

# Recollections From a Sister – part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of February 10, 2025)

Lou Ann (Harris) Cristy asked to publish memories of her brother, Chris. I am pleased to do so. Chris was included in an earlier Historically Speaking column by Jack Bailey. Please learn about Chris' life from his sister's perspective.

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## **Mathew Christian Harris, Jr. (Chris)**

Chris died in medical care in Murfreesboro, Tennessee on January 26, 2024, with his wife beside him.

Chris was born July 13, 1943, in the Charles N. Bacon Hospital in Loudon County, TN. His Mother, Marguerite Eloise Carter Harris took him home to Lenior City and presented Chris to his sister, Lou Ann, who was 25 months old. She said to both, "You belong to each other!" That was the way it was for the rest of his life. By the time Chris was a year old our father and mother were divorced, and we were raised by a committee of Eloise and her parents. They lived in Marshall and Jackson Counties, Alabama, in Dutch Valley, Clinton, Rt. 1, and Oak Ridge TN. Chris entered Jefferson Junior High in 1955 and was graduated from Oak Ridge High School in 1962.

Once in Oak Ridge, Chris became employed at age 12 years with a Jackson Square route for The Knoxville Journal and The Oak Ridger newspapers, simultaneously. He was employed by the dental molder at Jackson Square and the barber at Elm Grove keeping their floors swept at the end of each day. He bought Mother Eloise's television. He achieved Eagle in Boy Scouts. At age 12 he was confirmed as a youth in the Lake City Methodist Church. Commonly the family would hear his voice at mealtime: "Who's going to ask the blessing?"

Chris earned a scholarship through the records set for the mile-relay (3:27.6) and the two-mile relay (8:09.7) in the Tennessee State High School Track and Field Championships in 1962. He ran track in his socks at the beginning. Coach Nick Orlando saw Chris running on Blankenship Field after school and asked Chris to run with the track team. The records show that 1962 was the last year that Oak Ridge High School won the Tennessee State Track and Field Championships. He attended Memphis State University, Tennessee Wesleyan College and various other colleges taking courses in which he was interested. His expressed a goal was "to be the President of the United States."

He registered for the U.S. Army in Clinton, TN., January 17, 1966, serving a total of 4.5 years on active duty. Then he served in the Army Reserves in Kentucky and Nashville, TN. He achieved the rank of Lt. Colonel at retirement. He was an active member of the American Legion Forty and Eight, a veterans organization dedicated to serving its community of Gallatin, TN. He was dedicated to the scholarships for nurses' education that the chapter sponsored.

Chris registered for the U. S. Army believing not in the reason for the war in Vietnam, but "not being able to allow another person to serve in MY stead for the United States." Like many others returning from service in Vietnam his health was compromised. In the Reserves he was especially effective serving as friend "official," per assignment of his superiors, to military men whose wives and girlfriends cut their relationships with them while the men served in the Vietnam War. Special thanks for Dr. Frank Genella of Oak Ridge, now deceased, for his close friendship.

He worked for the Tennessee Valley Authority in Alabama, living in Langston, and later transferring to Gallatin, Tennessee until retirement. He researched the life of "pure-bred" Brittany spaniels and had them trained as show-dogs.

November 18, 1989, he and Charlotte Ann Morris of Nashville married. The two welcomed their "pride and joy" in February 1991 with the arrival of Hilary Ann Harris.

Among Chris' interests was his exploration of the life of the buffalo/bison. He purchased a large farm on the outskirts of Nashville and for decades attended annual Buffalo Conventions taking his family by car to

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see the sites enroute. At one time he owned eight buffaloes which he nurtured on a smaller farm until the discovery that the hay he served them was not nutritious enough for them to survive. The rest of his life he read buffalo journals.

His last decades he pursued assets in real estate. He had an eye for purchasing property that was cheap now but had potential for the future. The farm 20 miles from Nashville and a few miles south of I-40 alongside I-840 was a good example. Not long after buying that property it was announced that there was to be a NASCAR racetrack to be built just off I-840 very near Chris' property. Chris then got the idea of a buffalo park that visitors to the track would be drawn to. But the racetrack was never built so the buffalo park did not happen. But this location near Nashville, 20 miles, and the two interstates was the ideal place for a cell phone tower. The value to the cell phone companies was great and Chris made a great profit selling a portion of the farm to them.

After retiring from TVA, he kept working as manager of night shifts at service stations, truck stops, convenience stores and banks. He was an avid collector of duck stamps and buffalo memorabilia. He grew and canned delicious tomatoes. An avid hunter, he had deerskins made into trophy mountings and custom deerskin coats and gloves for Mother and Lou Ann.

Deceased before Chris were his playmate uncle Joseph Sidney Carter, Jr. (died at age 15), Mother Marguerite Eloise Carter Harris; grandparents, Annie Lou Evans Carter and Joseph Sidney Carter, Sr.; aunts Ada Evans Carter, Wilma Maude Carter Holland, and Evelyn Hope Carter Blackerby (Awyer P. (Blackie)); cousins. Julia Lee Holland Gasque (Who was Chris' Best Woman at his and Charlotte's Wedding), (Mac Roy Gasque III).

Survivors are wife, Charlotte Ann Morris Harris; daughter, Hilary Ann Harris; son-in law Luis Ortega; grandson, Joaquin Ramon Ortega; granddaughter, Iris Mar Ortega, all of Nashville area. Sister, Lou Ann Harris Cristy and brothers-in-law, Stephen Samuel Cristy, Oak Ridge, TN, and Randy Morris of Antioch, TN; cousins, Carrie Lou Blackerby Keith (Arthur) of Canada, Mac Roy Gasque IV (Rebecca) of Kingston, TN and Carter Doran Gasque, Langston, Alabama; niece, Jennifer Lee Cristy Strawn (Ben); nephews, Matthew Joseph Cristy (Mary Abreu) and Samuel George Cristy (Celerina Miguel, deceased); grandnephews and nieces: Joshua Brown, Garrett Brown, Alexander Miguel Cristy, Bogart Strawn, Liesl Cristy, and Amelia Miguel Cristy

EXTRA special caregiver and family member: Lisa Marie Orman Bean made it possible for Chris to live and know his grandson, Joaquin, who was 14 months old when his grandfather died!

A private burial with full U.S. Army honors was held at the Harris Family Cemetery, Antioch, TN following services February 7, 2024, at Woodbine Funeral Services, Hickory Chapel, Nashville, TN.

## Recollections from a sister: The Oak Ridge Years

In 1955 we were able to move into Oak Ridge to live with our mother. Chris and I lived at 118 Tennessee Avenue. He really had a big world there. He met many boys and girls and could walk the few blocks to school at Jefferson Junior High.

We were "rural" moved to the city. Mother had commuted to us for twelve years. Being employed by the Atomic Energy Commission and having a steady career she decided that we could live with her, finally. She found the E-2 apartment and went to Management Services Incorporated (MSI) to rent it. It was in walking distance for her work, most convenient from Jackson Square, and directly on the city bus route for Lou Ann to go to the high school. The apartment was "available," but the clerk told her it was not available to her.

She returns to her office and was discussing her disappointment at not being able to rent it. Her boss then, John Croxall, called MSI and told the clerk, "Do what you can to make that apartment available to EI." (His nickname for Mother). Soon Mother got a call telling her that it was available. We later learned

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that the barrier had been that mother was a single parent (the term politically-correct in 2024). With two children there was concern that she might not be able to continue to pay the rent being a factor. When asked how the clerk had gotten it available for Mother they explained: There had been a murder in that apartment. When the couple who were touring it saw the blood in the closet floor where it had not been cleaned, the couple declined the offer.

So, Mother who still lived in the dorm was able to access renting it. MSI at the dorm provided Mother with a disinfectant and a lamp from their lobby to use to prepare for our arrival three days before school started when Chris and I became new resident of Oak Ridge, TN.

Mother had not intended to share that information about the murder with us. However, a neighbor, Mrs. Taylor who was employed at the post office then at Jackson Square, told Chris, age twelve, the story. Chris told Mother who was aware that Chris often had bad dreams he shared with us, responded. "Now, had we moved into a house where someone died of a contagious disease, it might be somewhat harmful for a while. But when someone is killed our house is not contaminated." She explained that she disinfected the house.

Chris and I have hearkened back to the attitudes of our times often. We both expressed to each other the strength we gained for living through them, especially due to the foresight and the calm way Mother helped us as a trio face difficult times.

We moved to be with Mother according to her to find a path through which we would attain college degrees and have the opportunities she could best provide for us.

We had just the furniture we needed, a bed each, a chair and sofa in the living room and a dining table. Chris's and my beds and two matching chests of drawers were former original Oak Ridge dorm furniture our family had purchased for the grandparents' home. It was comforting to have those familiar items which lessened stressful situations. It turned out that those two beds and chests of drawers have been passed through my sons, grandchildren, and recently passed to Chris's grandsons Joaquin and his soon to arrive little brother.

At twelve Chris began working and saw himself "the man of the family and needing to earn money." Mother encouraged him to use his money for what he needed. After the television he purchased "for the family," he ordered a taxidermy kit. He nursed a stray cat who was always getting in fights at night. He kept a pet squirrel which gnawed the bottom of the closet door trying to get out. He was a young "businessman" ordering a classy bow and arrow set he took on a hike with the Boy Scouts.

By that time, he had become adventuresome and carried other scouts' food items which were too heavy for them. Then he sold them back to them for a profit when they arrived at the trail end and campsite. Once he left his bow and arrow set on the trail and when he returned it had been taken. It was a hard lesson from which I could not protect him.

Since he was interested in camping, we cleared the land making a lawn of property behind our apartment reaching a creek that ran parallel to East Tennessee Avenue and diagonally from Jackson Square gas station behind present-day Big Ed's Pizza. He purchased a tent, and we camped on summer weekend nights. The police told Mother that some young boys roaming the empty dormitories nearby at night had caused damage. So, to be sure Chris was protected from those issues Mother and I took turns staying up to "chaperone" the campouts.

I might have joined him sleeping out more, but we discovered that grass fleas were attracted to me when I took my turn at the tent. We had to be careful that I removed my shoes and socks before entering the house because the fleas would collect in our area rug where I commonly sat in our living room after my chaperone shift. The grass fleas would continue to eat my feet and legs for days following. The fleas did not bother Mother nor Chris.

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One camping night Chris decided he wanted a cold coke. He left home about 10:00 p.m. and went to the Studio Apartments, now located across from what is currently the Soup Kitchen, to obtain his coke from the vending machine in the lobby. The machine did not return his money nor did it release the coke bottle. Trying to get the bottle to release, he stretched his hand and arm up the channel. He was caught in the machine. A patrolman came and rescued him. The patrolman brought him home and talked to mother seemingly to decide if Chris was trying to rob the vending machine. It was determined that Chris told the truth, "That machine took my money, so it owed me a coke."

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Thanks, Lou Ann Cristy, for your fond memories of your brother, Chris.



This photo was taken after I groomed his beard just prior to the last in-person visit we shared, December 24, 2023. (Courtesy of Lou Ann Cristy)

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This photo was published in the Oak Ridger, March 23, 2012, in “Historically Speaking.” It was shared in his funeral video. The contributor of that story was Jack Bailey, teammate. Lou Ann was away from home attending Tennessee Wesleyan College as a junior when he earned this publicity and awards. He was a specimen of excellent health in 1962, a senior at Oak Ridge High School soon to graduate. (Courtesy of Jack Bailey and Oak Ridge High School)