

Finding his namesake

N.Y. man unknowingly named after long-dead WWII pilot from Ironton

By Shane Arrington | The Tribune

The gravestone he had been searching for was dirty, so he cleaned it off and took a second look at the name chiseled across the stone — Clarence Raymond Stephenson Jr. As he wiped the dirt off his fingers, his eyes lingered on the middle name, the name they shared.

Raymond O'Connor drove hundreds of miles to Ironton from his home in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., to see the grave and attempt to gather information on the man he only recently found out he was named after.

"The way this all started was seven years ago, on my mother's 80th birthday. We traveled down to Long Island where my mother's home was," O'Connor said. "At some point in the day she pulled me aside and said 'Raymond, come to the bedroom with me, I need your help with something.' So we sat down and she reaches into a drawer and pulls out a wooden box. From this box she pulls out what appeared to be a very old letter. She said she wanted me to read something, so I pull this letter out of the envelope and the salutation reads 'My Dearest Darling.'

"I don't get any further than that and my mom is tearing up. So I read the rest of the letter and it's just this really sweet letter about how he is looking forward to coming home to meet his daughter Ann, who he has never met and how he is looking forward to getting back together with his beautiful wife. So my mother starts to fill me in on the story."

The story begins in the summer of 1942, as young Stephenson is in New York training to be an aviator in the Army Air Corps. During this time, O'Connor said his mother was living in Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan, when she bumped into the dashing young man in Central Park.

If you want to hear a story of love at first sight, this is the one to hear, O'Connor said.

Before coming to Ironton to learn more of Stephenson from his hometown, O'Connor traveled to Michigan to meet with Keith Clinton, the last living member of Stephenson's flight crew.

"Back in March of last year I was sitting in my office and I think I've tracked down the right Keith Clinton, but I wouldn't know for sure until I called him," O'Connor said. "I called and someone picks up the phone and this old gravelly voice answers 'hello.'" I asked if this was Mr. Keith Clinton and answered 'yup, who's this?' I said, 'Mr. Clinton, my name is Ray O'Connor. You don't know me, we've never met but a real long time ago you met my mom.



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Raymond O'Connor is seen with a portrait of his mother and her first husband Clarence Raymond Stephenson, Jr., who is also O'Connor's namesake, alongside Clarence's gravestone located in the Woodland Cemetery Soldiers Plot.

My mom is the widow of Ray Stephenson, your pilot in World War II." He paused for a minute and then asked "How's Helen doing?" And I told him mom was doing just great."

After talking for awhile, O'Connor said he asked Clinton if he could come to see him. He said when Clinton asked him what he was doing Saturday he told him Friday he would be getting ready to get on a plane. So he headed out to Michigan where he met

with Clinton. While there, O'Connor said Clinton was a great source of military information. They discussed missions, looked at old flight records and Clinton shared stories of bygone days.

O'Connor went to see Clinton again last summer and a few months after that made a life altering decision: To retire early and commit himself full-time to writing a book about the man whose name he carries and the woman his namesake loved.