

DONOR STORIES

DEAN & LEE PLATT

“Dean and Lee Platt Family Fund”

The Dean and Lee Platt Family Fund was established to remember and honor the lives of Dean and Lee Platt. “Mom and Dad have lived and been in business in Waterloo since 1944. All that time, they were so actively involved and have given so much to the Community. But, the community has given so much to our family too,” said Ann Fergemann, daughter of Dean and Lee. “This is a way for us to thank the community and honor and remember our parents.

Dean Platt was born on November 20, 1919, in Oelwein, Iowa, the son of George and Hazel Horning Platt. He had two sisters and two brothers.

Dean’s father was a fourth generation nurseryman in a business that dated back to 1856 when Dean’s great-great-grandfather, Nathan Gould Platt (who had come to Iowa from Ohio in 1848) and his son, L. DeForrest Platt, opened a nursery in southern Jackson County. It was the first nursery in the state of Iowa. In 1900, the business moved to Oelwein where it was run by L. DeForrest’s sons, Loren Platt and his brother George, who was Dean’s father.

Interested in carrying on the family trade and making the nursery business his own profession, Dean went off to Iowa State University, eventually graduating with a degree in horticulture management in 1942.

Lee (Morf) Platt was born April 21, 1921, in Waverly, Iowa, the daughter of Bert and Hertha Morf. Lee is one of two children. Residing in Waverly only a short time, Lee’s family moved to Riceville, Iowa until Lee was in second grade when they moved to Tripoli, Iowa, where Lee graduated as Valedictorian.

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With an interest in Home Economics, Lee attended Iowa State University where she and Dean met during freshman orientation week, on the dance floor at a mixer. Dean’s fraternity house and Lee’s sorority house were about a block apart, and they would walk to and from class together. On June 4, 1942, the two married in Ames, Iowa, so all their college friends could attend. “We married the night before graduation because we wanted our friends to be there,” remembers Lee. “Back then, people didn’t have cars.”

For a couple of years, Dean worked for the Atlantic Commission Co., the firm that owned A & P grocery stores, as an inspector of commercial produce.



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During those years, Dean and Lee lived in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and in Youngstown and Cleveland, Ohio. They returned to Iowa and started the family business in Waterloo.

Dean and Lee settled on one of Waterloo's historic sites, on the land where George W. and Mary Melrose Hanna, the founders of Waterloo, had their homestead. Taking over what had been a dairy farm, Dean and Lee began selling quality trees and shrubs. Over the years, the two of them built what would become one of the most dominant nursery/landscaping businesses in the Cedar Valley.

But Dean and Lee built far more than a business, they built a family together. Ann was born October 3, 1945, and Richard was born five years later on November 7, 1950. Dean came of age during the Great Depression, a time when people had to grow up and learn responsibility very fast. That same work ethic was handed down to Ann and Richard from an early age. Growing up, the nursery was their only job, and they went to work weeding the rows between the plants and trees long before they were teenagers.

Ann and Richard recall vacation travels with their parents as some of their greatest memories. While traveling, they would all sing in their un-air-conditioned car. The important thing was that they were all together and that they were a family. At least one or two days of every trip they'd take, [Dean] would visit a nursery somewhere just to see if he could learn something new. He was always incorporating business in everything he did, and that's why he was so successful. Today, Platt's Nursery has 13 acres of growing fields, its own greenhouses, and is also a Toro Consumer Lawncare Center managed by fifth generation son, Richard Platt.

A Platt's Nursery employee once said that if you could light up all the trees from Platt's, you wouldn't find a neighborhood in Waterloo/Cedar Falls that would be dark. The same could be said of the many relationships and commitment to the community in which Dean and Lee found themselves planted. They were forever giving back to the community, trying to make it a much better place than they found it.

Over the years, Dean was a Past President of the Iowa Nurserymen's Association as well as a Past President of the Iowa Horticultural Society. At least twice, Platt's was the recipient of the national award for Outstanding Achievement in Industrial Landscaping. In 1989, he was elected to the Iowa Nurserymen's Association Hall of Fame. People loved working for Platt's, and they would often return to work there during the holidays or after they had retired from their main jobs. "One of the most rewarding things for me," said Lee, "is people stopping and telling me what a generous person he was."

Dean was also a member of the Order of Pythagoras of Acacia Fraternity, the No Name Club, the Associated investor's Club, Toastmasters 101, the Downtown Rotary Club since 1945, and he was a Paul Harris Fellow of Rotary International three times. In 2001, he and Lee traveled to India with Rotary International to participate in a polio immunization. He was involved in the Nicaragua Shoe Box Program, always donated, always helped check and pack boxes, and made five trips to Nicaragua to help distribute the boxes and see first-hand this program in action.

Lee has been a member of P.E.O. for more than 50 years. P.E.O. is a philanthropic organization where women celebrate the advancement of women, educate women through scholarships, grants, awards, loans and stewardship of Cottey College and motivate women to achieve their highest aspirations.

A piece of community that stayed central in Dean and Lee's lives over the years was their love for the church. They joined First Presbyterian Church in January 1946 and during their membership, they served in every capacity. Dean and Lee both served as a Deacon, an Elder and a Trustee of the Foundation Board. Dean also sang in the choir for years. They were both members of the Adult Sunday School class and the two of them would be in their favorite pew week after week.

In 1993, both Dean and Lee received the ISU Alumni Service Key Awards for Black Hawk County, an award given annually to two county alumni who have performed outstanding service to the university and their community.

Dean passed away at the age of 89 in 2009. Lee followed in 2018 at the age of 97. Their legacy lives on through their memory and the good being done through their fund with the Community Foundation.

"The beauty of the Community Foundation is that we know the gift will last forever," said Ann. "To leave the legacy so mom and dad's names live on in this community is really important. [By starting a fund with the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa], not only will our children, who have had the honor to know them, but the grandchildren and great grandchildren etc. will know them and the good things they have done. Mom and Dad were so giving, it just seemed fitting to remember them in this way."

Children

Ann Louise (Platt) Fergemann, DOB 10/3/1945

Gary Fergemann, DOB 10/6/1945, Married 7/1/1967

Richard Dean Platt, DOB 11/7/1950

Marsha (Brock) Platt, DOB 8/15/1953, Married 6/5/1976

Grandchildren

Brian Dean Fergemann, DOB 1/28/1974

Katarzyna (Gontarczuk) Fergemann, DOB 10/14/1975, Married 09/04/04

David Scott Fergemann, DOB 7/1/1976

Caitlyn LeeAnn (Platt) Sittig DOB 12/3/1985

Trever Sittig, DOB 5/18/1979, Married 6/7/2008

Allison Ann Platt, DOB 1/6/1989

Breanna Louise Platt, DOB 1/6/1989

Great Grandchildren

Olivia Fergemann, DOB 5/31/2006

Owen Dean Fergemann DOB 4/14/2010

***Historical vignette prepared by the Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa.*