

John Rice Irwin

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column during the week of January 17, 2022)

John Rice Irwin was born on December 11, 1930. He passed away January 16, 2022. He was the founder of the Museum of Appalachia and my good friend. He encouraged me to pursue the history of our area by suggesting things I should write in Historically Speaking and he was always willing to help me by introducing me to people he thought should be recognized.

His influence on the recognition of the rich cultural early history of East Tennessee is enormous.

Examples are the amazing Smithsonian affiliate Museum of Appalachia, the large number of books he wrote including his most popular - *Alex Stewart: Portrait of a Pioneer*, the 40-year run of the annual Tennessee Fall Homecoming - a music and heritage festival held in October, his relationship with Lamar Alexander and Alex Halley, and finally, his wonderful family who are carrying on his work - especially Elaine Irwin Meyer!

When I asked John Rice Irwin to help me introduce a documentary film, he told me the story of his family and Oak Ridge. While he was still a young child, his family was forced, in 1933, to move from their farm because of the construction of Norris Dam. They moved to a farm near Robertsville.

Then, in 1942, the Manhattan Project forced them to move yet again. He told me that his dad told him to get in the wagon with the first load of furnishings and to stay with them at the new location in the Bethel community. John Rice said he never got to go back again to the home place he knew for most of the first years of his life.

John Rice is the person who first caused me to have an interest in history. When I first met him, he was the Anderson County Superintendent of Schools (I just learned from his obituary that he was the youngest person to hold the position of school superintendent in Tennessee at age 31).

It was in the mid 1970's when he approached me about taking a photograph for him to replace what was in the Tennessee Blue Book that he felt was not as good as it should be. The photo was of a statue of Nancy Ward, Beloved Woman of the Cherokee, who lived from 1738 to 1822. The statue was standing on a white woman's grave in the Arnwine Cemetery in Grainger County.

I located the cemetery and took the photograph for him. He then asked me to write up the history of the statue so he could place the photograph on display at the Museum of Appalachia. That photograph is still on display in the Hall of Fame now. So, I had to learn about Nancy Ward. That was the first historical research effort for me, and the excitement of learning new facts hooked me hard. I have loved it ever since.

From this first exposure to our history, I next learned about the earliest road from east to west in what is now Tennessee, the Emery Road. My interest in history was growing and my job at the Y-12 National Security Complex began to tempt me toward learning about the history of the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge history.

All along, I remained in touch with John Rice as he continued to encourage me in my pursuit of history. I often visited the Museum of Appalachia which he created in 1969 and enjoyed seeing his vision develop over the years, especially during the 1980's when the museum gained substantial national recognition.

In his later years after retirement (if you could call it that), his invitation to lunch at the museum was a signal that he had an assignment for me. I grew to look forward to his call, knowing I was in for a treat of a good country meal but mostly that he had an idea for a story. He never failed to amaze me with a story angle that I would never have known but for his vast knowledge. It was always fun to hear him explain to me which county a person was from just from their last name! Such was his knowledge of our history.

Our relationship grew even more interactive when I became the Y-12 Historian and started writing Historically Speaking for The Oak Ridger and later became the Historian for the City of Oak Ridge. He

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often would call me to suggest topics he thought would be good for me to include and would give me just enough information to get me interested. He would give me contacts, but he refused to tell me the full story. He wanted me to learn that for myself. I am thankful to him for his insight into what I needed to do.

Remember he was a school superintendent and knew the value of teaching. I was an eager student and he sensed that, I am sure. Our interactions were always filled with humor, yet he was most serious in his efforts to coach me about the importance of capturing our history.

He delighted in encouraging me to look for the little-known details of people who were often overlooked by standard media and methods. His care for the people of Appalachia was sincere and longstanding. John Rice Irwin was truly one-of-a-kind.

Here are some examples of stories about which John Rice gave me a lead:

Harrison Mayes, the coal miner who after a mine accident made a commitment to lift the name of God that he kept for the rest of his life. <https://smithdray.tripod.com/hmayes-index-7-1.html>
Several of those concrete crosses Mayes placed on roadsides are located at the Museum of Appalachia.

The Jackson Magnolias which he showed me on the grounds of the Museum of Appalachia which were grown from cuttings from the magnolia tree President Andrew Jackson took with him as a seedling and planted at the White House in Washington, DC.

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2010/2-16-10%20The%20Andrew%20Jackson%20Magnolia%20tree%20story.pdf>

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2010/3-2-10%20The%20Andrew%20Jackson%20Magnolia%20tree%20story%20part%202%20.pdf>

Alvin C. York's captured German machine gun

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2010/2-2-10%20Alvin%20York%20and%20his%20captured%20German%20Machine%20Gun.pdf>

Dot Byrd and the "Littlest Library"

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2020/1-6-20%20Dot%20Byrd.pdf>

<http://smithdray1.net/historicallyspeaking/2020/1-13-20%20Dot%20Byrd%202.pdf>

From the John Rice Irwin obituary: "Irwin dedicated his life to preserving the rich heritage of the people of Southern Appalachia, and nothing would please him more than for that preservation to continue for generations to come.

"Donations made in memory of John Rice Irwin may be made to the Museum of Appalachia, P.O. Box 1189, Norris, TN 37828.

"A graveside service will be held at Norris Memorial Gardens at 3:30 p.m. on Thursday, January 20. The procession will leave from Holley Gamble Funeral Home in Clinton at 3:00 p.m. A celebration of the life of John Rice Irwin will be held at the Museum of Appalachia on Sunday, April 24, 2022, at 2:00 p.m.

I am proud to have been a member of the Museum of Appalachia for a number of years and encourage you to do the same. <https://www.museumofappalachia.org/memberships/>

His handwritten letters sent to me are treasures I hold dear.

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It is not often in life that one comes in personal contact with greatness in a person, and even rarer when that great person becomes one's friend. I will surely miss John Rice Irwin, one of the greats!



Senator Howard Baker, Jr., Andrew York, and John Rice Irwin with Alvin C. York's captured Machine Gun

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John Rice Irwin and his Jackson Magnolia tree, grown from a cutting from the magnolia tree President Andrew Jackson took from the Hermitage to the White House. The tree is now growing on the grounds of the Museum of Appalachia.