

FOURTH-GENERATION LOVELAND NATIVE

**Mehaffey leaves legacy in parks, history
Forester, historian and namesake of Mehaffey Park influenced
community forestry across northern Colorado**

By Jocelyn Rowley

jrowley@prairiemountainmedia.com

Raymond “Ray” Litle Mehaffey Jr., whose family’s former farmland is now preserved as Mehaffey Park, died Dec. 7 after an illness. He was 88.

He is survived by his wife of 67 years, Sonja (Sutter), son Michael, daughter Terri, three grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

As a fourth-generation Loveland native, Mehaffey’s roots in the city date back to the area’s first settlers. He was deeply knowledgeable about the city’s early days and later helped document that history by contributing photographs and firsthand knowledge to the Loveland Historical Society.

In his professional life as a forester, Mehaffey helped shape the landscape across Northern Colorado, influencing how the region plans, plants and cares for trees in a climate where growing them is no easy task.

“Ray was one of those that really was on the cutting-edge of urban and community forestry back in the day,” said Loveland Parks Manager Dan Willadsen, who first met Mehaffey in the 1990s. “He was the one leading the new ideas in how to establish forestry programs in places that aren’t very tree-friendly.”

‘The families really were pioneers’

The name Mehaffey first emerged in the area in 1879, when Samuel Mehaffey, Ray’s great-grandfather, relocated from Ohio, settling on a farm north of what would become Loveland. But another side of the family goes back even further, to John Litle, a carpenter who settled near the Big Thompson River in 1868.

Among other historic Loveland landmarks, Litle had a hand in construction of the Douth Mill and was among the first publishers of the Loveland Reporter, which later merged with the Loveland Herald to become the Loveland Reporter-Herald.

The two families were joined in 1904, when Samuel's son Winfield Scott Mehaffey married John Litle's daughter Grace.

Proud of his family's long ties to the area, Ray Mehaffey Jr. later became a steward of the city's history. He served as historian for the Loveland Historical Society from 2004 to 2007 and contributed many photographs to the Reporter-Herald book "Loveland: Publishers & Pioneers."

"Most of the pictures in the book were his mom's and his dad's sisters," said Sonja Mehaffey. "The families really were pioneers."

'There were no guarantees'

Ray Mehaffey Jr. was born in Loveland in 1937, the first son of Ray Sr. and wife Eva Braden Mehaffey. But their joy at his arrival was tempered by the diagnosis of a serious kidney condition and a blunt warning from their son's doctors.

"They told my grandma not to get used to him, because he wasn't going to be around very long," said Michael Mehaffey, Ray's son.

Ray Jr. survived past the grim milestones predicted by doctors, thanks to his parents' persistence in getting him treatment. Despite his medical struggles, Mehaffey joined Loveland's first Little League baseball team and later played varsity baseball at Loveland High School.

In the mid-1950s, Mehaffey finally received a life-changing operation that dramatically altered his prognosis.

"That surgery gave him a whole different life," Michael Mehaffey said. "Before that, there were no guarantees."

Family members said the experience left a lasting mark. Mehaffey rarely complained about setbacks later in life, approaching challenges with a calm, steady resolve that those closest to him came to recognize as resilience born of necessity.

“That determination through all that was definitely a key part of who he was,” his grandson Caleb Bollander said. “He was very stoic. He didn’t let a whole lot get to him.”

‘I was 17 and he was 21’

It would take some of that determination to make Sonja his wife. The two met at Loveland High when he was a senior and she was a sophomore, and, to hear her tell it, their first date was a fluke.

“I was locker mates with one of the girls he was dating, and she got the measles or the mumps or something, and couldn’t go on a date,” she recalled. “I also happened to be a friend of a girl his friend was dating, so they asked me to be on the date.”

The two attended a Loveland High Wigwam party, and then took a drive with their friends to a lake. After the other couple left the car to take a walk, Ray made his move.

“He put his arm around me and I was out the door and we went for a walk,” she said with a laugh.

Ray and Sonja continued their relationship after Ray’s graduation in 1955. After she graduated in 1958, they decided to marry, though it would take two attempts to make it official.

“I was 17 and he was 21,” Sonja said. “We eloped twice to Raton, New Mexico. The first time, we didn’t have our parents’ permission, so they made us go back. In July, we went back with our permission slips.”

Ray and Sonja went on to have two children, Michael and Terri — another defiance of the predictions doctors once made about Ray’s future. Together, the family would spend

weekends hiking and fishing in the mountains or on the road traveling to dog shows, indulging another of Ray's passions.

"We had beagles first, and then Irish setters and labs," Sonja said. "We showed in just about every state. We even went to Canada."

A life dedicated to trees

After his marriage to Sonja, Ray settled into a career as a forester — a path he hadn't initially set out to take. He had hoped to become an engineer, but after his first year of classes realized it wasn't the right fit.

"He had an adviser who recommended forestry, and he decided that might be what he wanted to do," Sonja said. "And then he instantly learned the Latin names for trees and everything about them. He had a marvelous mind."

His first job was with the U.S. Forest Service, where his work focused on wildfire suppression, which would take him around the western U.S. and included harrowing incidents that he barely escaped.

In the 1970s, Ray left his federal job and signed on with the state forest service to help fight the mountain pine beetle, a battle still ongoing in Colorado.

His state career also took him across Weld and Larimer counties, where he helped cities manage urban tree canopies. Among other efforts, he supported Arbor Day programs, Tree City USA initiatives, local tree boards and helped organize Colorado's first Tree Board Conference.

"Most communities in Northern Colorado now have some kind of arborist program, and that has to do with Ray and the way he kept us using each other's experience to develop our own programs," Willadsen said. "I really commend Ray for the work he'd done years before I even got to know him."

The road to Mehaffey Park

Before it was a farm, the stretch of Loveland that now sits west of Wilson Avenue and south of 29th Street was part of the Overland Trail, a major trading route that carried travelers, freight and stagecoaches in the mid-1800s.

For Ray's son Michael, that brush with history later made for fun treasure hunting when he would visit his grandparents on the farm.

"We used to use metal detectors at an old stable," he said. "I found an oxen shoe once."

The Mehaffey farm came into being when Winfield Scott and Grace moved onto a 250-acre plot a few years after their marriage to raise dryland wheat, alfalfa, corn and livestock. Decades later, Ray Jr. and his brother Roger inherited the property, though keeping it as a working farm would not prove feasible.

"The government tax on the inheritance was mammoth," Sonja said. "And so rather than let it turn into a subdivision, they decided to sell it to the city and keep it open land."

In 1997, the Mehaffey brothers sold 60 acres to Loveland for a community park, with a requirement in the deed added by Ray that it include an arboretum.

"He wanted to make sure the trees were taken care of," Sonja said.

Delays including the 2013 flood slowed the project and it would be 2015 before Mehaffey Park officially opened. Today, it is Loveland's third-largest park, with trails, athletic facilities, a dog park and an arboretum highlighting the site's ecology and history.

For Paula Sutton, past president of the Loveland Historical Society, the park is a fitting legacy for a family that contributed so much to the city.

"Ray had a deep desire to see Mehaffey Park come to fruition, but had doubts it would become a reality in his lifetime," she said. "I am so glad it did and that he was able to see what a wonderful addition it became."

