

Clayton Orton
Nicholas LoVerde

Members of Clayton Orton's family sat around the table blanketed with photos of Mr. Orton's life, and his son John realized something was missing. He walked into the garage and emerged a minute later with a pitcher of Coors Light.

John Orton grabbed some mugs, filled them to the brim and then passed them around, moving the scrapbook-making materials out of the way. If they were going to make a scrapbook of their father's life, they would have to do it the way he would have – with jokes, honesty, and hard work. And, of course, a pitcher.

Clayton had a rule about drinking, "Anytime after 3 p.m., it was OK to have a beer," said his granddaughter, AnnMarie.

It was 3:15 p.m.

Together, his family looked at the photos of the grandkids and the neighborhood kids, the photos of the army veteran and the devote Catholic. They raised their glasses, and did what their father loved to do. Drink and share stories of a loved one.

Clayton Orton died from congestive heart failure on Oct. 28, 2008.

Clayton Orton was born on Nov. 22, 1921 in Buffalo, New York. When he was 15 years old his family moved to North Collins, New York where Clayton worked as a part time grocery store clerk and earned his athletic letter in basketball, baseball, and soccer.

Clayton was a worker. He worked managing grocery store businesses all his life from Deertrail to Denver to Boulder.

Clayton met his wife, Patricia, in a coffee shop in Denver in 1944. He walked in with a few of his army buddies, and she was sitting with one of her girlfriends.

"We were looking at them and they were pretty good looking," his wife Patricia said. "And they were looking at us and we were pretty good looking." The couple wed six weeks later and stayed married for 64 years.

"Not a day too long," Patricia said.

His parenting philosophy was molded at boot camp: "Fall in," his son John said.

“He believed in the backhand,” John said. “He asks you to jump, you’re already on your way up.”

Clayton believed in staying committed. Once AnnMarie confided in him doubts about her own marriage. “He just looked at me and said, ‘You’ll do this. There’s no divorce. You just work through it.’”

Photos of Clayton’s family – Clayton had four children, 10 grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren - hang in the hallway of his home in north Boulder. A framed picture in the hall reads, “Grandchildren are the treasure of a long life.”

When he died, his wife, his daughter, his first granddaughter, and his first great granddaughter comforted him in his room. Four generations of the women in his life said the final good-bye to him.

Clayton built his own bar, “The 19th Hole,” in his garage complete with a Coors tap, a wall of hats, and a big screen television to watch the game.

“To be with him meant to sit and talk at the bar, which was a lot,” Patty his daughter said.

People would “just come to the bar and bulls--t,” John said.

“He always had a story,” AnnMarie said.

Those stories were almost always accompanied by salty language. One neighborhood kid, now grown-up, described Mr. Orton’s tendency to curse in a blog. “It came out in such a casual, effortless way,” David Caven wrote, “that after a while it seemed more like a local dialect instead of the occasional blue streak.”

At the same time, “he was always smiling,” Patty said. “He was very approachable.”

Especially in his homemade bar, where Clayton kept a running tally of how many kegs he had purchased over the years. Since 1991, he had bought about 550 kegs, John said.

Of course, it had to be a Coors beer. “Only Coors was drunk in this house,” the granddaughter said.

A photo of Clayton’s urn lay on the table. A miniature Coors Light keg holds Clayton Orton’s ashes.

Clayton lived in his Boulder house from 1967 until his death.

“He said, ‘He would leave this house feet first,’” AnnMarie said.

Along with the bar in the garage, he built a living room add-on, and backdoor porches. He also helped build the neighborhood, He mowed the public greenbelt, he put up newspaper wrappers outside for doggie bags, and he cut makeshift doors through fences.

Clayton loved the neighborhood kids and the neighborhood kids loved him, AnnMarie said. His grandchild called him 'Papa' and the kids in the neighborhood started using the name as well. They would come to have him teach them how to ride their bikes or sit with him in his big red chair.

When he wasn't constructing a new part of his own home or the neighborhood, he made birdhouses – hundreds of them – and handed them out like candy on Halloween.

"Every person that came by would get a bird house," AnnMarie said.

"I never saw my father take a nap. Ever." Patty said.

AnnMarie moves photos around the table until she finds a black and white photo of Clayton and his Army flight crew, posing in front of their plane.

Clayton joined the Army Air Corp in December 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor because "that's what you did," his wife, Patricia, said.

"He wanted to be a fighter pilot, but he could not pass the calculus and physics," AnnMarie said.

After a brief stint in Europe, he was sent to Buckley Air Force Base and trained to become a gunnery sergeant. In 1942, the Army Air Corp sent him to Guam and "he did 17 missions before the war was over," Patricia said.

When his first son Tom was born, Clayton went on leave to go see his child. In his absence his entire crew died, said Patricia.

"Tom changed his life forever," AnnMarie said.

After his leave, Clayton returned to the war and flew in the last mission to Japan, AnnMarie said.

Clayton was honorably discharged at the war's end in 1945. Clayton's father, his grandfathers and all his sons also served in the military.

"He was very, very proud to be an American," AnnMarie said.

His love of America went beyond serving the country. He was a staunch Republican and remained loyal to all American products.

“I would never buy a foreign car while he was still alive,” AnnMarie admitted.

Clayton also loved sports and was very competitive. He golfed, played baseball, bowled, shot trap, and “couldn’t believe the Broncos didn’t win the Superbowl every year,” AnnMarie said.

“Taking him to a sporting event was embarrassing,” AnnMarie said. During the last game they attended together, the ref made a bad call against his great granddaughter’s team. He wouldn’t stand for that and yelled and cursed at the ref and the opposing players. “I thought, oh God, we can’t take him out to the games anymore,” AnnMarie said.

His competitive edge did not apply only to sports. He also loved playing solitaire on the computer.

“He never did anything on the computer except play solitaire,” John said. “They’d have to buy new computers just to play solitaire.”

John got on the computer once and lost a game of solitaire. Clayton had 560 wins with one loss. He couldn’t stand seeing the loss and “had to reset the computer,” AnnMarie said.

Crucifixes hang in Clayton’s bedroom and hallway. Religion was another passion for Clayton.

Clayton was a devote Catholic. He said the Rosary every night during Lent. He went to Mass every Sunday. He made sure his children said grace before dinner and enrolled his sons as altar boys.

“A family that prays together stays together,” was his motto, AnnMarie said.

AnnMarie holds up the last picture ever taken of Clayton Orton. He’s at a neighborhood barbeque a week before his death. A Coors Light bottle sits on the table and his wife leans towards him. He’s grinning from ear to ear.

At Clayton’s funeral, on the bier where the coffin is normally placed, instead sat a neatly folded American flag, a crucifix, and his cremated ashes in the miniature Coors beer keg.

“It was him. It was Coors beer, the American flag, and the Crucifix.” AnnMarie said.

“God, Country and Coors Light,” AnnMarie, Patty, and John all said in unison.