

## Tribute to Lowell Anderson, by [Ed Hart](#)

There once was a man--a very mild and creative man--who lived among us and for us on this mountain. Before he was one of us he studied architecture with Frank Lloyd Wright and engineering at a school that taught those who built the towers and dams and industrial structures that made the nation's heartland vigorous and beautiful and productive. Before most of us were born he built dams in the high country of the American West and helped to open the Panama Canal to the largest vessels that ply the seas.

Here in Huntsville he helped to open space to exploration by designing and building the massive stands that tethered the most powerful engines man had ever ridden and environmental test facilities that made certain our astronauts and their vehicles were up to the task of traveling beyond their imagination.

His work here was interrupted to mold nature to human needs on the nearby mud flats of the Gulf coast, on the coral reefs of Hawaii and on the prairies of Wyoming, Texas and North Dakota. He built the vast Pascagoula ship yards and to support his structures invented a soil-stabilization technique that made possible the nation's energy-production efforts in the Arabian desert and its submarine-construction facilities along the shifting shores of southern New England. He spent ten years fashioning the reef runway to open Hawaii to the air traffic that facilitated its skyrocketing growth and did it with a delicate touch that preserved the coral reefs that make the islands worth the trip. He built giant power-generation plants atop coal mines in Wyoming and lignite fields in North Dakota to meet the electrical needs of city dwellers and their industries half a continent away. In Texas he rebuilt a power plant to eliminate the pollution that threatened the health of city dwellers not yet there when the facility was originally built, and celebrated his eightieth birthday atop a chimney taller than almost anything between the Appalachians and the Rockies.

But he kept coming home to Monte Sano and to this pool he had dreamed and designed and built--and had taught us and our kids to build on land he had explored and helped us to buy on the top and over the side of the mountain. He did it all while he was designing and building NASA's critical test structures--coming home in the evening to check what his amateur crew had done during the day, staying up late to draft instructions for the next day's work and delivering them to the crew before he went to the job that morning.

Most of the work on the pool was done by the residents and their kids, back when there weren't as many of them. They cut the trees, hollowed out the cavity on the bluff where the pool was to go, bent the reinforcement rods and poured the concrete to hold the water, installed the plumbing that got it into the hole, wired the pocket that held the pumps and valves that made it work--everything we enjoy here now. We couldn't have afforded the facility otherwise.

But they weren't construction men. He taught medical doctors to operate bulldozers and weld, accountants to form the skeleton that supports the concrete, scientists to run pipes through the tunnels under the aprons, aerospace engineers new skills in the construction trades, and their kids to pour concrete in impossible patterns poking out beyond the bluff. (It was he and school kids who cantilevered the patio beyond the edge of the mountain to form our bluff side deck.)

It didn't stop there. He designed and built our tennis courts, put in the sidewalks and the parking spaces and did it again when the traffic got heavier. He planned a treetop clubhouse to be built over the bluff on stilts to fit against the patio, into space he left for the project. Hawaii's reef runway interrupted that project after test drilling had been done and the I-beams were on site, and the void

is still felt when the season ends and activities are shut down.

And pools don't stay built after the initial construction without a little help, no matter how well they were designed and put together. Someone has to repair the pumps and filters when they fail and replace them when their life is over. Someone has to paint and patch and install new tile after winter freezes have taken their toll. Someone has to expand the facilities when our population grows. He did that, too, most of the time.

Someone remembers driving through the pool property on a bitter winter day and seeing him working on a drainage problem. He was recovering from an injury, and had a concrete block in one hand and a crutch in the opposite armpit. That kind of thing lasted a long time, and he was still at it after he passed his ninetieth birthday.

Many of the members who enjoy the pool today never knew him, and some aren't sure he ever existed. But they can still look around themselves and see the signs. The domes on the lights around the aprons and on the bluff aren't domes at all; they're mixing bowls he bought at a kitchen supply shop for a lot less than lighting fixtures would have cost. The stainless steel at the bottoms of the rails that surround the pool might look, as he said, "like spats on a rooster" but they're necessary and practical; when he returned from one extended project out of town the chemicals in the pool water had begun to erode the posts. He cut, reinforced and protected the posts with stainless steel sheeting. The flag that flies over the pool was initially at the top of an exhaust stack that ventilated the bathrooms, which originally filled the space under the apron there. He drilled holes at the upper end of the pipe, which some said added to the briskness of the flag's brave waving.

Just look around; his tracks are everywhere. If you've remarked how lucky we are that the open valley fell smack dab in front of divers on the board and picnickers on the bluff, it wasn't luck at all--he planned it precisely that way, just as he did every other happy accident on our bluff. He formed an early partnership with Nature, and they got along very well, partly because they understood each other so well. He studied geology as avidly as architecture, and was as familiar with the tectonic plates at the deepest points in the sea as with the delicate shells that graced its fringes, and he revered both.

He was a creative artist and a sensitive musician. He was a record-setting college athlete. He took his explosives to embattled Pacific islands during that great war, and lost a barge full of them and several of his men when his construction arsenal took an enemy shell. He was a botanist who lived in awe of the "force that through the green stem drives the flower" and appreciated that it drove his own soul. Every cut he made in the earth's surface he made with its permission, with respect, and care to do as little harm as necessary. If you've heard a windy symphony from the scalloped border of the bluff, it was he who left it there.

He died one summer day in 1998, alone at a Tennessee nursing home. He had lived just over ninety years. Pool members and neighbors on Monte Sano gathered at the edge of the bluff on a Sunday afternoon, recited his praises, expressed thanks for his individual gifts, and pledged to erect a memorial to him on the grounds. Not much of what we earnestly promised that afternoon has ever materialized, probably because he had survived most of those who knew him best.

Even the cast plaque, dedicated on the day the pool was opened to declare ours to be the Lowell M. Anderson Swimming Pool, was destroyed by a vandal on a sad night a few years ago.

One last fact must be recorded: Lowell had no children of his own to splash in the pool. Neither he nor his wife Laurie was even a swimmer. What he did he did for us and our kids.