these electric-mechanical gadgets and is delighted anew with each discovery.

He was a persistent suitor and on Jan. 25, 1941, they married in Mount Pleasant. After a combined honeymoon and sales trip, they returned to Grand Rapids. Bill had put a down payment on the home near Plymouth Avenue and Michigan Street NE. The house was part of a development that had been halted by the stock market crash. The street in front of the house, Lonsdale, had never been developed. Eventually Bill and his siblings bought 18 lots for \$20 a lot.

There was room for chickens, a bull, dogs and kittens. Marian built a small cottage on her property called Cherry Lane. Later, it was moved onto Bill's property. An outdoor pool was installed. It was later enclosed and in recent years solar panels were added.

Like most young couples of this period, Bill and Doris had a family. Betsy came first, then William III (Mary Jo), Carole Gohl, David (Maureen), Richard (Victoria), Mary Kay Parks and Rose. It was a lively household and the addition of 22 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren has not slowed the pace.

Gradually, their family became the focus of their life. Bill made a few sales trips, but he preferred running the factory. His sisters all eventually married and brother Joe formed his own business, leaving Bill in charge of day-to-day operations.

During World War II the factory produced 5,000 small games a day for the military. The largest order was for a railroad car full of cribbage boards.

The '50s and '60s were good years. People still played card and board games. Many of the smaller game boards produced by Drueke are centuries old and are not covered by patents. Every year or two, the company would reintroduce traditional games.

In 1972, Drueke Games received a priceless promotion when photos showed Bobby Fischer practicing with Drueke chessmen. The match in Iceland, between Fischer and Boris Spassky, doubled orders for

Drueke chess sets.

In the '80s, sons Bill and David and daughter Rose worked in the business.

Bill Sr. spent his mornings at the factory and pursued his electronic and photo interests in the afternoon.

When the city of Grand Rapids renovated downtown, Drueke chronicled the demolition of landmarks and the ordinary alike. Later, he captured the rebuilding of the downtown Grand Rapids.

He shot photos of hundreds of weddings and parties. He has enthusiastically taught his own children and hundreds of others to take good photos and videos.

In January 1987, the Drueke family sold the business to a group of young businessmen who immediately renovated the factory. But in 1992, the Drueke division was resold to the [Carrom Co.](#) of Ludington who retained the Drueke name and reputation.

During his 54 years with the company, Drueke never lowered the standards for the company's solid hardwood chess boards and cribbage sets. He respects fine wood and craftsmanship.

Few days pass, even now, when he doesn't have an idea for "doing something better."

Millions of the Drueke products have been scattered all over the world. They are already rare accent pieces from Grand Rapids' Golden Age of Wood.

- Cathie Bloom

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