



Robert Emerson Hennessee

August 13, 1929 - November 18, 2021

Robert Emerson Hennessee, 92, of Maitland, FL passed away November 18th at AdventHealth Hospital Orlando following a sudden illness. Born in Burnsville, North Carolina on August 13, 1929, he was the youngest of three children born to Ruby Anderson and William Wren Hennessee.

A natural athlete with a particular talent for baseball, in his senior year of high school he was scouted by the Brooklyn Dodgers, who offered him a place on their Triple-A team. He turned it down. Had he accepted, he would have filled the opening vacated by Jackie Robinson, who was moving up to the major league.

He instead attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he reported and wrote editorials for the college newspaper, the Daily Tar Heel. His senior year he ran for the North Carolina State Senate on the Democratic ticket. He was well on his way to beating his Republican opponent when a reporter discovered that at 21, he was too young to legally run, a fact which had not previously occurred to him or to his opponent. Despite this, with his name already printed on the ballot, the election was close, and he captured 45% of the vote. He graduated with a B.A. in journalism in 1951.

In 1952, he moved to New York City and was hired as an assistant reporter at the New York Post. He was particularly proud of contributing to a series of

columns opposing Walter Winchell, the syndicated gossip columnist who had aligned himself with Joe McCarthy.

He served in the U.S. Army in Germany from 1954 to 1956, first as a cryptographer, and then as an editor of the Seventh U.S. Army Sentinel newspaper.

In 1956, he joined the International News Service in Chicago as a reporter. In 1957 he was sent to Little Rock, Arkansas to cover the story of the Little Rock Nine, the nine black students who integrated the city's all-white Central High School after the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision. There he sought out Daisy Bates, the state NAACP President and architect of the integration plan, and was the only reporter she invited into her living room as she counselled and prepared the students in the days before they entered the school. The stories he filed were lauded by newspaper editors – “That’s the best I’ve seen out of Little Rock.” “That’s about the best yarn I’ve seen come off your wire since I’ve been wire editor here.” “We were especially pleased with Robert Hennessee’s story from Little Rock.” “We could use more of his copy.”

An editorial he wrote for an Illinois newspaper in 1960 endorsing John F. Kennedy for president was widely disseminated by the Kennedy campaign throughout Illinois, and after the election, Kennedy’s advisor Ted Sorenson joked to him that the editorial had won Kennedy the state of Illinois, and therefore the presidency. After the inauguration, Kennedy posed with him for a photo as a thank-you.

After brief stints at the Washington Star and Tufty News Service, in 1961 he became publisher of Globe Newspapers, a string of 12 weekly suburban newspapers in northern Virginia and Maryland. In the early 1970’s he founded Daisy Tells, an advertising business, and launched The Billboard newspaper

in Montgomery County, Maryland. After relocating to central Florida in 1979, he founded a goods-exchange business called The Barter Club. He eventually returned to publishing, creating two business-oriented newspapers, Business to Business, and New Business Today. In 2013, he invented an alternative currency system for businesses.

He met and connected with many prominent people during his long life, and loved to tell the stories. As a child in 1937 he crept downstairs late one night, and was introduced to the novelist Thomas Wolfe, who was sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, poring over a rare copy of the 1790 North Carolina Census kept in the house. As a young reporter, he once called the White House close to midnight because he needed a quote from Harry Truman for the morning papers. He was put right through and woke up Truman, who gave him his quote. On leave from the army, he recognized William Faulkner at an outdoor café in Rome and introduced himself. They discussed the meaning behind Faulkner's latest novel, A Fable, which he had just read. One evening in 1960, he arrived home with Oliver Tambo, the exiled South African anti-apartheid activist and future African National Congress president, who needed a place to stay.

He was attracted to intellectuals and they to him. Close friends included the scholar and civil rights activist Al Lowenstein, and New Deal architect Benjamin Cohen, with whom he frequently played tennis, even on icy winter days.

He followed politics closely, and was a passionate sports fan, with a particular soft spot for UNC's basketball team. He had a powerful and creative intellect, an unusually sharp memory and breadth of knowledge, and above all loved to exchange ideas. He was a marvellous storyteller. He will be particularly remembered for his ability to always put things in perspective, his wise

counsel, deep kindness, and great love for his family.

He was married three times: in 1957, to Judith Adler Hennessee, who survives him; in 1968, to Linda Opper Hennessee, who is deceased; and in 1989, to Alberta Branche Hennessee, who predeceased him.

He leaves behind four children: Nancy Hennessee, Joshua Hennessee (Jennifer), Jason Hennessee (Cayce), and Scott Hennessee; as well as six grandchildren -- Thomas, Charles (Charlie) and James (Jem) Costello, and Milinda, Conley and Carson Hennessee.

A memorial service will be held at a future date.

Arrangements under the direction of DeGusipe Funeral Home, Maitland, FL

Please sign guestbook on www.orlandosentinel.com/obituaries.

Tribute Wall

JB

“ My father, Garrett Dixon (Dick) Bailey, would have been a contemporary of Mr. Hennessee and knew his father Wren in Burnsville. I had always heard that Thomas Wolfe sat on the floor in the Hennessee house in 1937 and poured over books like a child, so I enjoyed having this anecdote confirmed and would be interested in any more details. Other than the time Wren brought my dad a silver-plated chafing dish as a present for help with some sale, the only other Hennessee story I know is about one of Wren's grandsons headed to Harvard being in the Man Store in Asheville telling his grandfather he didn't want a tuxedo only to be told he was going to have one. I've never been in the old house, but it still stands.

J. Todd Bailey, Burnsville, NC jtb@burnsvillencattorneys.com

Jospeh Todd Bailey - December 04, 2021 at 10:14 AM

NH

Thank you so much for writing what you knew about Wren and his family. The grandson who didn't want the tuxedo was my cousin Keith, and I had never heard that story, so thank you! As far as the Thomas Wolfe story goes, the way my dad told it, he was a little boy and was asleep when he heard a noise downstairs and came down to investigate. He found what he described as a huge man sitting cross-legged on the floor of the living room, with a big turkey leg in one hand and a beer stein in the other hand, and a big heavy book open across his lap. That was Thomas Wolfe. My dad described how Wolfe was turning the pages of the book (an old North Carolina census, which my grandfather had a rare copy of) with his elbow since his hands were full. My dad said to him, "you must be hungry," and Thomas Wolfe replied, "I am the hungriest man in the world."

Nancy Hennessee - January 19, 2023 at 11:59 PM