

# John Rice Irwin inducted into East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of December 3, 2018)

It is always a treat to receive a phone call from my long-time friend, John Rice Irwin. His calls always have a purpose and are well thought out and planned ahead of the call. Of course, his most effective way with words and his innate ability to put one at ease by talking about something of mutual interest, always adds value to the conversation.

A recent phone call was a bit unusual for him and I even detected a sense of unease in him even making the call. You see, his calls almost always, actually always before this one, focused on someone else or something else in which he wanted to interest me. This time the call was about himself. So, the unease in his voice and hesitancy in his words.

He wanted to know if I was aware of an event to which he had been invited. I was indeed aware of it, but was not privileged to know much more than the fact the event was held in Knoxville's prestigious Club LeConte, and told him so. He became a bit more comfortable and began describing the purpose of the event was to induct some fifteen writers into the East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame.

I asked if he was one of the fifteen. His response was somewhat muted, but I understood and even sensed a bit of pride in him for receiving the recognition. He attempted to minimize his involvement, but I could tell he was pleased to be included in what he called a group of exceptional writers. John Rice did mention that several of the awards were posthumous ones and quipped that at least he was still alive to receive his award. Typical of the humor I have come to expect from my friend!

So, I asked him to send me some information about his experience saying I would like to write about it in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column. He reads my column and often calls me to add some information on a subject I have written about or to tell me about some related information suitable to be included in another column.

He agreed and sent me the Norris Bulletin's excellent article describing the honor he had received. I also looked online and learned that among the "group of exceptional writers" was Cormac McCarthy, who was given a Lifetime Achievement Award. I have long admired him and even know his younger brother Dennis McCarthy.

I provided Dennis a tour of Y-12's Beta 3 Calutrons some years back when he was doing research for Cormac's upcoming book that included a young woman character who worked in Oak Ridge at Y-12. Dennis needed to learn what this young woman would see as she came to work, so we traced the route she would have to take to get to the building. Just last year during a trip to Los Alamos, New Mexico, Fanny and I had breakfast in Santa Fe with Dennis and his wife.

I learned also that John Rice was recognized for *Outstanding Contribution to East Tennessee Culture and Literacy* in his induction to the hall of fame.

Here is the text of the East Tennessee Writer's Hall of Fame online recognition for John Rice:

"Born in 1930 of pioneer ancestors who settled in Union County in the 1700's, John Rice Irwin spent much of his childhood learning to love all aspects of Appalachian life and its colorful people. In 1935, the family moved a few miles southwest of Clinton when their Big Valley home place was covered with the waters created by the building of Norris Dam. Their new home was

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also taken by the U.S. government—this time for the building of the Oak Ridge installations in 1942.

“The family settled on a farm on Mountain Road near Norris, where Irwin learned to farm, hunt, trap, and appreciate rural Appalachia. After high school, he enrolled in Tennessee Tech University, but joined the U.S. Army infantry shortly thereafter. Following his military service, he graduated from Lincoln Memorial University and earned a master's from the University of Tennessee. Irwin taught school for several years and was then elected three times as School Superintendent of Anderson County -- the youngest in the state at the time. In his spare time, he traveled the remote areas of Southern Appalachia, collecting over a quarter of a million items, which he used in founding and developing the internationally renowned Museum of Appalachia in Norris, Tennessee.

“He has authored several noteworthy books on Appalachian history and culture, including *Alex Stewart: Portrait of a Pioneer*, *Guns and Gunmaking Tools of Southern Appalachia*, *A People and Their Quilts*, *Musical Instruments of the Southern Appalachian Mountains*, *Baskets and Basket Makers in Southern Appalachia*, *A People and Their Music: The Story Behind the Story of Country Music*, and *The Unlikely Story of the Museum of Appalachia and How It Came to Be*.

“Considered to be one of the leading authorities on the history, culture, and music of the Southern Appalachian region, Irwin has lectured on the subject throughout the Eastern US and has garnered many awards and honors. A recipient of the prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, Irwin has also been honored by the East Tennessee Historical Society as one of nine prominent area residents whose accomplishments have distinguished them far beyond East Tennessee.

Excellent! I am proud to note this most worthy and remarkable honor being bestowed on John Rice Irwin. I concur with the points made and add my personal appreciation for his many accomplishments over the years.

As the Norris Bulletin so correctly observes, “To grasp the significance and import of this induction, one only need look at the list of Irwin’s fellow honorees...” and after listing the local writers honored along with John Rice, the article concludes by noting, “...the inclusion of such a distinguished and nationally acclaimed writer as Cormac McCarthy is a worthy testament to the prestige and worth of Irwin’s accomplishments.”

It gives me great pride to see John Rice included in this induction into the East Tennessee Writer’s Hall of Fame. I have known John Rice since he first interested me in history by requesting a photograph of the Nancy Ward Statue and just over the past two days, I have been invited to speak to the Farragut Intermediate School about the history of Nancy Ward and Dragging Canoe.

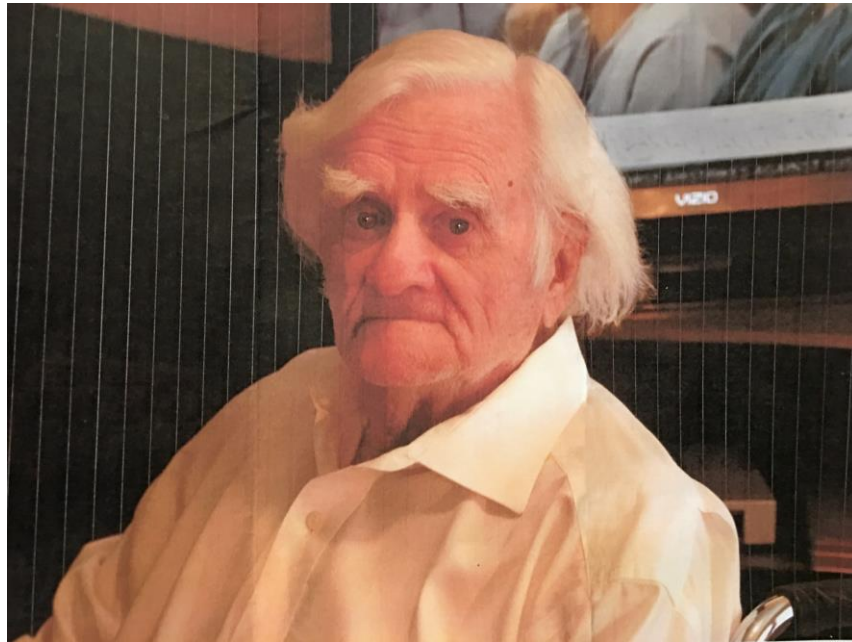
Without John Rice’s encouragement, I would not have the opportunities to enjoy such interactions. Without his friendship over the years, I would have missed knowing a wonderful and pleasant man much deserving of all the recognition he has received over the years.

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Of the many books I own, I count as my most cherished, two autographed by Cormac McCarthy (who does not normally do autographs, but at Dennis' request he signed these for our sons, Mike and Zane, who are both huge fans) and our autographed John Rice Irwin collection!

So, it is with great pleasure that I can bring you readers this information of substantial recognition provided to one of the giants of our region. Thanks, John Rice, for making the phone call and letting me tell folks about the great honor you have recently received.



John Rice Irwin, my friend, and a true giant of a man who is most deserving of the recognition provided him