

James W.R. Brown, 99, forged his legacy through hard work

By Natasha Rausch / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Sunday, March 13, 2016
12:30 am



James W.R. Brown

James W.R. Brown

James W.R. Brown was a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of guy.

His youngest son, 57-year-old Bill Brown, said his father was the hardest-working human being he'd ever met.

“There was never a more practical or utilitarian man than my dad,” he said.

James W.R. Brown died Thursday at age 99. Bill Brown said his father left his family a legacy of hard work.

Brown was born Oct. 31, 1916, and grew up on a farm in Ruthven, Iowa. He was in his early teens when the Great Depression hit, but he'd known from an early age that he wanted to be a lawyer.

After he graduated from a six-year law program at the University of Iowa, his dreams were put on hold when he was called to duty in World War II.

He was stationed in Omaha, where he served as a security intelligence special agent in the Army's Security Intelligence Corps.

Bill said one of his father's many military duties was disarming and dismantling Japanese "balloon bombs." Bill said one of his father's many military duties was dismantling Japanese "balloon bombs." Several appeared in the Midwest, including one that exploded in the air over the Dundee area without causing any damage. A plaque marks the site where the balloon came down near 50th and Cass Streets.

"I know I am biased," Bill said, "but he really was a great, great man."

From 1946 to 1988 James worked at the Fitzgerald and Brown law firm. (The mandatory retirement age was 70, but the firm extended it two years just for him.)

During his career he was president of the Omaha and Nebraska State Bar Associations and was a member of the Nebraska Supreme Court Advisory Committee.

Retirement didn't suit him, though, Bill said. So James helped his three sons build a law firm, called Brown & Brown LLC. The first "Brown" stood for their father, the second "Brown" stood for the three sons.

"It was like having a 25-year-long apprenticeship," Bill said. "It was invaluable. It was fun."

James stopped working in law when he was 93. Bill said that wasn't easy for him.

"He would always ask me 'How are things down at the firm?'" Bill said. "He believed in the law."

But James got to spend more time with his grandkids, Bill said. He loved his profession, but he loved his grandchildren even more.

As a dad, James was tough, Bill said. He "expected excellence" from his six kids, and he valued their education, which is why he put each of them through college.

"He was unbelievable," Bill said. "All six of us have big shoes to fill."

In addition to son Bill, survivors include his wife of 70 years, Mary Pattavina Brown; sons Jim and Tom; daughters Kay Lenihan, Mary Reich and Therese Jensen; 21 grandchildren; and 16 great-grandchildren.

His funeral service is set for 10 a.m. Tuesday at St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church, 6116 Dodge St.

Contact the writer: 402-444-1304, news@owh.com