

# DEADWOOD WALL OF FAME

2018

## Leo F. Nikont

**Born:** December 3, 1914  
Hemingford, Nebraska

**Died:** February 9, 1981  
Deadwood (Buried at Mountain Lawn Cemetery, Englewood)

Leo was born in Hemingford, Nebraska, to Mary Mulligan and Ferdinand Nikont, a Russian immigrant. As a child, Leo attended school in Hemingford and nearby Alliance. By the time he was 16 years old, the Great Depression had brought drought and difficult economic times to Nebraska. The promise of a better life led Leo and his brother Merle to take a train to Deadwood, where Leo re-enrolled in school and took a job at a local shoe store.

At the age of 21, Leo opened his own retail shoe store on Deadwood's Main Street. Thanks to his customer service and dedication to the community, Leo's Shoe Shop soon became a local institution. Entire generations of families in the northern Black Hills would come to the store for footwear. It wasn't uncommon to hear customers say, "Leo fit me in my first shoes, and I want him to fit my child in theirs."

His family recalls many instances of Leo going above and beyond to help the community - even those newly arrived in town. In one such recollection, a newly-hired employee at the Homestake Gold Mine came to the store on a cold and windy night just a few minutes before closing time to obtain the company-mandated boots he needed to start his first shift. Leo gladly kept the store open, and when he discovered that the man had no money to pay, Leo extended him credit on the spot - simply because the man was eager to start his new job and provide for his young family.

Leo's dedication to service led him to volunteer for the military during World War II, but problems with his hearing made him ineligible to enlist. Instead, he was tasked with repairing flight suits and boots for airmen at the nearby Rapid City Army Air Base. He also volunteered in the community, serving as president of the Deadwood Chamber of Commerce and as an elder at Saint Ambrose Catholic Church. He was also a longtime member of the Deadwood Elks Lodge and the Loyal Order of Moose.

Although arthritis struck Leo when he was just 44 years old, he continued working at his store until his death at the age of 67. His wife, Sara Ruth Kane, and a son, Alvin Leo Nikont, ran the store until 1986, which meant Leo's Shoe Shop was a retail presence in Deadwood for a full half-century.



DEADWOOD  
SOUTH  
DAKOTA

A National Historic  
Landmark