

## Michael Toohig



### ***A life of travel and adventure***

Michael Toohig was stationed in Europe during World War II with the US Army. When the war ended, he took a side trip to Ireland to see his ancestral homeland and his grandmother. During the trip, he made the local paper as the first “Yank” to come to town.

That fateful trip was the start of a lifetime of traveling for Michael. It also illustrated his deep and lasting dedication to his family, and not least, his ability to make a splash in all his endeavors, from building a successful, close-knit family to a career that would include others kinds of ‘firsts’ as he worked to develop groundbreaking new technologies.

### ***A large Irish Catholic family***

Michael grew up in a large working class family in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He was the oldest son of eight siblings. His parents Timothy Toohig and Catherine “Kitty” Toohig were Irish Catholic immigrants who met in America at an Irish dance. His father was a butcher and his mother a seamstress. The children also worked to help support the family. In the summertime, Michael harvested hay and weeded vegetable gardens at area farms. One winter, he recalls working at an ice house where he was responsible for floating the ice down from the lake to the processing house.

Michael enjoyed playing sports with the other kids in town and swimming in the river below the cliff where he lived. During the school year he studied hard. Only a few people from town went to college at the time, but Michael was one of the few who got a scholarship to go to Boston College when he was 17.

### ***Liberating Europe***

After a year in college, Michael joined the Army and fought in World War II. He remained in Europe long enough to stop the Germans from coming through the Alps at the St. Bernard Pass, liberate concentration camps and celebrate with thousands of people in Augsburg as the American Army tanks rolled in when the war ended. To this day he has two pieces of Lira he took as a souvenir from a bank that he helped to liberate from German occupation.

Michael treasured the trip to Ireland he took after the war because he could see where his parents had grown up. He met his 90-year old paternal grandmother and his maternal grandfather. His grandmother was so excited she hitched up the horse to a jaunting cart and headed off to church with herself and Michael in the back.

Back at home, Michael returned to Boston College and graduated with a degree in Physics. After hitchhiking around the country and finding no jobs, he took advantage of the GI Bill to go on and earn a Master's degree. When he finished, he went to work at Firestone where he helped design a recoilless rifle that was later used by militaries around the world, including the U.S. military. He also ran a test site at Lake Erie. When the company needed someone to travel around the country, they chose Michael, the resident bachelor, to go.

### ***Building a family and a career***

Within a few years, Michael met his future wife Barbara while mingling at a Catholic social for young people in Fort Wayne, Indiana. They dated for three years before they got married. They went on to have five children: Aimee, Michele, Terrance, Timothy, and Delsina. The family lived in Fort Wayne and then later moved to Roanoke, Virginia.

Family has always been at the core of Michael's life. "My dreams have been to have a good job, a professional job, to support myself and the family."

And he succeeded. After working at Firestone, Michael transitioned to a company working in the burgeoning fiber optics industry. There, he had a chance to work with Philo Farnsworth, who created the prototype of the first all-electric television. As a director of research, he oversaw a team that developed night vision goggles, which were also adopted by the military, and night vision telescopes. He became a leader in this technology and the company, and he would go on to be the first president of the Night Vision Goggles Association.

### ***Exploring the world and keeping family close***

He moved to another division of the company eventually, where he worked closely with Nobel Prize winner Charles Kao, who invented and developed fiber optics. By then, he was focused on international sales. He built sales networks in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Philippines, and many other places.

After the kids were grown, Barbara often traveled with him. Sometimes the whole family would travel together. They especially enjoyed trips to Mexico and the beaches on the West Coast, which Michael describes as the most beautiful in the world.

Closer to home, the family also enjoyed spending time at their historical log cabin at Smith Mountain Lake which Michael fixed up. He built a wrap around porch perfect for stargazing. He also loved tending his garden there.

Michael is proud of the family he has raised. He is especially proud to have sent all five children to college. And now that his children have gone on to lead successful lives, he is proud that "the family is still united." He still talks to his four living sisters every Thursday. His big family has only grown as it now includes 11 grandchildren and about 40 nieces and nephews, and Michael is glad that his five children call often or live close by.