

Tribute to Bill T. Henry, Jr.

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of June 28, 2021)

Mick Wiest provides a tribute to a good friend, Bill Henry. Bill was a great person, an excellent whittler, and a person who was proud of the history of Oak Ridge. Ed Westcott was a hero to Bill, and he often talked to me about the desire he held to see a life-size bronze statue of Ed.

He told me he would certainly help fund such a statue. I hope one day to be able to fulfill Bill's desire and see a life-size bronze statue of not only Ed Westcott, but General Groves, General Nichols, and Alvin Weinberg. If you share my interest in seeing these statues become reality, contact me. Jim Kolb is another person who is working to see such statues placed in Oak Ridge. Won't you join us?

Enjoy what Mick has prepared to honor Bill:

Truly a life well lived! That was one of my first thoughts when I learned that Bill Henry had passed away. I also thought of how much I would miss his warm and friendly smile. It was obvious that many others felt that way too, based on the large number of people that attended Bill's memorial service May 16, 2021, at the Museum of Appalachia's Reception Hall. Considering the past year of pandemic concerns it spoke highly of Bill that so many would attend.

Several people stood and gave heartfelt tributes to Bill Henry. Bill Landry, host, and producer of the Heartland Series episodes could not attend, but his letter was read, and it could not have been more special. Bill Henry was widely known for his wood carving, which he preferred to call whittling. It was common to see Bill demonstrating his skill with wood at the annual Fall Homecoming at the Museum of Appalachia.

Born William Taylor Henry, Jr, he passed away April 24, 2021, two weeks before his 92nd birthday. I came to know Bill because of his friendship with my father-in-law James H. Campbell (Jim). They were classmates together at Oak Ridge High School, where Bill was called "T" (from middle name Taylor). It seems nicknames were common in those days, to the point that real names were often unknown. Bill would often ask me how Jimmy (my father-in-law, now passed on) was doing. Bill graduated in '48, and Jim in '49.

Bill's son, also Bill Henry (William T. Henry III) was kind enough to let me interview him about his father recently. He said that he knew immediately if someone was a long-time friend of his father if they called him "T". His dad grew up in the coal camps of Kentucky and his family moved often. Arriving in Oak Ridge in early 1944, his father loved his new home from the start, and it was said he never wanted to live anywhere else.

Bill Henry proudly served in the U.S. Army 4th Infantry Division from 1950 – 1952 during the Korean War, with much of that service stationed in Germany, and then returned to Oak Ridge. In 1955, Bill married Billie Sue Looper, a teacher at Willow Brook Elementary school. Their first date was at the Snow White Restaurant, a well-known landmark on the Oak Ridge Turnpike for many years.

For over 30 years, Bill worked at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, primarily as a hot cell operator. After retirement Bill had more time for his wood working, a hobby he pursued for over 60 years. Numerous awards were earned by Bill, including the 2015 Tennessee Governor's Arts Award for Folklife, and he demonstrated his craft at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife.

I came to know Bill on a personal level in 1999 as several of us, including Bobbie Martin formed the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association. Bill was an early member who often expressed ideas on how to preserve our unique history. I remember clearly, he was one of the first to promote having a statue made to honor famed photographer Ed Westcott, years before Mr. Westcott passed away. This worthy

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project is one we hope gains traction soon. And when the Oak Ridge History Museum was being developed in 2018 Bill encouraged us from the beginning.

It has been said by several people that Bill "never met a stranger". That sums up his genuine affection for people and his generous spirit. He was one of our pioneers of Oak Ridge. Bill Henry was a great man, and I am proud to have known him.

Thanks Mick, it is good to remember Bill Henry and you have provided a good summary of a truly remarkable man who treasured his hometown of Oak Ridge and our history. I join you in hoping we can fulfill Bill's long-held dream of a statue of his good friend, Ed Westcott.

Let me recommend to you a newspaper article published in the Knoxville News Sentinel and written by Jay Searcy (author of "The Last Reunion" and a good friend who has passed away). In this article, Jay featured more details about Bill Henry's life: <http://archive.knoxnews.com/entertainment/life/oak-ridgers-ornl-work-led-to-whittling-skills-ep-359694262-356457001.html>

Here is a segment from the above article by Jay: "There isn't a trace of sadness in his voice today when he talks about his impoverished past no embarrassment, no sense of regret or pity or blame.

"I don't mind talking about it," he said. "My parents didn't have a lot of education and we didn't have much, but they kept us together. They did what they could, and we got by. People have no idea how tough it was back in those Depression days. Those mining camps were nothing less than forced slavery. There are still thousands of very poor people today who are totally used up and left to wheeze their very lives away. This is their story, too. I consider myself lucky."

"Lucky to have moved to Oak Ridge, lucky to have worked with understanding bosses at ORNL, and lucky to have become a whittler of some importance."

Finally, here is a link to recognition Bill was given in 2015 by the Tennessee Arts Commission: <https://tnartscommission.org/permanentcollection/bill-henry/>

There is a video shown there where Bill talks about how he got into whittling. Also, some excellent example photos of his whittled miniature tools.

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Example of miniature whittled tools from Tennessee Arts Commission recognition