

# FROM THE RIVEREAST WEEKLY PAPER

## Hebron Resident Celebrates 104th Birthday by Michael Sinkewicz

When Vera Rittenhouse was born in 1920, President Woodrow Wilson occupied the White House, newspaper headlines marked the start of the Prohibition era across the United States and the 19th Amendment was ratified, guaranteeing women the right to vote. A dozen eggs set you back 47 cents – or \$7.68 when adjusted for inflation – the most popular tune in the country was “Swanee,” by Al Jolson, and the hot commodity was a radio, which could be yours for \$200 (\$3,269 in today’s money). Tomorrow, Dec. 21, Rittenhouse, a Hebron resident, will celebrate her 104th birthday — a remarkable milestone few are able to celebrate. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Centenarians — people who have reached the age of 100 — account for just 0.03% of the country’s population. After being born in Toronto, Rittenhouse moved to the U.S. and traveled from coast to coast, living in both California and New York. At the age of 97, she joined the Colebrook Village, an



assisted living facility in Hebron, where she is the oldest resident. So what is the secret to longevity? If you ask Susan Sokoloski, one of Rittenhouse’s four children, the answer is good genetics combined with a bit of luck. Generally, she sticks to healthy habits and avoids harmful ones, like smoking. Perhaps mastering a card game is the solution; Rittenhouse was known for hosting gatherings centered around playing bridge. Stimulating a strong social life is yet another potential clue, she offers. “She loved hosting parties,” said Sokoloski. “They seemed so sociable in that era and she was a very gracious host. She loved to entertain.” Scot Kauffman, the executive director of Colebrook Village, has his own theory. “Maintaining a positive outlook on life is something that can help you extend life,” he said. While Kauffman described all of his residents as the “treasures of our

society,” he said Rittenhouse was in her own unique category. “She has seen so much in her life,” he

explained. “She adds a certain dynamic to our neighborhood.” During the 1930s, both Rittenhouse and her father worked at one of the newest, and at the time, the tallest, skyscraper in New York City: the Empire State Building. Rittenhouse’s father introduced her to a young man he met there, William, and a romance ensued — decades before it was brought to the silver screen by Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan in *Sleepless in Seattle*

They got married in 1940, when Rittenhouse was just 19 years old. Along with four children, she has 10 grandchildren and 14 great grandchildren. William passed away over 25 years ago. “She’s had a good life,” Sokoloski said. Rittenhouse largely worked as a homemaker, and William served in the Army at the end of World War II. Together, the couple moved to southern California — which she loved — before work took them back to New York City area in the ‘60s, and they settled down in Connecticut around Fairfield County. Then in the mid ‘90s, they moved to Glastonbury to be closer to family. “I think she warmed up to New England,” said Sokoloski. Besides her talent for bridge, Rittenhouse developed a passion for crafting dollhouses. The hobby began with making a home for one of grandchildren, but she became hooked. Her skills were so impressive that WFSB-TV Channel 3 did a news story highlighting her work. “She built dozens,” Sokoloski recalled. “They were really amazing.” Currently, Rittenhouse experiences some memory issues. Throughout her life, Rittenhouse has seemingly been interested in “everything,” her daughter reported. Although she didn’t attend college, Sokoloski conveyed that her mom always craved information and soaked up knowledge on a variety of subjects. Rittenhouse would visit the library every week and pick up around five new books to absorb. During daily *Jeopardy!* viewings, she would often command the board and best anyone watching alongside her. “She knew all sorts of things I had no clue about,” Sokoloski said with a laugh. Kauffman rattled off numerous adjectives to describe Rittenhouse including “affable.” “She carries herself with a certain element of class, but is down to earth,” he said. In October, Colebrook Village hosted a prom night, where each resident dressed in formal wear. The idea, Kauffman shared, helped “bring them back to a time they really enjoyed.” Rittenhouse, he added, was the prom queen. The world has changed a lot since Rittenhouse was in high school. From unimaginable technological advances, to life-altering events, she’s experienced a lot of history. Progress can happen fast, but sometimes it’s hard to change. For example, Rittenhouse was willing to use a flip phone, but refused to entertain more modern options — or even computers. One of the starker differences between her childhood and today’s world is the value of money. Rittenhouse would reflect on how she and her husband built their California home for roughly \$3,000. And after living through the Great Depression, her outlook on spending was permanently impacted and she became resourceful. “She wouldn’t let anything go to waste,” Sokoloski said. Sokoloski noted that Colebrook Village has continued to be a “wonderful place” for her mother, highlighting their quality care and communication. “They’ve been great,” she said.