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West Michigan Skies for Sunday

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Others have spoken or written recently about the rich legacy of former Grand Rapids Public Museum Director Weldon D. Frankforter, who died November 4th at age 94. My perspective is uniquely person. Frank, as he preferred to be called, was quite simply my number one professional mentor and one of the most significant figures in my life.

With an academic background in archeology and paleontology, and passion for just about everything in life, Frank came to the Museum in 1961 as assistant and heir apparent to legendary Director Frank L. DuMond. Beginning in 1965, he would go on to both guide the institution and expand its outreach for nearly a quarter century.

It is unlikely that my tenure as a long running columnist for the *Press* would have happened were it not for Frank, and one particular aspect of his background that has long served me well.

Before coming to Grand Rapids, Frank was Director of the Museum and Planetarium in Cherokee, Iowa. He was always quick to point out that he was in charge of the only planetarium between Chicago and Denver at the time. Therefore, one of his responsibilities when he came to Grand Rapids as Assistant Director was to oversee operation of the Museum's new planetarium.

With responsibilities and the directorship looming , Frank cast about for someone to take over operation of the planetarium. From among the applicants, he took a chance on a young and untested greenhorn just out of the University of Michigan and launched him on his dream job. Throughout the 24 years I worked under Frank as Chief Planetarium Curator, I watched firsthand his amazing accomplishments, and benefitted in so many ways from the example he set.

He had a huge penchant for historic preservation, and participated in the futile effort to save the old City Hall. Other projects were far more successful. He made sure that the new I196 expressway did not run through sacred Indian burial mounds, he established ethnic heritage exhibits at the Museum and played a big part in initiating downtown ethnic festivals.

One of his most important imprints, from my perspective, was insistence in 1967 that the Museum's planetarium be named after fallen local astronaut Roger B. Chaffee. Featured speaker at the dedication ceremony was Eugene Cernan, a close friend and training partner of Chaffee's. As commander of Apollo 17, Cernan would be the last person to stand on the surface of the moon. Not long after I joined the staff of the Museum in 1964, Frank asked me to write a regular astronomy feature for the Museum's newsletter to its members. That went over well enough for the two of us to pitch the idea of something like that to then Grand Rapids Press editor Lee Woodruff. I remember

being a bit nervous at the meeting in Mr. Woodruff's office, but he decided to give it a try and introduced me to a staff editor named Paul Hines to establish content, format etc. Hines turned me loose and here we are almost fifty years later.

Early on in his tenure as Director, Frank's visionary instincts were illustrated by his plan for a much needed expansion of the Museum's facilities at the Jefferson Street location. The adjacent bowling alley would be acquired, and a new entrance to the existing building established to the north. He envisioned a cultural park facing the then Grand Rapids Art Museum and including the nearby historic Women's City Club.

When that plan proved impractical, Frank and fellow Museum officials turned their attention to participation in the renaissance taking place on the west side of the Grand River. Here old buildings were being torn down and the Museum honoring President Gerald Ford was rising in the early 80's. Though Frank had been retired for a few years when Van Andel Museum Center opened in 1994, twenty years ago this month, his mark from the planning process is all over the place: The carousel hovering over the Grand River, the fully restored whale skeleton, and the marvelous ethnic exhibits are just notable examples.

Still another example of Frank's positive influence is a project dear to my heart. When the Grand Rapids Amateur Astronomical Association sought help in building the James C. Veen Observatory in the late 60's, Frank did not hesitate to offer Museum support and resources. At his memorial service last weekend, a former staff member recalled when the rear axle of the Museum's old pickup truck succumbed to a heavy load of cement blocks being transported to the Observatory project. Public Museum support for Veen Observatory and its programming remains in effect to this day.

A number of historic vehicles in the Museum's collection, and even historic buildings such as the Voight House, were acquired during Frank's watch. When the 1937 American LaFrance fire engine was retired from service in 1972, Frank made arrangements to have it acquired by the Museum. It is on the streets from time to time today in parades and neighborhood events, reminding us of how things were done in earlier times.

Many others have spoken or written of Frank's penchant for and preservation of just about everything (even animal skeletons, but that is another whole story). I would ask him to what he attributed his longevity (94 years). He would point to his 78 year marriage to his beloved Glea, huge family, and good genes. The point that had already made a huge impression on me over the years was: "Keep doing things, and do them now," a motto he certainly lived by right up to the end. Visiting him at the assisted living facility just weeks before he died, I found that his body was obviously failing, but he still wheeled himself outside on sunny autumn days to collect twigs and brightly colored leaves to make decorative arrangements. That was pure Frank.

Many people touched by Frank are saddened by his departure but rejoice in the knowledge that we were so fortunate to have such a special man pass our way, and for so long. We were collectively enriched by his presence and influence, but few more than I.