I was looking through old family albums recently and came upon the following article about my father. It contained information that I thought worth sharing—some of it was new to me. Father’s Day is about acknowledging our fathers for what they’ve done and honoring who they are or were. That’s what I’m doing here.

For all his accomplishments, some of which are laid out below, my dad died at age 45.

No, he didn’t die of a heart attack. He was in perfect health. Someone who turned the wrong way onto a freeway off-ramp killed him. The old guy might have been drunk—he did have half-full bottle of wine on the seat next to him—or he might have been confused. He could have been trying to end his own life. He did end his life, along with my father’s.

Here’s the article from an old newspaper. I’m going to post it in its entirety.

**From the DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS, “OLDEST BUSINESS NEWSPAPER ON THE PACIFIC COAST—SINCE 1875,” Thursday, January 15, 1959, by Hugh Russell Fraser**

*Today’s Bay Area Profile of Andy Oddstad is another in a DAILY COMMERCIAL NEWS series, which appears each Thursday to give you an intimate portrayal of prominent Bay Area executives. The author, Hugh Russell Fraser, is recognized as among the top book reviewers and biographical writers of our time. —Editor.*

When I heard that down in Redwood City there is a man, only 40 years old, who has built 10,000 houses in the Bay Area in the last 10 years, I decided to go down and see what he was like.

They call him Andy Oddstad, but his real name is Icelandic in origin—Andres Fjeldsted Oddstad.

He is a stocky, blond type, built like a wrestler (which he was at college, and still is), decidedly affable and friendly in his manner.

There is nothing ostentatious about his office a 1718 Broadway. There he presides of the destinies of 10 construction and building companies, the best known of which is Oddstad Homes.

With a signal to his secretary to cut off the phone, so as to give me his uninterrupted attention (How I hate these tycoons who take a dozen calls while pretending to talk to a visitor!), he talked in a low-pitched, well-modulated voice.
Naturally, I wanted to find out what made the man tick; I first question him about how he got into the home-building business.

Born in British Columbia, Oddstad’s forbears were all from Iceland. He was 9 years old when his father, a carpenter and builder, moved to San Francisco. Here he worked for his brothers-in-law, the famous builders Ellis and Henry Stoneson. Young Andy went to Sunnyside Grammar School.

At the age of 10 he knew he was going into the building business. Never was there any doubt of it.

**FASCINATED**

Not because his uncles were builders in a big way, the founders of Stonestown, but because everything about building, from sweeping out the floors of new houses to constructing walls and roofs, fascinated him.

Every daylight hour that he did not have to spend in school, he spent around building projects; in fact, he worked after school cleaning up trash on building sites, sweeping floors, helping make repairs. He discovered he would rather do that than play.

Meanwhile, Andy kept on going to school—first to Aptos Junior High, then two years at San Francisco college and finally two years at the University of California [at Berkeley] from which he graduated with honors and an engineering degree in 1941.

Despite the financial status of his uncles, he worked his way through college, always in building and construction work.

It was while at college that he stumbled onto something that made him think in more precise terms of business. He took as his graduate thesis a study of low-cost housing in California!

**ALMOST HALF**

He went all over the state, and in San Diego he ran into an eye opener. Mind you, this was in 1941 when government low-cost housing was at its high point. He discovered to his amazement that Uncle Sam was putting out $9000 for a unit that was little more than a three-room apartment, while in San Francisco private enterprise was building five-room houses with a garage underneath, definitely superior to the San Diego Government-subsidized project, for about $4250! In other words, for less than half the subsidized amount!
That was his first acquaintance with the waste inherent in bureaucracy. He could hardly believe his eyes, but slowly he came to realize that he was looking at a simple and inescapable fact.

His interesting and carefully documented thesis went to waste, however, although the University of California gave him a pat on the back for it.

Hardly had he completed this study when the approach of World War II brought him into the Navy. There he became a “frogman,” an undersea demolition expert. He saw combat duty in Okinawa, winning a raft of medals, including the Bronze Star Medal, a Presidential Unit Citation, and the Pacific Theater Ribbon with five battle stars.

On getting out of the Navy, with the rank of Lieutenant, he returned to the Bay Area.

Then he decided to go into business for himself. [The initial business was funded with $500 or thereabouts that my mother, Clara Oddstad, saved from her wartime wages. SN] He teamed up with another Icelander, Chris Finson, who hailed from Seattle, and together they formed the Sterling Building Company.

**GREAT TRIO**

It was at this point that his famous uncles, Henry and Ellis Stoneson, came in with help and guidance. A third man, whom Oddstad gives great credit to, was Parker Maddux, on-time president of the San Francisco Bank. This great trio, all three of whom helped Andres Oddstad on the road to a spectacular success, have all passed on, Henry Stoneson only recently.

Andres Oddstad doesn’t think much of the co-called “self-made men” who insist they did it all, that nobody helped them.

“When you come to analyze it,” he said, “that is nonsense. Nobody makes it alone. Sooner or later, they get cooperation and/or assistance. I am proud of the help and expert guidance that I got from my uncles and from Parker Maddux, and if you writing anything about me, don’t forget to mention their names!”

I like this about the man. No boasting, no phony claims. In fact, I think he underestimated, rather than overestimated, his own ability, which I soon recognized was considerable. It is plain he is a hard and unremitting worker; that he thinks problems through and believes in doing a through and careful job.

But he also has imagination! This was apparent in his keen interest in economics and architecture. Perhaps a better word is enthusiasm, although I do not usually associated the word “enthusiasm” with a man who always talks in a low-pitched voice, never once raising it to an excited pitch.
It was obvious he has been fascinated by two men, the great architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, and J. Kenneth Galbraith, author of *The Affluent Society*.

Wright he regards as a great architect, the like of which American has never known before. “He thinks and designs in three dimensions,” says Oddstad. “In addition, he is a showman and super salesman. Take this training ground he operates for young architects on the desert near Phoenix, Arizona. [Taliesin West] Here he takes young men out of college, puts them to work drafting—carrying out his ideas, and the result is he has a far-reaching influence on the rising generation of architects.

“Wright sees things in their relation to their environment. Many orthodox architects—and Wright is anything but orthodox—remind me of the fellow who polishes a pebble in a mosaic. Write has helped me think in depth—you have to do it in any kind of business, but especially in the building business.”

But it was the imaginative Galbraith I wanted to question him about. *The Affluent Society* has dynamite in it, and I was curious how the third largest builder in the San Francisco area reacted to the top U.S. economist.

“Let me say one thing,” said Oddstad, “I like to solve any problem by reducing the variables—in other words, simplifying the assumptions. But by no means do I disregard the variables. Some economists—in fact all of them but Galbraith, disregard factors they don’t understand.”

“Meaning what?” I demanded. “Let’s get specific.”

“Well, just this: The usual run of economists pay no attention to such factors as human greed, the ego, etc. Because they do not understand these, they ignore what they can’t understand. Galbraith does not. He tries to reckon with all the variables. In other worlds, he sets the whole problem of economics against a background of common sense. Do I make myself clear?”

“Exactly,” I said. “In fact, you have converted me, as never before, to the value of Galbraith. My previous acquaintance with him was wholly superficial. In other words, if I may add, it is your view that most economists are lacking in fundamental common sense?”

**ALL BUSINESS**

“Right!” he said in that low, even voice of his. Then he added slowly: “Of course, you can ask how all this helps me in my business? Well, an understanding of economics helps toward an understanding of the reference frame of all business, not just the building business.”
“And speaking of business,” I said, “what do you think of the future of the building business in California?”

“Just this:” he replied, “first, our population is going to double by 1975. They are coming in here at a great rate now. It is becoming a tied. And it will accelerate. Not only that, we will double our production units. I mean—and let me make myself clear—for every apartment house or building you see now, there will be another apartment house or building by 1975. For every home you see now, there will be another home in 16 years.

“You mean,” I said, “for every house and building we see know, we are going to see double that by 1975?”

“Yes. This is one part of the country where values are going to be on the increase, steadily and persistently. In fact, right now California has the only semi-permanent wealth in the nation.”

When I left this rather extraordinary man, whose profession is building and whose hobby is economics, I suspected he was telling me the truth. The surprising thing is that 1975 is only a relatively short time off!”

End

Andy Oddstad getting ready to water ski in the San Francisco Bay, early 1960s.
AFTER WORD: Well, we all know that 1975 came and went. I’m sure my father’s predictions were far lower than actual levels of development in California. I’m also certain that he could not understand what happened to the housing market from the 1970s on. Before the 1970s, housing prices were pretty level.

My dad would not understand the prices that homes in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some of his most modest homes that sold for about $9,000 in the 1950s are going for $1 million. (I wish he hadn’t sold them!)

Andy Oddstad was a guy who came up in the Great Depression. The article above mentions him working for his uncles after school. He did it because he needed to work if his family was to eat—and the rest of the Oddstad family worked, too. Sweeping out jobs after school wasn’t a hobby. Nor were his two paper routes before school just for fun. He constructed the bicycle he rode to deliver those papers out of scrap from the junkyard. And raised rabbits behind the family home for meat for the table.

Those were hard times.

Oddstad Homes built over 14,000 homes at the time of my father’s death. Oddstad Homes was the #1 builder of residential housing in Northern California and #10 in the US at its hey-day.

What was it like having a dad like that? Like growing up in the Marines. Tough, and fair. He really did read Galbraith. He had—and read—volumes by the philosophers Kant and Spinoza on his bedside table. When he helped me with my homework, I had to have razor sharp pencils, several pens, a pad of scratch paper, good paper for the answers, a straight edge, and a compass at the table before he would sit down with me. I got one explanation, which was it. [Pocket calculators didn't exist.]

Brisk.

I majored in economics for my first two college degrees. I’m glad I have that knowledge, though it’s taken me a lifetime to start “listening to my heart” as the New Agers say. I still feel guilty about being a writer and author, though I know it’s what I was born to do. (My dad could not have fathomed the New Age, either. Or free love or the 1960s.)

I owe Andy Oddstad a very great deal. I’ve never seen a person who lived at 100% and demanded that those around him do the same. It’s shaped my life and me.

What are some of the most important words my father said to me?

First off, he said, “Sandy, there’s no reason a girl can’t do everything a boy can do.” So I took physics and calculus in high school. “And I know how smart you are, so don’t try and tell me you can’t get good grades.” I got good grades.
He held me to a high standard, and I’ve kept it. That’s the most valuable thing I got from my dad. He was the most disciplined person I’ve met. He moved through life at hyper-speed, like he was skating on the edge of a razor blade.

It’s a shame he’s been all but forgotten. He gave a great deal to the San Francisco Bay Area.

But that’s what happens when you die.

I know that tracts built by one of his competitors, Joseph Eichler, have been named Historical Neighborhoods. There’s an very glossy, slick magazine put out for owners and fans of Eichler homes. I think that’s great. Eichler’s designs were spectacular examples of low cost, good design.

They are not spectacular examples of low cost, good construction. I’ve lived in an Eichler. I know all about huge single-paned windows that leak all the heat in the room and radiant (under floor) heating that that doesn’t keep rooms warm and can lead to big repair bills when it breaks. My cousin worked as a carpenter building Eichlers. I will not repeat what he said about the quality of their construction. I don’t know if the old saw about how fast they burn down is true. Three minutes?

Enough carping. I expected that Frank Lloyd Wright would approve more of Eichler’s work than my fathers. I do wish that some of the folks living in Farm Hill, Linda Mar, Crestmont, Rollingwood and the rest of the communities built by Oddstad Homes might throw together a blog or something.

My dad was an engineer. He was interested in straight lines and economy and that’s what he built. He wanted everyone to have a good, well-built house over his or her head. He was a political liberal, a strong Kennedy man, a man who cared about everyone, not just the rich.

Now is the time to remember our fathers, whoever they were and whatever they did, even if they weren’t perfect and contributed to our personal difficulties. We’re here because of them, whoever they were or are.

My best wishes, fathers everywhere. And all the best to you, Andy Oddstad, whom I knew as Daddy. There’s so much you didn’t get to see, Daddy. You have five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. You missed the Beatles.

And you didn’t get to read my books! I think you would have liked them.

Sandy
Ray Stern and Andy Oddstad getting ready to water ski in the SF Bay, early 1960s. Ray was a great buddy of my dad’s. He was a professional wrestler and entrepreneur. The caption next to this photo in our family album is, “Ray floats at last.” That is in my dad’s handwriting and refers to the fact that Ray was a block of solid muscle. He had so little fat mass that he couldn’t float at all without his wet suit. I think he was the hardest to teach of the many people my dad taught to ski. By gone times: The Bay is too polluted for skiing now. Ray and my dad are gone.

Copyright © 2008 Sandy Nathan All rights reserved.