

Well-known local photographer publishes personal memoirs

By **KIRBY ROSS**
Review Staff Writer

“He was great to work with,” Vanessa Smith said on July 18. “He is very funny and his photography stories are really great. He really loves working with people.”

Vanessa was speaking of Bill Clarke, who has been a prominent fixture in Phillips County for decades. Pick out any person at random who was born and raised here, and more likely than not they have had their image captured in one of his photographs.

Working together off-and-on over the course of the past year, Vanessa and Bill have recently completed a book detailing Bill’s life entitled *Train Tracks & Photographs: The Memoirs of Bill Clarke*.

“He tells a lot of very interesting local stories,” Vanessa says. “It was pretty amazing. I learned a lot of history of Kirwin and Phillipsburg that I didn’t know.”

In browsing through it, a reader can quickly verify that statement to be true. According to one story found in the book that concerns his days growing up in Kirwin--

“One time a road show came to Kirwin. They put a man up on the square, buried him, and said he was to come back up the next day. After seeing the man alive and well, we figured we could do that. So my neighbor, Amy Busby (now Mrs. Bob Kastle), got our shovels, and on the lot west of our house, we dug a big hole. My Dad ordered flowers for funerals and weddings from a Concordia greenhouse, which came in long cardboard boxes. We got a box from Dad’s trash pile, and it just fit in the hole. We were deciding who to put in there when along came Bob Gray, who stopped to



PHOTOGRAPHER PHOTOGRAPHED -- In this recent photograph, Bill Clarke has his picture taken as he stands in a classic pose that has become a very familiar one to thousands of people over the past six decades.

Randy Moll/Review

see what was going on. We asked him to get in the box to see if he fit, and he did. We told him we would say a few words to hypnotize him like we saw them do uptown. We got a stove pipe to fit on the lid of the box which goes over his face so he could get air and see up at us, and then we started shoveling in the dirt. Lo and behold, his grandmother across the street on her porch swing saw us working, and, boy,

she came right over and said, ‘Get Bobby out of there right now!’ We told her he was hypnotized and would come back up tomorrow. She said, ‘You get him out of the right now.’”

In putting together this memoir, Bill Clarke was greatly assisted by the notes of his now-deceased wife, Loretta, to whom he was married just short of a half-century. Intending to write her own story which was to be

called *Memoirs of a Photographer's Wife*, she kept many notes for the project that was cut short by her death from cancer in 1998.

In a poignant section entitled "My Life Partner," Bill speaks of her--"Loretta and I hope we have brought happiness to many with our photos, leaving some history to the community. We hope they will be enjoyed as much as we enjoyed you folks and the making of them. Loretta and I lacked about six months of being married fifty years. We went through the best years after World War II, working elbow to elbow nearly seven days a week and half the nights, but we loved what we were doing. There was something new each day, it seemed."

Gathering Loretta's notes, and making many new ones of his own, by the summer of 2004 Bill was ready to start putting them into some sort of order. Enter Vanessa Smith, who graduated from Phillipsburg High in 2002 where she had been an editor of the Panther Pause. Through Marilyn Jansonius, Vicki Constable, and Paula Schilowsky, Vanessa and Bill began collaborating last summer on what originally was an effort to just put things in order.

Eventually, though, it was suggested to Bill that a book might be able to be put together from the compiled materials. Vanessa, who by then was off attending the fall session of college, came home during Christmas break and helped him go through the tedious process of putting it into a fully developed manuscript format, and then find a publisher. Submitting the final draft in early March, it has just recently come

off the presses and is now on the bookstands.

The book not only chronicles his earliest days in Kirwin, but also the family move to Phillipsburg, being drafted and then serving in the Pacific Theater during World War II, detailing how it was he came to become a photographer. Best of all, he tells us all some very amusing stories--

"One of the funniest things to happen here in Phillipsburg," he writes, "was a wedding at the First Methodist Church. A man and his wife from Woodston, KS, came to attend the wedding. The couple went to the church, leaving a well-wrapped wedding present with an usher. They were ushered down to the front area. The man's name was Willard Hale. He looked around and did not seem to know anyone, but when the bride came down the aisle, he knew he was in trouble. He hurried to the basement to pick up his gift and asked if there was another wedding. He was told there was another one over at the Wesleyan Methodist Church. He and his wife rushed over there just in time to get some cake at the reception and leave his gift."

He also tells stories of having to take pictures on behalf of law enforcement in regard to two men found dead at local motels on two different occasions, for a woman who committed suicide, wrecked cars and skid marks, and of card tables with money on top after a gambling raid.

"I've seen people at their best for pictures and at their worst with murders and wrecks, with scars on their faces and bodies. I would rather have been photographing in the good times

instead of those kinds of conditions," he says.

The book reveals top secret Bill Clarke information--his real name is Wilby. It also includes a number of photographs depicting him through his life as well as sections entitled Family History, Kirwin, Phillipsburg, World War II, Beginnings, The Railroad, Photography, and My Life Partner.

Bill will be appearing for a book signing at the Scott-McCoppin Bookstore on August 6 (Rodeo Saturday). Radio personality Tad Felts of KQMA 92.5 will be conducting a special edition of his Tad Poll program live from the bookstore that morning, where Bill will be his guest.



BILL CLARKE, WARRIOR-- During his World War II tour of duty from 1943 through 1945, Bill was stationed at Hawaii, Guadalcanal, New Guinea, the Phillipines, and Korea.

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