

## A TRIBUTE TO MY FATHER-IN-LAW

I finally officially met King Herrington sometime during the summer of 1972. Until that point he was just a voice that answered the phone in the small white house he'd lived in for 22 years at that point. I'd become quite fond of dialing his number, actually. I'd call two, three, sometimes four times a day. Not so much to talk to King...there was someone else in the house I was interested in. But, more often than not, it was his voice I'd hear when the ringing ended on the other end of the line.

"Hello", he'd say.

"Is Debbie there?", I'd ask.

"Hang on, I'll get her".

That was it. The extent of our relationship was 9 words exchanged between two total strangers...repeated over and over again, several times a week. Never varied much...not a "How about them Broncos?"...or "Did it snow much on your side of town last night?"

Just right to the point...both doing our job. Him answering the question and me trying to get past the operator as quickly as I could.

When we finally met, it was obvious to both of us that we were from two very different places in life. I was a long haired kid with stars in my eyes, holes in my bell bottom jeans, flip flops on my feet, and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young in my eight track player. He was a hard working man with his feet firmly planted on the ground. Those feet, by the way, could usually be found in a pair of steal toed boots, accompanied by green work pants and a matching shirt. Not a lot of flash, but heavy on consistency. He didn't have an eight track, but if he did you'd probably find Lawrence Welk blaring through the speakers.

We were very different. About the only thing we shared in common was a fondness for his oldest daughter, Debbie. I'm not sure what he thought when he got his first glimpse of the guy that would later become his son-in-law. Whatever it was, he thankfully kept it too himself.

Sometimes it's hard to appreciate different. It's taken me a lifetime to fully appreciate the value that King's life brought to my life and our family. I've always respected him, but in the last few years I've come to really cherish the qualities in my father-in-law that I see being naturally reproduced in his kids and grandchildren.

King Herrington was a part of what Tom Brokaw lovingly calls the "Greatest Generation" in his book by the same title. A generation that quite literally saved our nation and shaped our values so that we and our children can celebrate the freedoms that we so often take for granted.

King was born in 1921 on the plains of Eastern Colorado. His mother, Bessie, was a school teacher and his father Leonard, was a farmer. King and his younger brother, Sam, and younger sister, Betty came of age during the Great Depression, a time of economic despair unrivaled in our history. Added on top of that was the great dust bowl of the 30's, when so much dirt covered eastern Colorado, western Kansas, and northwest Oklahoma, that Timothy Egan wrote a book calling it the "Worst Hard Time".

King and his friends watched as families lost businesses, jobs, family farms, and finally, hope. Then when things started to turn around, the great war broke out in Europe. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Americans lost a sense of innocence and security that comes from knowing that those things just don't happen in our homeland.

In 1942 King answered the call to help save the world from what Brokaw calls the two most powerful military machines ever assembled. His part was building and repairing the planes that were crucial in preserving our freedom. Against all odds, his generation succeeded...and the world narrowly avoided the consequences of domination by an evil tyrant.

So King and his friends came home...wise beyond their years. A wisdom born of the times they lived through.

Shortly after that he met and married Willa Mae (Polly) Fickel. They bought and moved into their first and only home almost fifty-

eight years ago and immediately began to produce little Baby Boomers. First Terry, then Debbie, then Kristy, and finally Nancy, God's wonderful surprise, who could be found on daddy's lap most times I came to visit. The Germans and Japanese were nothing compared to the assault those girls could put on a father's heart and pocket book. He acted tough, but craters pretty quickly when the pressure was on.

Through out his life, King stayed true to the shared values of his generation, the greatest generation: Duty, honor, faith, and personal responsibility.

He joined Aurora 1st Assembly of God Church in 1952 and never shopped for another one. He worked for Frontier Airlines for 27 years and never took a sick day. He was faithful to his God, his wife, his family, his country and his work. He didn't make a big deal of it...he didn't need a medal...he just did it. That's what was expected and that's what was given...not just most days, but every single day of his life.

He wasn't perfect, nobody is. But if God graded on a curve, let's just say I wouldn't want him in my class.

When King got close to retirement, he started collecting things. All kind of things: Tools, arrowheads, railroad nails, rattlesnake tails and barbed wire, just to name a few. His collecting led to cataloging, and cataloging to displaying, and displaying to competing...until King's collections became famous throughout the Southwest. He'd load up a few boards of barbed wire displays into the camper truck and he and Polly would go to a show in some small town that celebrated the fencing of the American West. Invariably he would bring home the "best of show" prize along with more than a few tools or pieces of wire that he had negotiated a poor unsuspecting newby out of. He even made an industry out of reproduced wire. He would find a picture of a rare piece and then go home and manufacture a replica in his workshop that collectors would gladly part with some hard earned cash for. King was always happy to take their money, more for the sport of it than anything else.

King could make anything. He was one of the few men I know that considered a purchase from the hardware store a waste of time and money. Why buy it, when you can make it...out of what you have laying around at the time? Amazing. That's a gift I'll never have.

A few years ago King's peers inducted him into the Barbed Wire Hall of Fame. His collections are known as being among the best in the world. Think about that for a minute. About the best most of us can expect is to be good at what we do. A few actually become very good. A select few become extremely good. And only a handful of people that you will meet in a lifetime will ever become the best in the world at anything. King Herrington was one of them. The best in the world.

A couple of years ago I brought my boys to spend a week in Colorado. Toward the end of our stay, they talked their grandfather into pulling a few display boards out of the garage and telling the story behind the fencing of the West. I watched in amazement, as for over an hour the Michael Jordan of barbed wire held court and shared his passion with another generation. It's a priceless memory that they will carry with them forever.

As it became apparent in the last few years that King's health was failing and his time on earth was approaching an end, we all began to treasure even more deeply the gift that God had allowed us to share for these 87 years. When our family would come to Colorado for a visit, as the time for us to leave would approach, you knew that he knew... You could see it in his eyes, and hear it in the quiver of his voice...this might be the last goodbye. There was a sadness that he felt that came with the knowledge of his own mortality.

Today, we have that look, I see it in your eyes...and our voices struggle to keep from betraying the sadness that we feel. He's gone. There are pieces of him that will remain in our hearts everyday, and glimmers of his personality that we see in our children and grandchildren.

He is gone...but not forever. We love you King...we'll see you soon.

Greg Surratt of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina  
-[http://www.gregsurratt.org/greg\\_surratt/2008/10/a-tribute-to-my.html](http://www.gregsurratt.org/greg_surratt/2008/10/a-tribute-to-my.html)