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BOOK NOOK

Vick Mickunas: Charles, Barbara Whalen draw portrait of a famous Ohio Family

By Vick Mickunas
Contributing Writer

My grandfather was perplexed when he was forced to retire. He rejected the notion. So, he volunteered. He became the mayor of his small town. I can picture him still, a fearless octogenarian.

Forget about retirement. We draw essential vigor from our productivity. I've met some former Daytonians who exemplify the concept of creative retirement.

Charles and Barbara Whalen are former residents of Oakwood. He taught economics at the University of Dayton. In 1966 he was elected to represent Ohio's 3rd District in Congress.

Barbara worked at WHIO, where she was the voice of Elsie the Borden Cow. Chuck served in the Ohio Legislature while Barbara wrote a political column called "Columbus Coffee Break" for *The Journal Herald*.

Barbara describes her husband. "He was a very liberal Republican. He kept driving all the conservatives crazy. When he was in the state Senate he wrote Ohio's first fair-housing law." Chuck adds: "All the Republicans were against it but me."

Picture him, a liberal Republican. They called him a maverick. Whalen opposed the Vietnam War. He retired from Congress in 1978. They've kept busy. Together they wrote *The Longest Debate; a Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act*.

While researching that book Chuck noticed the name McCook. He discovered a treasure trove of material in the Library of Congress: 32 boxes of letters, photos and McCook memorabilia.

The McCooks were a Scotch-Irish clan of Ohioans who served the Union cause during the Civil War – some with distinction, others less so. It was once

a famous name. There was a McCook Field and a McCook Theatre in the Dayton area.

They spent five years retracing the steps of the warrior McCooks – 46 battlefields in 11 states. For the next 15 years, Barbara distilled those exploits into *The Fighting McCooks – America's Famous Fighting Family* (Westmoreland Press).

It's a profusion of heroism and treachery. Seventeen McCooks served – generals, lieutenants, colonels and one humble private. Four of the McCooks lost their lives. The book is generously illustrated with maps, photos and pictures.

Scenes shift nimbly from the large stage – "(Abe) Lincoln was deeply depressed. The war, which cost \$2 million a day to wage, was bankrupting the Union." – to the small: "One of Lincoln's strongest traits was loyalty to his generals. Not only did Lincoln retain (Alex) McCook, but he sent his eldest son, Robert Todd Lincoln . . . out to Dayton, Ohio . . . when Alex was married to Kate Phillips."

Team Whalen gets the job done; Chuck, the exhaustive researcher, Barbara, the wordsmith, forging disparate McCook tales into a compelling narrative.

In 2003, a number of former congressmen sent a letter to President Bush warning him that an invasion of Iraq would be a grave error. Chuck Whalen, the maverick, was one of four Republicans to sign it.

Charles and Barbara Whalen return to Dayton for a book signing at 7 p.m. Thursday at Books & Co., 350 E. Stroop Road, Kettering.

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