



DISTINGUISHED CITIZENSHIP AWARD

George H.V. Cecil

Chairman, Biltmore Farms

George Cecil's lineage will always include being grandson of the man who envisioned Biltmore Estate, but there's much more to his legacy. Cecil was born at Biltmore House to parents John and Cornelia Cecil in 1925. At age nine, George and his younger brother William accompanied their mother—the daughter of George Washington Vanderbilt—to Europe where they attended school (and developed their English accents). But they had to grow up quickly; when he graduated in 1942, the world was at war, and duty called.

"I knew I didn't want to be drafted into the army, so I decided to enlist in the [British] navy," says Cecil, who ended up serving as an officer on a P.T. boat in the North Sea at age 19.

"It was just lovely" he recalls, with a humorous dose of sarcasm.

After serving off the coast of England and West Africa for four years, Cecil returned to his North Carolina home in 1946, where he began working on the family dairy farm.

Biltmore Dairy Farms was a robust operation, and its products were the "standard of excellence to which other brands were compared." When Cecil and his brother divided the company in 1979, George assumed ownership of Biltmore Farms, and William ownership of The Biltmore Company. For decades, business was good: Biltmore products such as milk, ice cream, yogurt and cottage cheese were available in five Southeastern states.

However, as home milk delivery became a thing of the past and supermarkets entered the bottling and manufacturing business, the dairy operations were sold to Pet Corporation. Biltmore Farms repurposed much of the property once used for farming, forestry and dairy processing into real estate developments.

Over the years, Biltmore Farms has become a preeminent community development firm with four divisions: commercial and retail properties, residential communities, home building and hotels. The transition has been successful and proves that a multi-generation family-owned business can indeed evolve with the times. Cecil is company Chairman.

The company has at its core five tenets, which Cecil puts into daily practice: endorsing and supporting education; emphasizing wellness and preventive healthcare; advancing economic development and job growth; cultivating the local arts; and practicing sound environmental stewardship. Cecil's business career encompassed not only leading Biltmore Farms for over 74 years but also serving on three public company boards: Multimedia, Inc., Carolina Power & Light, and First Union Corporation (he is the only remaining Director of the First National Bank & Trust Co. of Asheville, which became First Union). His resume of volunteer activities is equally long and impactful, serving on the boards of Mission Hospital, Rotary International, United Way, Asheville Country Day School (now Carolina Day School), UNC Hospitals and the NC Medical Care Commission. But what Cecil takes most pride in is his work with WNC Communities—the second-oldest surviving rural community development organization in the country.

“We don't try to tell [community leaders] what to do,” he says. “That would kill it quicker than anything.” Instead, the organization uses a “bottom-up approach” to bring successful regional and state strategies for agriculture and economic development to the community level.

WNC Communities has played a major role in upgrading the region's Interstate highway system, completing the Blue Ridge Parkway, developing and expanding the WNC Farmer's Market and opening the NC Arboretum. Cecil played an instrumental role in the founding of the organization and still serves on its board.

In the seven decades that have passed since Cecil initially worked on the family farm, he has seen North Carolina change immeasurably. What hasn't changed is his love for the state. He attributes North Carolina's allure and success to “good, sound government, hardworking people and an education and healthcare system that doesn't receive enough credit.”

It's pretty clear that Cecil, who turned 95 in February, is one of those “good North Carolinians.” And for those who want to know his secret for thriving as a nonagenarian, he's happy to share it: “I have six wonderful children who take care of me and keep me young. And I have a martini every evening before dinner.”

Cheers, Mr. Cecil.

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