

In Memory of Robert L. Nuckolls, Jr.

Robert L. Nuckolls, III
Vigil Services August 2, 2007



He was a building contractor for many years. He later became a certified locksmith. Most of his professional services were offered to the citizens of Medicine Lodge, Kansas.

These are the kind of words used in newspapers every day intended to describe departed family, friends and neighbors. But how does one paint an accurate and useful image of an individual's contributions to the lives of others . . . especially for someone like Bob Nuckolls who touched so many lives? I will beg your indulgence for the next few minutes while I share a small part of my personal image of who and what my father was.

I'll suggest that descendants of our grand-parents Robert and Lena Fern are living proof of the notion that we inherit much of our potential from our ancestors. From the time my grandfather moved to Wichita to begin his rich career as a builder, nurseryman, and farmer, he and all of his children were deeply immersed in grandpa's livelihood. The family had numerous addresses in Wichita as grandpa was constantly dealing for new opportunities in the building of his business and practice of his craft

Grandpa built a number of houses for the family but couldn't pass up a great offer to buy the house! Grandma's frustration with all this commotion prompted her to purchase a

Robert Lee Nuckolls, Jr., was born on November 2, 1923 in Wichita, Kansas. One of eight children born of Lena Fern and Robert Lee Nuckolls. He is preceded in death by his parents, his wife Norine of 47 years, his brothers Floyd and Wilbur, and sisters Edith and Thora. He is survived by his sisters Dorothy, Lena Fern and Corine. Robert has four children, Robert III, Bonnie, April and Tim, 4 grand-children and 8 great grand-children. He was a veteran of WWII having served aboard a mine sweeper in the Aleutian Islands in the last battle to be fought between sovereign nations on American soil.

permanent home at 346 N. Grove in Wichita which became the “up home” anchor for the growing house of Nuckolls.

In 1931, Grandpa traded for some land on Elm Creek northeast of Medicine Lodge where the family’s “down home” anchor was planted in Barber County. To this day, Wichita, Medicine Lodge and territories between have described the range of operations for the Kansas branch of grandpa’s family tree.

Dad’s activity in the building trades began quite early. When dad was about 5 years old, his older brothers were laying the brickwork on the back of a storefront at Kellogg and Grove in Wichita. While the workers were at lunch, Dad tried his hand at laying brick. When they returned, everyone was amused at the Dad’s amateurish attempt at bricklaying. But as someone started to remove the poorly positioned brick, uncle Floyd said, “leave it alone”. They continued with their task and incorporated Dad’s first semi-professional handiwork into the finished wall. I’ve often wondered what grandpa had to say about it!

Some years later, Dad and Wilbur received a wood lathe for Christmas. The biggest motor they could find was only 1/8th horsepower - they had to be content with making really tiny cuts. Today that lathe is a fixture in Dad’s shop. It’s got a bigger motor on it now and I’m looking forward to learning how to use it. How many kids today would ask Santa Clause for a wood lathe?

Dad told me that his first professional training as a worker of wood was to learn how to build window sashes and frames. He soon mastered the craft and grandpa was able to use Dad’s work product in customer’s houses. On a trip to a lumber yard, dad was startled to see factory-built sashes and frames. Upon questioning grandpa about building them by hand, grandpa informed his young millwright,

“you can’t buy ‘em as good as you can make ‘em.”

Dad got a job at Boeing and was told to attend some electrician’s training for installing the wiring in B-29. After a few days at school, his instructor asked how he already knew so much about electrical systems. Dad told him that he had learned a lot from his brother Floyd who was an instructor in the Boeing schools. “Oh, you’re Floyd’s brother? You don’t need to take this course.” Dad was immediately sent to work on the production line. Dad’s skills in the working of wood were immediately useful on the airplanes. He showed his fellow workers how to build a variety of jigs and fixtures to make their jobs more productive.

Dad joined the Navy shortly after I was born. He served as electrician aboard a 125 foot long by 25 foot wide, wooden hulled mine sweeper in the Aleutians. Those were the same seas where episodes of Discovery Channel’s “The Deadliest Catch” were filmed. Dad was fishing for mines instead of crabs . . . and in a smaller boat!

Our father and all his siblings had what I call, “The disease.” I too enjoy the benefits of this affliction . . . for all of my waking hours, I cannot keep from thinking about ways to assemble simple-ideas into new and useful products supported by a strong desire to understand how things work. Dad strived to be “Jack of all Trades and Master of Most.” By the time his career was in full bloom as a contractor, he could provide all the skills needed to build a house that began with concrete work for walls and foundations and ended with custom built cabinets and installation of carpet. He could do plumbing, wiring, duct work, shingles, brick and dry wall . . . what ever it took.

He didn’t shy from heavy lifting. During a

visit about 45 years ago, I was trying to help deliver 30 sacks of concrete to a customer of Doherty Lumber. Dad backed a flat bed truck up to one a dock at the rail siding warehouse and we went inside with two-wheeled hand trucks to get 90-pound bags of Portland. Dad put 10 sacks of concrete on his two-wheeler (900 pounds!) After achieving the correct angle and velocity his stack of sacks hopped up on the slightly raised truck bed and end up neatly stacked against the headboard.

I took a run at the truck with my paltry 450 pounds of concrete. When my poorly aimed hand-cart came an abrupt halt at the edge of the dock, 5 sacks of concrete spread out on the truck bed. In later years Dad proved equally comfortable with the skills and patience required to disassemble tiny pins and springs of a lock and crafting one-of-a-kind, finely sculptured brass keys to open the lock.

Our grandpa's descendants were also gifted with what I call, "The packrat gene." We find it difficult to throw out anything that just might be useful at some time in the future. As a small child, I recall a man visiting "the ranch" (That's what grandma called it!) and offering to take a pile of junk iron and metal off of grandad's hands. Grandad responded with some note of surprise and alarm, "No! That's my inventory!"

Dad had the gene too. A few years ago, we were discussing a joint wood working project but there simply no room in Dad's shop. My sons and I offered to clean out and organize the shop. We put dad on a stool at the door and as we each filed past he could say, "keep it", "garage sale" or "trash". It took most of two days to haul off seven truck-loads of "stuff" most of which was indeed trash. My boys and I looked into the newly cleared space with some degree of satisfaction. Not all of us were so proud . . . Dad looked like he'd just lost a favorite pet. On one occasion in

subsequent months he sent me out to the landfill on the farm to retrieve items which he'd decided that he could not live without.

Even in his last hours, Dad's head was in his workshop. On one occasion, he wanted to give me an important piece of information but could not speak well without his teeth. We put his teeth in and he told me, "In the southeast corder of the shop on the east wall, there's a green wooden case on the second shelf from the bottom that holds the bits for the little router."

For many individuals this apparently random and disconnected bit of information might seem to be a hallucination. But I understood . . . unless concentrating on a singular task, my head is constantly sifting bits of knowledge and testing combinations of tools, skills and materials for potential usefulness. I was pleased that even as his body was failing, his mind was as busy and useful as ever.

Dad was fond of tools . . . always looking for better ways to get something done. In the last months of his residency at the hospital, he was still ordering new tools out of the mail-order catalogs. On one occasion, he bought a nice miter-saw. After it arrived, a better model went on sale. He ordered the preferred saw and told me that Acey Dials was interested in buying the first one. Dad never used the new saw but I found it exceedingly useful when we put new flooring down in our Wichita home. He was pleased that it made a good job easier for one of his sons. I've got the tool-bug too. I'm suffering a growing lust for the laser guide attachment for the new saw!

Dad's creativity was not limited to the builder's arts. He like to cook. He enjoyed exploring the art and science of assembling ingredients into pleasurable eating experiences. He loved to cook for Norine. He has several years worth of recipe periodicals

on file. He was a pushover for the late night TV infomercial and was persuaded to try a variety of kitchen gadgets. He was particularly fond of “the Magic Bullet”. He also dabbled in painting, model building, archery. He was a pretty fair golfer too . . . at least good enough to justify a number of road trips to distant tournaments with his golfing friends.

He had good taste in music. We’re discovering quantities of 8-track and cassette cartridges with pieces he favored, much of it classical music. Interestingly enough, I don’t recall seeing him listen to the radio or play any of these tapes. I’m wondering if his musical enjoyment was more of a private thing. When we were discussing plans for his funeral, I asked if he had any favorite piece he’d like to share with those in attendance. Without hesitation he said, “Grand Canyon Suite”.

I was a bit startled. As a third grader, he introduced me and my younger siblings to this graphic piece. It came in an album of two 33-1/3 RPM disks pressed in an amazing, almost water-clear red plastic. All of our other records spun like a whirling dervish and played for mere minutes per side. This recording was different. It played at a seemingly lazy pace for over 15 minutes per side! The jacket cover was a spectacular photo of the Grand Canyon. It became one of my favorite records. I recall taking it to Mrs. MacGregor’s third grade class and playing it for my school mates. I read the jacket notes to them that described the Grand Canyon imagery that inspired the music.

I had not listened to this work in many years but I recalled that the suite is in 5 movements totaling perhaps 30 minutes. I asked Dad if he had a favorite movement and again he didn’t hesitate: “On the Trail”.

That surprised me. Three of the five movements are rather serene but two movements, “On the Trail” and “Cloudburst” didn’t strike me as introspective funeral music. After some thought I began to understand. “On the Trail” is a metaphor for Dad’s life. “On the Trail” is a musical description of purposeful movement. *Got places to go, things to do and people to see.* At the conclusion of this reading, we’ll share this work with you.

Dad’s life was not without strife. Family photos of a smiling young woman who was to become our mother offer no hint of a misery she also inherited. As she grew older, her schizophrenic paranoia forced Mom and Dad apart at no small price to our family. But Dad was never a whiner or complainer. His mention of our family’s experiences were observations of fact - acknowledged as beyond his ability to repair. Dad’s approach to life is illustrated by the ideas in the Serenity Prayer which goes like this: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” He played the cards dealt to him with as much dignity and grace as anyone could under the circumstances.

He was proud of his breadth of talents and was willing to share them. Whether you were looking forward to a time of simple fellowship or an offering of skills to accomplish a task, Dad was the kind of person you were happy to see coming and looking forward to your next meeting as he left. He strived to leave everything he touched in better shape than he found it. His accomplishments in the building and repairing of houses stand all over Medicine Lodge stand as monuments to his life among us.

From time to time, folks who see the spelling of my last name will offer a remark like, “Say,

I knew this fellow in Medicine Lodge with that name.” “Yes”, I answer, “He was my

friend, my teacher . . . and oh yeah, he was my dad”.