

Lois Brown Dale

Ohio's Lady of the Levy

Like the mighty Mississippi, the origin of countywide senior-service levies in Ohio – now a rapidly rising \$100 million-plus annual enterprise – can be traced back to a small, unlikely source. For the river, it's little Lake Itasca in the woods of northern Minnesota; for the levy, it's 90-year-old Lois Brown Dale of tiny Milford in rural Clermont County.

Lois was a Clermont County administrative assistant in 1967 when the idea first bubbled in her head that perhaps money for senior services could be raised the same way that it was raised for mental health and mental retardation services – through a countywide property-tax levy. She was told, however, that such a levy would require an act of legislation from the Ohio general Assembly, and local politicians and powers-that-be were not encouraging: “Keep quiet and forget it, you're never going to get it passed,” she remembers being advised by one political official in the early going.

But people like Lois don't need encouragement – only time. In this case, 12 years. “Oh, I've always been a meddler,” Lois recalls, only half-jokingly, of her motivation almost 40 years ago. “I'd been active in the community with United Appeal and was working for the county commissioners, seeing how levies worked for other social services, and it just seemed that I was in the right place at the right time. Sometimes situations present themselves, out of the blue; and there you are, in a position to do something about it. And I've always liked to meddle.”

So, the determined businessman's wife and mother of three kept working away on the idea, first to obtain funding to assist older persons in Clermont County in need of transportation services, and later to help fund centers for senior services that were scattered among the county's churches and VFW facilities in Milford, Bethel, Williamsburg and New Richmond. Still having no luck at the local level, and after "a lot of walking on eggs about politics, Lois got the support of Martin Janis, then-director of the Ohio Commission on Aging (now the Ohio Department of Aging).

She organized busloads of older Ohioans to attend the commission-sponsored 1979 Ohio Governor's Conference on Aging, and, with Janis's help, led them in petitioning Ohio's then-Governor Jim Rhodes to assist in passing a state law to allow countywide senior-service levies. Ever the loyal friend – and ever the astute politician – Rhodes saw the point of his old buddy Janis and his constituents, and appreciated the logic of letting others raise taxes for him at the local level.

"I was getting no help from the legislature," Lois recalls, "then Jim Rhodes put the squeeze on them and the law passed that year, in 1979, just like that.

In 1980, Clermont County put its first senior-service levy on the ballot and saw it defeated by 1,100 votes. The levy failed again in 1981. Undeterred, Lois and her supporters took the levy back to voters the next year. They found the third time, indeed, to be a charm, finally winning approval of a .5 mill levy that brought in \$543,700 to help set up services for those needing transportation to and from medical appointments and to fund hearing-loss programs at the county's four senior centers in 1982. The levy hasn't failed since and today, increased by voters to 1.3 mills, raises roughly \$5.8 million for senior services in Clermont County, annually.

Across the state, other counties gradually followed Lois's lead. Today, 66 of Ohio's 88 counties are collectively raising in excess of \$115 million a year via countywide senior-service levies. (That's more than the rest of the country combined, as only four other states – Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan and North Dakota – are known to have countywide senior-service property-tax levies in place, none of them nearly as lucrative as Ohio's.)

Not a bad harvest from a small seed planted by the enterprising Indianapolis native (nee Lois Karch) whose Depression-era higher education consisted of a year at the *Mrs. Daniels' School for Young Ladies*.

And what valuable sociopolitical skills did she pick up there? "Oh, how to be somebody's wife, I suppose," Lois laughs. "That, and how to hold a teacup and talk at the same time."

She's obviously mastered that declining art, but the school must have emphasized modesty as well. For Lois is quick to downplay her monumental role in making it possible to raise money for so many older Ohioans in need of the valuable services procured through senior levies throughout the state.

"I was of that generation where you did what was expected of you, and more if you could," Lois explains. "Maybe others didn't expect me to do certain things, but I kind of expected it of myself.

"And, like I said, I always liked to meddle."

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Written as a human-interest companion piece to:

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