



A treasured elder...

Charles Hayden Abbott

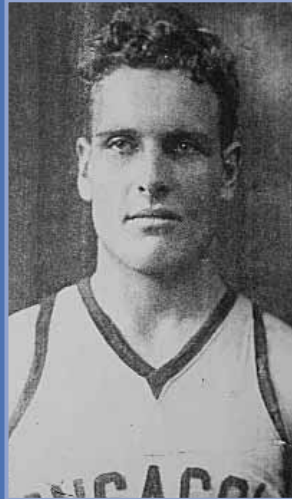
Florida's oldest living ex-sheriff is a descendant of Florida's first sheriff

One gets the distinct feeling of being ushered into Charlie Abbott's office rather than his private room at St. Andrews Bay Skilled Nursing & Rehabilitation Center in Panama City. Abbott greets the Treasure Our Elders interviewer with a strong handshake, steady gaze and a firm, clear voice. It's hard to believe he's 97, but the man from Century, Florida acts as if it's no big deal to approach the century mark himself. "My dad lived to be 90 and my two brothers lived to be 95 and 93," Abbott says, introducing Dan Smith, a 40-year neighbor who's making his daily visit to chat with his longtime friend.

The afternoon sunlight floods the cheery room, shining brightest on a wall covered with photos and mementos from his pro baseball days, 1929-1937. On a nearby bulletin board is a 2007 certificate from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers recognizing Abbott's 70-year membership. On another wall is a large color photo of the Charles H. Abbott Public Safety Training Center building at Gulf Coast Community College near Panama City. The criminal justice programs he helped form at GCCC and more than a dozen other north Florida locations has since trained thousands for professional careers in law enforcement. Abbott's own law enforcement career began at age 51, long after he had already established himself as a successful businessman, church elder, Rotarian and reforming city commissioner.

Star athlete

Abbott was born October 9, 1910, the third of three sons to a power house engineer and his wife. He grew to be a high-average infielder and star athlete who lettered in four sports at Pensacola High School and was recruited by several colleges before graduating in 1929 and signing a pro baseball contract. His teams barnstormed across Florida, Georgia and Alabama in the days when cities sponsored their own baseball teams and treated its players like kings. "We couldn't buy a dinner in a restaurant or pay for a haircut," Abbott recalls. "I chased all the girls who didn't chase me." Abbott played in at least two Spring training games with Babe Ruth before a nagging knee injury ended his playing career.



Straight-shooter: Abbott lettered in four high school sports and played pro baseball. He was a successful businessman, city councilman and police reformer — a criminal justice training building near Panama City is named in his honor. "You have to dig in and find the truth and then have the guts to stand up. The Lord will help you with that."



Returning to Pensacola, Abbott took a job at Gulf Power & Light, and within three years was promoted to district manager. By 1940, he had already met, courted and married Mary, with whom he would be married until her death in 1995. When World War II began, Abbott enlisted in the Navy and was later assigned to a base in Jacksonville, and then to San Diego and Pearl Harbor, where he administered critically important ship repair units. Abbott moved to Panama City after the war and used his accumulated expertise to start Abbott Commercial Air Conditioning as home and commercial construction boomed in Florida. "We air-conditioned most of downtown Panama City," Abbott mentions with pride.

Sheriff Abbott

Abbott can trace his ancestry back to William M. Lofton, Florida's first sheriff, appointed by Territorial Governor Andrew Jackson in 1823. His own career in law

enforcement began unexpectedly in May 1961, with a call from Florida Gov. Farris Bryant, whom he had never met. Bryant had been in office only about six months, but told Abbott he was removing the Bay County sheriff from office and asked if he would consider taking the job. "Professional police forces were unheard of in Florida in those days," Abbott says, noting that county sheriffs appointed whoever they wanted as deputies. "We had officers handing out warrants who couldn't even read and write." Abbott's goal was to professionalize law enforcement, which he did as sheriff, and after leaving office, as part of the newly-created federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration. By the time he retired in 1981, the criminal justice program of which he was a prime mover at GCCC was a national model.

A good life

Abbott moved into St. Andrews about four months ago as his care needs changed.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Loved Linda

"Your excellent staff not only tolerated Linda and, I believe loved Linda, but were able to reach her on a personal level. Linda was very bright and perceptive and could spot a phony and insincerity instantly. She could see your people were genuinely interested in her and wanted her to get better and be happy. Linda not only seemed to thrive in this caring atmosphere but started to improve dramatically, despite her poor medical prognosis. I believe the reason for her improvement was because your personnel reached out to her not only on a professional level but also on a personal level and Linda responded."

— **George R. Peacock**, writing of his niece, **Linda Keal**, to **Cheryl Fredsall**, Administrator of **University Center East in DeLand**.

Special star

"I wish I could tell each of you how much you're meant to me for all the years of good deeds and kind service you gave to Granny. Even a thing as simple as telling her, 'I love you.' I know many of you did because I have heard some of you. Everyone needs to hear those words. I know Granny did not always

make it easy for you to do all these things but I do know God will place a special star in your crown for all you do. I love you all dearly and it is my prayer that God will bless each of you always. I think the fact that many days Granny never knew if it was one of your or myself speaks volumes!"

— **"Ms. Carolyn"** to the staff at **Macclenny Nursing & Rehab Center**

A 'Health and Rehab Home'

"They are not just a nursing home, they are a 'Health and Rehab Home' too. I found this out as I was there for five weeks. The room and meals were good, the girls who cared for me were very kind and understanding. The therapy was excellent. Some of the people there really went above and beyond for me. I would like to say thanks to all the people involved in my care, from admission, therapy, nursing, CNA, activities and all the behind-the-scenes people who made my stay fantastic...Remember Okeechobee Health Care 'Rehab Home,' because they made me feel right at home. I am proud of them all — never a cross word; always laughter and smiles. God bless them."

— **Doris Plummer**, a former **Okeechobee Health Care Facility** rehab patient, to the editor of the *Okeechobee News*

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

He has praise for the nursing and house-keeping staff ("They're beautiful to me"), particularly the training they receive in courtesy, respect and ethics. Abbott says those are the very values he always emphasized in his own training programs. "It's a lot like police work — you're never going to satisfy everybody so you just do what you think is right and stick to it."

FHCA honors Charles Hayden Abbott and treasures his many contributions to our state and nation.



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