O’Bannon leaves $2 million to Northern Piedmont Community Foundation

By Staff/Contributed

Mary Virginia Smith O’Bannon was a woman dedicated to her community, her friends and her family. Last May, at age 99, O’Bannon passed away peacefully in her home, leaving more than $2 million in her will to the Northern Piedmont Community Foundation for the support of local charities and nonprofits serving Rappahannock, Madison, Fauquier and Culpeper counties.

O’Bannon’s executors say she wanted to create a legacy that would benefit others in need.

Born March 17, 1917, in Castleton, O’Bannon was the daughter of Charles Harrison Smith and Louise Cropp Smith, the sister of Charles Harrison Smith, Jr. and Emerson Smith, and, according to her obituary, “the granddaughter of the largest land and cattle owners of Rappahannock and Fauquier Counties, James Carter Cropp and Virginia Ramey Cropp.”

As a child, she went to school in Sperryville and attended Gourdvine Baptist Church. She later attended Mary Washington College, and after receiving her degree, she served as a schoolteacher in Culpeper County.

In the early 1940’s, O’Bannon married Silas Lillard O’Bannon and moved to Green Valley Farm near Warrenton with her husband, where they raised cattle for a living.

Upon her husband’s passing in 1982, O’Bannon continued to run the farm, buying and selling the cattle at the Culpeper and Marshall livestock yards, tending to the farm’s upkeep, and balancing the farm’s books.

“She really was a unique lady in that she was before her time, running a pretty good-sized farm on her own. On the day she passed, she was still writing checks and taking care of business,” said Dolores Aylor, a longtime friend and business confidant.

In addition to her farm, O’Bannon had a variety of other interests. She loved numbers, and friends and family alike
were often amazed at how she could carry hundreds of different phone numbers around in her head. O’Bannon was also very interested in history and her family ancestry, being very proud of her heritage as a direct descendant of Cyrus McCormick, the inventor of the first reaper.

She was a big supporter of the Ammissville Fire Company, where her late brother Emerson Smith used to volunteer, as well as the Warrenton Rescue Squad. She also enjoyed spending time with young people, eating healthy foods (especially vegetables), and tending to her flowers and plants.

Most of all, O’Bannon had a vibrant faith, attending Warrenton Baptist Church every Sunday for most of her adult life. Doug Harris, her pastor, says, “I was always very impressed with her faith. I could tell through her prayer that she had a personal relationship with her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

In addition, Pastor Harris notes that she was a very generous member of the congregation. She gave money to the church to complete an octave of handbells for the music ministry, and when she noticed that the church’s sanctuary needed repainting, she donated the money necessary for scaffolding and repairs.

In a similar manner, O’Bannon spent much of her life tending to those around her. She cared for her brother following his stroke, and fed and housed Guy Thomas, who worked on her farm and was like a son to her, up until his death.

Those who knew O’Bannon describe her as “one-of-a-kind”: a savvy businessperson; a stylish woman who made sure to dress her hair and don her jewels; a conscientious homeowner.

In responding to O’Bannon’s generous gift, Jane Bowling-Wilson, executive director of Northern Piedmont remarked, “The Community Foundation is deeply indebted to individuals like Mary Virginia O’Bannon. Mrs. O’Bannon believed in the work we do, and through her bequest she created the means to further accomplish opportunities for others.”