

## Town honors eldest resident with Boston Post Cane

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KENNEBUNK — What do you do when you're the town's oldest citizen?

"Anything you want," joked Kennebunk's Board of Selectmen Chairman Al Searles in presenting the Boston Post Cane to Kennebunk's eldest citizen, George Barner, 102, recently at Huntington Commons.

Barner stood erect, without the aid of wheelchair, walker or cane as he accepted his award.

"I find this quite a surprise," he said. "I certainly appreciate all these folks coming here. I thank you again, and I thank the town for giving me this award."

The celebration of Barner's longevity brought family members and friends, neighbors, Huntington Commons staff members, and Kennebunk town officials including Finance Director Joel Downs, Town Clerk Joanna Moran, Searles and selectman Deb Beal.

In addition to the plaque and the picture of the cane he received, Barner was asked by Downs to serve this summer as the grand marshal of Kennebunk's first Old Home Week parade, to which Barner replied, "I'd be honored."

Barner was raised in a small town in Iowa. He became an Eagle Scout at age 13, excelled in tennis and dramatics in high school. He attended Grinnell College, then transferred to Harvard University, went on to Harvard Law School, and finished his law degree at Boston University. While at Harvard, he was a member of the Harvard Dramatic Society and Pi Eta Club.

During this time Barner said, "I rarely thought of anything else (except performing)."

Despite his passion for acting, he graduated and passed the bar in 1934, only to come out of school into the Depression, with little chance of landing a job.

"So he applied to Oxford University, and spent the next two years studying jurisprudence there," said his son, Christian Barner, who attended the presentation with his wife, his step-sister Kim Streetman and her husband.

Barner's first position after law school was at a large firm in New York City. He met and married his first wife, Vivian, while in New York. They moved to Melrose, Mass., and Barner went to work in Boston. The couple had three children, and after Vivian's untimely death, Barner continued to work and raise his kids. In 1962, he married his second wife, Barbara, who had two children of her own. Two years later Barbara gave birth to Christian, who is now a fourth generation estate planning and trust lawyer with the Kennebunk firm of Bergen & Parkinson.

In 1969, Barner retired and built a house in Cape Coral, Fla. But the northeast beckoned to Portsmouth, N.H. native Barbara, and they moved back to become the caretakers of the Russell Nype house in Kennebunkport. Nype, a former Broadway musical star, entertained many well-known folks in his home. Barner chuckled as he reminisced about one of them.

"I used to go out in his boat with Ethel Merman, and I'd have her singing her songs to me," he said. "Those were good times."

The Barners moved into Huntington Commons about five years ago; Barbara passed away in June, 2010, at age 88.

Barner still keeps busy, though. He was recently made an honorary lifetime member of the Harvard Club of Boston. He faithfully attends Harvard commencement ceremonies every year, where he leads the Grand March

and has a special seat in the front row.

An avid philatelist since he was a child, Barner has a stamp collection that he believes is one of the largest in the country. He does most of his trading online, and he busies himself daily with his hobby.

What's the secret of his longevity? Barner isn't sure, but he served up two possibilities.

"I think the tennis, the exercise," he said. "I would say also the fact that I have never smoked has a lot to do with it."

### **Boston Post Cane**

The Boston Post Cane award originated in 1909, when the publisher of The Boston Post newspaper, Edwin Grozier, sent ebony canes with gold handles to selectmen in 700 towns in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New Hampshire, to be distributed to the oldest male citizen of the town, and redistributed to the next oldest townsman upon each current holder's death.

In 1930, women also became eligible to receive the cane. Because some of these valuable canes were lost or not returned over the years, many towns began giving plaques or certificates to recipients, and keeping their canes on display in town buildings, as Kennebunk's selectmen have elected to do. Visitors may view the original cane on the third floor of the Town Hall.