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## **Coast business and civic giant Leo W. Seal Jr. passes away**

By KAT BERGERON

The Mississippi Coast lost one of its best friends about midnight last night with the passing of 84-year-old banker Leo W. Seal Jr. to a blood disorder he kept as quiet as he did the philanthropic and community leadership stories about himself.

A hint of this Bay St. Louis native's personality is found in an incident when he was only 8. As frugal and humble then as he would be later in life, Seal saved every penny earned for good grades, odd jobs and birthday gifts, safely stowing it in a savings account in his father's bank.

That night in 1932, when the Great Depression raged and banks failed, his father sat on his bed and told him, "To meet our depositors needs today, I had to take your bank account." His father also promised that "if we come out of this, I'll give you every nickel back."

Unlike 162 other Mississippi banks, Hancock Bank survived the economic crisis and young Leo got his money back. The lessons learned about trust and economics proved valuable when he later led the way for the community bank to become a Southeast financial service leader and created Hancock Holding, with combined \$6 billion in assets.

"I don't know if anyone has heard that childhood story before about Leo, but it tells us a lot about who he was as a person and why," said George Schloegel, mentored by Seal and now chairman of Hancock Holding and president of Hancock Bank, with branches in four states.

"All his life, Leo saved the pennies so he could give away dollars, and he did it without anybody knowing about it. I tell the story of our driving to Jackson in a hot car, no air conditioning, because he wanted to save two gallons in gasoline. Then he'd turn around and give away \$100,000 of his own money.

"You could do a lot of research and never find the depth of his giving, or his dad's before him."

Seal's philosophy is an echo of his own father, Leo Seal Sr., who first said in a bank 50th anniversary speech and now repeated for every new Hancock employee:

"Never forget that the underlying principles of character are love of truth, devotion to duty, respect for law and the unselfish consideration of the rights of others."

Tens of thousands who benefitted from his philanthropy and behind-the-scenes gentle arm-twisting - all in the name of a better Coast community and state - do not know it because of his wish for anonymity.

But Seal did so much that word got out anyway, proven by an extraordinarily long list of honors as well as civic, church, education, development, banking and economic boards he sat on or directed. Then, there are buildings at his beloved alma mater, Mississippi State University, that carry the Seal name, as does the Coast's Leo W. Seal Teacher Recognition Award and the Leo Seal Jr. Hancock County Community Center.

The State Port of Gulfport, Stennis Space Center, Hurricane Camille recovery, the Mississippi Economic Council, John C. Stennis Airport, education, Coast tourism and charity benefited from his tenacity or generosity.

Before more World War II veterans died, Seal wanted them to know their patriotism was appreciated so he footed the bill for a monument in Hancock County, showing up at the 2005 dedication in his World War II sergeant's jacket. Before and after the war he had played MSU football as a tackle (with the nickname Scraps for his habit of leftover cafeteria food), and his tall, full football build had changed little.

"Leo was outwardly subdued but inwardly operating at a fevered pitch for those things important to him, including, in this order, Hancock Bank, Mississippi State, the community in which he has lived and his family," said Schloegel, who began at Hancock as a teenaged mail runner and is among the Seal-trained executives who will move Hancock forward in his absence.

"Leo would say, 'There is so much bad in the best of us and so much good in the worst of us. It's a matter of finding that good in the people and giving everyone the benefit of the doubt.' Leo always did look for the good and as a result, he found it."

Real retirement was out of the question, and his last titles were chairman of Hancock Bank and President of Hancock Holding. Until his latest stay in the hospital, Seal showed up at the bank five days a week, and then conducted business from his hospital bed.

"His best attribute was trying to make the Coast a better place," said Roland Weeks, retired Sun Herald publisher who worked with Seal on many committees and boards. "When the Coast was led by a few old white men who were selfishly and narrow minded leading us in the wrong directions, Leo was enlightened and led us in directions that served everyone, as opposed to a few."

"Leo was a man of the Coast, back when cities were protecting their own turf. Leo saw the need for togetherness and regional thinking in the public and private sectors."

George Thatcher, a fellow banker from Gulfport, believes Seal demonstrated his "absolute love of the Coast" in the late 1950s by spearheading turning the Port of Gulfport into a profitable and bustling state port that helped the Coast grow.

"He is the godfather of the port," Thatcher said. "It was a hotly contested issue but Leo shouldered the leadership on it, going across the state to hundreds of groups to convince them it was the right economic thing to do.

"He never sought gratitude and preferred to do things quietly, like sending an unsolicited \$100,000 check to Harrison County Library system after Hurricane Katrina, which was never made public."

Such stories abound. For many Christmases, Coast churches of all denominations have received unexpected donations. He was a life-time member of Main Street Methodist in Bay St. Louis, where he continued to make his home even though Hancock Bank's headquarters were eventually moved to Gulfport.

Seal began as a proof clerk at the bank in 1947, even before receiving his MSU degree in business and finance, when Hancock assets were \$14 million in three locations. At his death there are 160 locations in four states.

At his father's death in 1963, Seal became president of the bank founded in 1899, and forged ahead with the Depression Era philosophy he'd learned from his parents to share with the less fortunate and to take seriously the responsibility that a bank has to depositors in all economic conditions. He set examples of frugality in the way he dressed, the cars he drove, even in the functionality of his executive office.

Seal's devotion to his parents is legend. After his father's death he continued to live in the family home with his mother, Rebecca Baxter Seal, in the same converted kitchen pantry where he'd spent boyhood nights. After her death he married Jane "Susie" Pringle and they had twin sons.

The family home was enlarged, and like the bank headquarters and many branches, it was badly damaged in Hurricane Katrina. Seal's post-Camille work years earlier paved the way for how Seal wanted the bank and himself to help in Katrina recovery, tourism and redevelopment.