



Wilbur E. Smith

June 15, 1926 - August 18, 2018

Picture the rolling Flint Hills of eastern Kansas, located between the Missouri River valley and the wide prairies to the west. Too rocky to plow, they're still an oasis of undisturbed land with gravel roads and trees and cattle ranging freely.

Ray Smith was an oilfield worker in the 1920's, living with his wife Mildred and their kids outside the little town of Reece. Even before the Depression they had to be industrious to get by: growing a big garden, gathering wild berries and nuts, fishing the local rivers and ponds. Their kids enjoyed the freedom of country living, riding horses to school in the early days.

On the evening that Wilbur was born Ray was sitting outside on the porch, smoking his pipe and watching the sky for funnel clouds. (He couldn't possibly have imagined a television station in Wichita with weather radar.) Ray was a man of few words, but when he saw a bad-looking cloud heading their way he went into the bedroom where his wife was in labor. Mildred told him in no uncertain terms that she wouldn't be joining him in the root cellar, but they were spared when the twister leaped over the house before continuing its path of destruction. It seemed that the Lord had plans for young Wilbur.

Though he loved the outdoors and learned many practical skills, Wilbur was also a "bookish" boy who was writing poetry at the age of twelve. Because he was such a promising student he went to live with his cousins in Virgil, Kansas (pop. 600 in 1930) to finish high school. The summer before his senior year he walked the forty miles to Virgil, and along the way he was noticed by a pretty girl named Charlotte Heidrick. By graduation time they were devoted sweethearts.

Wilbur joined the Marines near the end of World War II, shipping out to Saipan where he helped to secure the island's caves and waited for an invasion of Japan which never occurred. He bought Charlotte a wedding ring in San Diego on the way home, and their 72-year marriage began. The next year Marsha was born, followed by Woody and Brian and a little later Melinda.

Thanks to the G.I. Bill Wilbur attended Emporia State Teacher's College and began teaching high school English in Newton. He enjoyed the work but had to supplement his skimpy salary by counting railroad cars in the evenings. Somehow he heard about an

opportunity in California and was hired over the phone to teach at San Bernardino High School. Along with another family they made the five-day drive, their possessions in an old Army truck loaded to the gills and listing to one side.

Wilbur taught English for decades, grading papers in the evenings and working a variety of summer jobs (at a Sears store, in a warehouse, for the Santa Fe railroad, even driving an ice cream truck). They were able to buy a house on Elm Avenue and were active in the First Christian Church, where Wilbur served as an Elder and Charlotte was the Secretary for twenty-seven years.

By all accounts Wilbur was an uncompromising teacher with high expectations, not afraid to stand up to coaches who demanded special treatment for athletes. He clearly had a big impact on many students, dozens of whom reached out later to thank him. "I loved every minute of it," he said, "because I had thousands of young people share their stories with me. To teach is to touch a life." He also had a brief glimpse of celebrities, when his honors class was seated in the front row at an assembly featuring a brand-new British rock band. As soon as Mick Jagger began to sing Wilbur retreated to the teacher's lounge.

Though well-settled in California, the family honored their Kansas roots by going "back home" in the summers dozens of times, often in their Studebaker Lark. Despite kids in the back seat asking "Are we there yet?" Wilbur loved those road trips and chose different routes each time. When they broke down one year outside Tuba City, Arizona, a group of Navajos helped them get back to town and found them a place to camp while repairs were being made.

Years turned into decades as Wilbur continued to teach and the children grew into adults. As they moved away and some had their own kids, Charlotte began welcoming them back to the dinners for which she's well-known. Wilbur finally retired to write family histories, do more gardening and make landscape paintings. In 1992, just as southern California was erupting in riots, Wilbur and Charlotte moved into a peaceful seniors golf community north of the I-10 in Cherry Valley.

After fixing up their new home Wilbur went back to teaching part-time at Mt. San Jacinto College in Hemet. He said he liked that even better than high school because "half the students drop out after two weeks and the other half really want to be there." He taught at the college for nine years while enjoying golf games and continuing his creative work. He was an accomplished oil painter who completed almost two hundred canvasses, mostly landscapes of scenes from Kansas to California. His final book *The Last Shepherd*, an account of a disciple of Jesus who turned up at Starbucks, has sold quite a few copies on Amazon.com.

Throughout these adventures Wilbur was above all a devoted husband, father and grandfather. He and Charlotte were sweethearts for seventy-three years, and they loved having family gatherings in their home. He continued to brave the freeway traffic to stay

active in their church but reluctantly stopped making longer road trips. It was clear to everyone who knew him that Wilbur saw his life and family as great blessings. "Life is an adventure," he said. "Live every moment of it with enthusiasm."

Comments



“ Charlotte and family:
We send our thoughts and prayers your way. We have fond memories of you and Wilbur and our times with you at the church. God bless you and your family today and every day.
Frank and Pam Hamilton

Frank Hamilton - August 25, 2018 at 11:29 AM



“ Sorry For Your Loss
Jesus Loves Me
I Am Special



Thomas Widgeon - August 22, 2018 at 07:45 AM