EVERETT COLLINS

Today is a special one for J. Everett Collins. The Andover Endowment for the Arts will name the new $4 million performing arts center as a tribute to him.

Collins in his 90th year is more charismatic than ever. The bright white hair worn moderately long is complemented by his moustache and eyeglasses that seem small on his meaty face. Close observation reveals the shiny smoothness and surprising youthfulness of his skin. Although of only average height, his head and shoulders are designed for a person much larger. His voice is deep and rich and the only indication of his great age is a slight catch heard in his breathing.

Collins has tremendous presence and knows how to use it, whether in front of an audience or alone with me for an interview. He is too quick with a smile or a laugh to be intimidating, and the pleasantness of his face is a memorial to a long, fruitful life.

I have always known Everett since he and my father were such good friends. When my father talks about the good old days, he often mentions Collins. Such as: "When we were youngsters, my mother wouldn't let us go to Pomp's Pond unless Everett took us. He was 5 or 6 years older and would watch out for the rest of us."

Everett's memory of the past is vivid; he recalls things that happened generations ago as though they occurred last week.

Collins: "We were poor as heck; lived on Whittier Court on the first house next to the brook. My father took care of horses for T.A. Holt, the grocer. The horses were kept in a barn across the park from where we lived. On Halloween night he'd take one of the wagons and cover it with a sheet and hold the sheet up with a broom. Then he'd slowly ride the wagon across the park towards the house. Scared the devil out of us kids."

Collins: "I remember when we got a bathtub. We were on Avon Street then — 8 Avon Street. It must have been about 1906 or 7. Before that, you had your bath on Saturday nights. We'd pull the washtub out into the middle of the kitchen, and that's how you bathed. Nowadays in school you have showers. Back then when we played games we'd stink afterwards and take our baths in the middle of the kitchen floor in the washtub.

"When we got gaslights you have no idea what that meant; it lit up
the whole kitchen."

Collins: "There were no automobiles when I was a youngster. About 1907 or so, a kid by the name of Whipple used to drive a car around. He was only 12 years old, his father sold Packards; he would drive us back and forth to choir practice. You didn't have to be any certain age to drive. This 12-year-old would drive us all over town in that big car."

Collins: "I played on the old Andover Royals baseball team. I was a catcher and batted left-handed. We used to play at the Playstead Saturday afternoons. There was no daylight savings so we couldn't do much in the evenings. That was about 1915 or 16. Charlie Bowman, the O'Connell boys — Eddie and Walter — my brother George, Ed Lawson, Jim Shattuck — I guess I'm the last one left."

Collins: "I was born on Barnard Street, where Dolan's market is now. I have a picture of my mother and I'm standing next to her. I'm about two and have a dress on with high button shoes."

Rare is the individual who excels in athletics and music. Not long ago, Collins was honored by being the first person inducted into both the Andover High School Sports Hall of Fame and the Fine Arts Hall of Fame.

I explained to him that when I was growing up you were either in sports or music but very rarely both, and asked if it had been the same when he was young.

He laughed and said that he has a picture of the Christ Church choir taken not too long after the turn of the century. Several boys are in sports uniforms. The choirmaster was also the cricket coach and several cricket bats are evident.

Collins: "Back then we had to make our own play. We weren't given shoes or uniforms for sports; we had to supply our own stuff. The team looked like a bunch of orphans. It was a wonderful time. We didn't have any television or automobiles."

I asked him about the events of his life, his favorite times, his lost opportunities, how it all evolved.

Collins: "High School was the best time of my life. Sports, I love sports. I still stay up until after midnight and watch sports on TV. Those were happy days. I fell in love with my wife in high school, Elizabeth Abbot, Chet Abbot's sister. That was 1909. I was class of
'13; she was class of '14. I got great joy out of high school. I was in sports, school shows, I was earning money from singing.

Collins: "After I was out of high school, I worked in the rubber shop for eight bucks a week. The rubber shop was where the fire station is now. Later it was moved down to Railroad Avenue — the building is now part of Andover Commons.

"One day, I was asked to play baseball in Manchester. They needed a catcher and paid me ten dollars for one day. I'd worked 40 hours a week or more in the rubber shop for eight dollars, and in one afternoon they paid me ten dollars for playing baseball! Back then ten dollars would buy a good suit.

"My mother didn't buy me a stitch of clothes after I started singing; I paid for all my own clothes."

There was a significant turning point in Everett’s life. His voice and love of music were paying off, but just before his plans to continue his music studies his career was disrupted.

Collins: "I was living in Boston with John Batchelder. He was going to take me to Europe the next summer to continue my studies in music. One day, he got off the trolley on Commonwealth Avenue and started walking toward Exeter Street where we lived, when he had a heart attack and died. The bottom fell out for me and I went back home to live. But, by God, I kept going.

I started singing in the old high school hall and churches. I didn't let it stop me. All my life I've worked, worked, worked to get where I wanted, ether it was sports or music."

Everett spent fourteen years in the legislature, one term on the Andover School Committee and 21 years as a selectman. Musician, athlete, politician: I don’t know many people with that range of skills.

In addition, add the following to his list of accomplishments: in 1926, he founded the Andover Male Choir; in the early 30s, the Andover Choral Society, for decades he directed the choir at the First Calvary Baptist Church; since 1960, he has been a choral director in the Andover Schools; director of the Haven Singers; the list goes on and on.
Collins: "A lot of people today don't give a damn about the town. We were brought up and taught to love it, just like we loved our country. When I grew up, no one left Andover, families stayed together, there was a tremendous pride in the Town."

His wife died several years ago, and Ev now lives with his son, Roger, daughter-in-law, Bea, and granddaughter Nancy.

Collins: "Last Sunday, I went to Christ Church where I first sang in 1900, when I was six. I sat in a pew and looked at the spot where I used to stand on a box and sing solo. I was a little shaver then and still am."

Collins: "I can still swing a baton and sing. God's been good to me; I can still sing. I don't think I have much longer to go."

Dalton: "You've probably been saying that for 20 years."

Collins (chuckling): "No, really, I've felt myself slipping the last year. The other day, I came out of the market and couldn't find my car. I went inside and asked someone to call my granddaughter and tell her my car was stolen. She showed up a few minutes later and I got into her car. She looked at me and said she could see my automobile from where she sat." He was laughing hard as he spoke. "Also, my legs bother me. Oh, what the heck, most people don't move very well when they're ninety."

Indeed.