

Max DelSignore: Hi folks, and welcome to another episode of the Northern New York Community Podcast. We're excited to have you join our conversation with Donald Whitney. Don's family has lived in the north country since the early 1800's. His affinity for, and historical knowledge of the region is vast and true. He will share some great historical stories related to northern New York. A long time educator and administrator, Don will also talk about his 40 years in local education. His family has been tied to philanthropy for centuries. He will offer his unique perspective about the influence of giving back. There's plenty to cover during this interview, but before we start, we have to share our gratitude with our supporters, WPBS, and the Northern New York Community Foundation. They are responsible for the creation and production of these outstanding stories, from the heart of our community. Be sure to check out what both organizations are doing these days. Head to [www.WPBSTV.org](http://www.WPBSTV.org), and [www.NNYCF.org](http://www.NNYCF.org), to learn more about both agencies. Now, let's get started with our conversation with Don Whitney. Don, thanks so much for coming on the podcast.

Donald Whitney: Thank you for offering.

Max DelSignore: Your family settled in the north country more than two centuries ago. That's a long time ago. The area has changed immensely, certainly, in that time. Your family played a vital role in some of the wars of the 19th century, including a battle many forget, the battle of Big Sandy. Can you share with us that important historical story, and your family's involvement, here, to open?

Donald Whitney: Well, my sixth generation great grandfather, Erasmus Whitney, was in the militia, the Henderson Militia, at the time. He not only was at the battle of Big Sandy, but he was the bait. He was the guy that got the British out of the boats to chase him. He actually didn't fight it, he just ran. So it's a great story. But he was at the battle of Big Sandy. Certainly he was involved with the cable carry. Carrying the cable from Big Sandy to Sackets harbor, the two day carry that changed the outlook of the war.

Max DelSignore: Can you share with us some details about the cable carry, too, and just its significance?

Donald Whitney: Well, the material was not only carried in the cable carry, but some of it was brought by ox cart, but the cable itself was a six ton cable that was 21 inches around, and over 100 men carried it. And each man was carrying over 100 pounds. And they carried it 20 miles from Big Sandy to Sackets Harbor.

It was necessary to keep it in one cable, because they needed it for the mast, and for the anchor rope of the Superior. Once the Superior was afloat, then we now had, for the first time in the war, we had control of the lake. We had the biggest battleship on the lake. So throughout the war, we had never controlled Lake Ontario. And whoever controlled the lake, pretty much controlled the northern tier of the war.

Max DelSignore: How did that tip the scales, at that time?

Donald Whitney: Because, once the ship was loaded with its cannon, and its cable, the British broke the blockade, and took off for Kingston. Their ships got out of there, cause they knew, coming out of Sackets, was gonna be the biggest, meanest battleship that ever was made.

Max DelSignore: Your knowledge of history is just so vast, as we mentioned at the top. If you could share one other unique, little-known fact about the region's history, or one that you find that's really exciting, or cool to note, is there one, in particular you could share?

Donald Whitney: No, I just think the people were very resilient people, to come to such a cold climate, a climate that was so different from where they lived before, and to come in and do the things they did. The early settlers were really successful in what they did. And yet, they were the first ones to do it. They had no model. They brought with them all the tools. We didn't have any way of ... we didn't have the railroad 'til 1851, and these people had to come [inaudible 00:03:40], or by water, and that's a tough way to get here.

Max DelSignore: Where did your love for history originate?

Donald Whitney: I'm not sure. I had family that loved history. I had a couple of great aunts that, when I was growing up, would tell stories, family stories. And I guess that's where I got it from. I just loved to hear them tell the stories about ... they were actually, their grandfathers, my great, great grandfathers, would be their fathers and grandfathers, actually were the ones that did these deeds. So they had direct knowledge. They had firsthand knowledge of this.

Max DelSignore: Are there any artifacts, pieces of history, that you have at your home, that kind of reflect some of those previous eras of local history?

Donald Whitney: No. I've got a lot of artifacts, but I'm not sure which ones reflect what. I've got a lot of artifacts of the times. Of industry. Not necessarily family, but milk bottles, and those things of the early days. Early guns. Just a lot of material that was collected over the time. My dad was in ... when he was in World War II, he brought back a lot of artifacts from the war, too. So it's nice to have those.

Max DelSignore: Let's continue with your mom and dad. Mother was an educator, a teacher, elementary and Sunday school, correct?

Donald Whitney: And Sunday school, and secondary teacher.

Max DelSignore: And secondary.

Donald Whitney: She was both.

Max DelSignore: Your father ran a family business that is Whitney Sales and Service, correct, in Adams?

Donald Whitney: Right, yes.

Max DelSignore: What did you learn most from your parents, at a young age, and as you became older?

Donald Whitney: Well they were hard workers. They believed that you got out of life just what you put into it. So they gave a lot to it, and they certainly got a lot out of it.

Max DelSignore: You decided to pursue a career in education yourself, graduating from Adams Center, Adams Central School, I wanted to make sure I got that right, and SUNY Potsdam.

Donald Whitney: Adams Center, Adams Central.

Max DelSignore: Correct.

Donald Whitney: Right [crosstalk 00:05:22]

Max DelSignore: And SUNY Potsdam, for college, as well. But you always helped with the family business. Why was that important to you?

Donald Whitney: It was just something, like father, like son. You just wanted to be like your dad, and it was something I grew up with, so you just kept doing it.

Max DelSignore: And the service industry, the business, offered a lot. I mean there are a lot of jobs that your father, and the family certainly helped with. And not just in southern Jefferson County, you guys were all over the place.

Donald Whitney: Right, but I think the thing about the business, because of the north country, you had to be more than just one thing. So we were plumbers, electricians, we sold appliances, we sold furnaces, we sold water heaters. So there was always some thing for business, all the time. So if one area was slower than another, something else carried it.

Max DelSignore: Where did you find time to help with the family business, as you were becoming an aspiring educator, or began working as a teacher.

Donald Whitney: Well, my father-in-law was also a farmer, and we also had a farm. So the time was there, you just had to be careful how you used your time.

Max DelSignore: Was there a particular job that you enjoyed the most? I know, from personal experience, you fixed my parents' washing machine, many years ago.

Donald Whitney: Yes. I love the service work. You know, the nice thing about deliveries and service work was you got a chance to go in everybody's home, and you got to meet a lot of people. A lot of great people. A lot of people that you wouldn't have met, otherwise, had you not been in that business. So you got a chance to see everybody, as they were, in their own home. So nothing was put on. It was the way they were. It's the way they lived. And that's a great part of the business.

Max DelSignore: What did you learn about this area by going to some of these homes, and working on some of these jobs?

Donald Whitney: I think you learned how hard the area people worked. How honest they are. How much they cared about the area. I think there's a lot of positives in the area, really, that people don't realize sometimes. You hear a lot of criticism. "You know I'd like to move south, I'd love to move here or there," and I just couldn't be happier where I live right now. I have no other choice to live, but right here, in the north country.

Max DelSignore: Since your mother was a teacher, as you said, pretty much at all levels, what lessons did you take from her approach and methods as an educator?

Donald Whitney: Well my mother always believed that you listen very carefully to all teachers, when they spoke. She said, "Just don't listen, being a male, don't just listen to the males, but listen to the female teachers, too. Take all opinions, and think them out thoroughly, before you make your decision." So my mother was very good about doing that. She said, "Make sure you listen to both sides of the story." That was important.

Max DelSignore: Did you ever talk shop with your mother about, again, not approaches and methods only, but just, "Here's a scenario that I have at school."

Donald Whitney: Absolutely. We talked about it all the time. And my daughters are educators, and we talk about it all the time. So it's one thing that never leaves you. Once you're there, you're always there.

Max DelSignore: Is there a common thread, or message that's always underlying, based on any of the feedback you share, either with your daughters, or that you remember from your mom?

Donald Whitney: Be enthusiastic about it. Embrace change. When I first started, I didn't like change. And as I got older, I liked change more and more. And as I embraced it, everything turned out better. So the other thing is, look at new ideas that come in, embrace those ideas, look at those ideas. Make sure you don't put them down.

Max DelSignore: From a reading teacher to an administrator, you have said that being a building principal was the best job in the school.

Donald Whitney: Well being a reading teacher was a great job, but a building administrator was the best job.

Max DelSignore: Why is that?

Donald Whitney: It's just that you have a chance to meet all people at their best. You really do. You get to see all areas of the school. You get to see all pieces of it. Whether it's transportation, whether it's enrollment, whether it's discipline, you get to see all pieces of it. And that's nice, to be able to see the whole picture. So you're not missing pieces of it. And that's the exciting part, cause every day was a different challenge, and those challenges were fun.

Max DelSignore: Now there's a great debate, I feel like it's a debate for all eras, it seems, among people, and likely some of the teaching profession, certainly parents, about how children had changed over the years. Now education certainly continues to evolve over time, but after 40 years in the profession, what do you think has changed, if anything?

Donald Whitney: I thought it got better. I'm gonna tell you. Discipline, especially the boys, were kinder, gentler, when I left, than when I started. When I started, in the '60s, I think they were tougher. When I left, I found a kinder, gentler group of boys. I'm not sure what the reason is, maybe the different rules, sexual harassment rules, or whatever, but I found a kinder, gentler group of kids than I had started with, and yet, that's not what you hear from the general public. You hear about how bad it is today. That's not true. I'm telling you, go out there and try it. It's a great place to be.

Max DelSignore: Are the values and principles of philanthropy integrated enough into a child's education, today?

Donald Whitney: Well, that's always debatable. You never can do enough for it. I think that's something that we always have to be mindful of. That's something we always have to hold that piece there. Where do we put it? Do we put it in social studies? Do we put it in philosophy? Do we put it in English? Where do we put it? I think all areas actually have to have it.

Max DelSignore: Are there any experiences that you recall, either as a teacher, or an administrator, where projects that students had worked on, that were just really good examples of giving back to a community, that you felt were real highlights, or maybe that you enjoyed the most?

Donald Whitney: I think the school has done a lot with kids. I can remember, this may sound terrible, I remember a kindergarten teacher that wanted to, this is in a very poor school, I was principal of, wanted to take here class to the mall, to see Santa Claus, and also buy a gift for the, is it the sharing tree?

Max DelSignore: Sure, yeah.

Donald Whitney: And somebody said, "Well geeze, these kids are poor." And somebody said, and I love the answer, "But it's good that all kids learn to share, whether rich or poor." I just loved it. And on they went. It was approved by the board, and on they went. Every year they went to [inaudible 00:11:06] Mall, and the poor kids got a chance to help buy a gift for the tree.

Max DelSignore: That's a terrific lesson.

Donald Whitney: I thought that was wonderful. I just thought that was a great experience. And I loved the answer that everybody has to share, whether you're rich or poor.

Max DelSignore: Where did your values of philanthropy and giving back come from?

Donald Whitney: They came from the community, but especially from my parents. My parents were very big givers, especially my mother. Very, very ... always talked about giving. She always ... that was one of her main things, was always about sharing.

Max DelSignore: Are there any examples that you recall, either at a young age, or as you became a young adult, and older?

Donald Whitney: Well, I remember Sunday school, when we were very young, we always had a fund where we gave extra money to the kids and families of foreign countries that weren't as well off as we were. We all felt good about that, and we were little kids, five, six, seven years old. You know. So it was a good feeling to do it. And also they had local food drives at that time, for people in the community that could really benefit from that. So that was always fun to do that. Always fun to be part of the food drive.

Max DelSignore: You get to play a special role in being a difference maker to many communities, serving as the president of the Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation, which is based in Rochester, but you work with the committee and family members to determine grants each year to worthy projects and programs that are addressing important needs. Can you share the story about how the Daisy Marquis Jones foundation was established?

Donald Whitney: Well my great aunt and my great grandmother were very frugal investors. They lived on a side street in Rochester, right off Monroe Avenue, and they lived the life of like the millionaire next door. They lived in a two-story 150,000 dollar home, and know one would have known it. But they believed in giving back. And that was the nice thing about it. So when they had the opportunity, and they certainly had the finances, they decided that's where they wanted their wealth to go.

Max DelSignore: Can you share a little bit about the experiences, and examples of some of the projects that the Daisy Marquis Jones Foundation has supported recently?

Donald Whitney: Well, our biggest trust is certainly in working with youth, and working with the elderly. So we get both ends of the spectrum, but we do a lot in the middle, too. We don't like to pick a particular program, because it looks like that's the one we favor over another, so I'm very careful not to say this is one area that we like better than another. But we do a lot with the disadvantaged youth, and we do a lot with the elderly. So you get both ends of the spectrum, there. And that's a great place to be.

Max DelSignore: Kind of that multi-generational impact, in a lot of ways.

Donald Whitney: Yes, yes, yup. And that changes, too, and that evolves, over time. So as history goes on, as time goes on, you evolve, too, in your foundation. Where we used to give a lot of large grants, now we give more smaller grants.

Max DelSignore: So how do you evaluate that, as far as determining which projects you feel are really important, and again, hit the mission, really, of the foundation.

Donald Whitney: Here's the difficult part. 99.9 percent of the people that walk through my door, cause we deal with nonprofits, 99.9 percent of those people really care about what they do. And the reason that I give to some, and not others, is just because I only have a limited amount of finances. If I had more money, those 100 I turned down, I would actually give to. So it's hard to pick and choose. It is. We look at the mission, but we also have to look at the need. 'Cause needs change. Needs change immediately in the area. And Rochester is a very giving area, it is.

Max DelSignore: To piggyback off that, about needs, given your lifelong residency here, and watching the needs evolve here, in the north country, what do you see that really stands out as key community needs for this area?

Donald Whitney: That's a hard one to pick, and certainly to say. Because, again, if you say one over the other, it looks like you favor one over the other, and you certainly don't want to hurt anybody's feelings because there are a number of people that are out there giving to different projects, different causes. Not only in money, but in product, and volunteering. So it's very difficult to say that. But what I will say is that the more we give, the better it is for everyone. All things will improve, because of the giving that we give in all areas.

Max DelSignore: How has serving on the foundation changed your view of philanthropy? Has it changed your view?

Donald Whitney: I don't know if it's changed it. It does change from year to year in how I look at different projects, and programs that are out there. But I don't think it's really changed it. I don't think it's had any change at all.

Max DelSignore: Why is philanthropy so important to this region's future, the north country?

Donald Whitney: It's so important because it creates a culture. It creates a culture that, the more we give, the better it is for everyone. So that's very, very important.

Max DelSignore: Where do you think we stand with that culture today?

Donald Whitney: We can always do more. We never exceed our reach in that one. We always can do more. We have to remember that. Never is enough, we need to do more.

Max DelSignore: Students, obviously, are the area, or the demographic you worked with very closely, again as an educator and administrator. If you had a chance to impart a message to a group of elementary school students, or say, middle school students, what would you kind of share as that just key message about why philanthropy is important in this area?

Donald Whitney: Well, philanthropy is important because it helps everyone in the area. Everyone benefits. Those giving, and those receiving. So where it's a win-win for everybody. So it's very, very important. And it's very important that we involve this youth, too.

Max DelSignore: Do you have any thoughts on how we get youth more involved in philanthropy?

Donald Whitney: Absolutely. First of all, we model for the youth. This is what we do, this is what works for the community. Then we get them involved. We get them involved by saying, "Join us." And then celebrate and recognize those things the youth have done. We have to remember that. In order to get these kids to participate, we need to recognize their good deeds. There's nothing wrong with it.

Max DelSignore: As we start to wrap up, thinking about all that your family has done, and the legacy of the Whitney name, in the north country, somebody asked, "How do you want to be remembered?" Not just Don Whitney, but the Whitney family. How would you hope that the family's remembered, given their years of support, and giving back to this community?

Donald Whitney: I remember my mother saying, probably the best way to look at it, she said, "I don't want any monuments, or statues. All I want to do is just continue to help the community grow." So it isn't anything that I really want out there in any kind of letters, or form. I just want to ... I had my opportunity to have what I have, and I want the opportunity to give back. That's all I want to do. I don't want any name, or any plaques, or anything else out there. I just want to have the chance that, in my lifetime, I had a chance to give back.

Max DelSignore: Well we hope that your story, your wealth of knowledge, the example that you have set, is certainly one that we hope the younger generation aspires to be, and looks at, and says, "This is a person, a family, that did it the right way. That wanted to enhance the quality of life in the north country, and make it better." And hopefully they'll continue to do that. Don, your knowledge and insight's greatly appreciated. You've done so much to make this north country vibrant,



and strong. Continued success with the local business, which I'm sure you're still helping with, correct? To some degree. The critical work, certainly, with the Daisy Marquis Jones foundation, and much more, and we're fortunate to have you inspiring so many others to do better in our area. Thanks for being part of the podcast today.

Donald Whitney: Thank you.

Max DeSignore: That wraps up another Northern New York Community Podcast. Remember, every interview is easily accessible, and always free, whether it's online, or on your mobile device. Find us on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, or other podcast platforms, when you search for the Northern New York Community Podcast. Check out our podcast website, which also features interview highlights, transcripts, photo galleries, and much more. Just go to [www.NNYCPodcast.com](http://www.NNYCPodcast.com). Our thanks again to Don Whitney for joining us, and thanks to all of you for listening to the Northern New York Community Podcast.