

'BOCKMAN BOYS' ESTABLISH MEMORIAL FOR A MAN THEY LOVED ROBERT ROE BOCKMAN

By Jill Thomas, Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: Sunday, 26 December 2004

In the Years after World War II, Robert Roe Bockman took Tennessee Tech students into his home-and they have not forgotten.



When Congress passed the GI Bill of Rights by one vote in 1944, Tennessee Tech in Cookeville was one of the nation's colleges which couldn't provide enough housing for the large influx of students home from the military service and eager for education.

According to records at TTU, after the dorms were filled cots were placed in TTU's gym and in Cookeville's National Guard Armory for students. And the students kept coming.

Then the president of Tennessee Tech – it was then "Tennessee Polytechnic Institute" or TPI, prior to university status – Everett Derryberry asked Cookeville area residents to open their

home to the students.

Robert Roe Bockman who lived on North Dixie Ave., near the TPI campus, responded by renting out the four upstairs bedrooms and one downstairs bedroom in his house to single men of all ages.

Between the years 1946 and 1962, he and his wife, Ada, played surrogate parents to nearly 100 young men, including regular students and veterans from both WW2 and the Korean war who were attending Tennessee Tech on the GI Bill.

Last month, 13 of the 'Bockman Boys' returned to TTU for a formal reunion and to establish an endowment for the university in Bockman's name.

"We've been holding reunions since 1998, but we're getting older and some of us are suffering from ill health so we decided to keep in touch informally rather than have an official reunion each year," said Doug Norman who graduated from TPI in 1952.

Norman was one of the earliest Bockman Boys and went on to a journalism career working for three daily newspapers including the Nashville Banner where he held the position of assistant state editor. In 1959, he returned to Cookeville and became TPI's director of public information and assistant professor of English teaching journalism classes. He also advised the Oracle and Eagle.

Roe Bockman was a farmer and father of four. By the time his oldest children were grown, he had moved from the farm to the city of Cookeville and he and Ada found themselves with five vacant bedrooms.

"It turned out to be a great thing for everybody," said his daughter, Lucille Bockman Robertson who lives now in Cookeville and who was attending Tennessee Tech herself when her dad started renting out rooms to students.

"Dad helped the boys whenever he could, and they, in turn, did a lot of chores for him," she said.

Norman, in a 70-page booklet he wrote for the recent reunion, described the combination of young students and returning war vets as resulting in an interesting mix at the Bockman house – "young, wet-behind-the-

ears kids mingling with adult veterans....The kids listened wide-eyed to stories, some true, told by the vets about their experiences around the world.”

According to Miss Lucille, her father screened the young men, veterans as well as regular students, pretty thoroughly before letting them into the house.

“There was no drinking. I think they appreciated that,” she said.

“The boys were there to study so there was not to be any late night carousing, and, of course, no girls were allowed on the second floor.” She recalled.

But there were no restrictions on smoking, she remembered.

Doug Norman didn’t remember any rules that were particularly severe.

“Mr. Bockman was a surrogate father to us. He was a kind, gentle man, a true gentleman.” Norman said in a phone interview from Myrtle Beach, SC, where he has retired.

Norman remembers the ‘boys’ as studying hard but letting loose on weekends by having all-night card parties on Saturdays.

“There was no gambling, of course. It was very innocent. We played Hearts, not Poker,” he said.

“No money changed hands. Losers would have had nothing to eat on the next week.

“Mr. Bockman put up with everything we did. He never complained about noise or our late night,” Norman said.

The boys often helped Bockman with mowing the lawn and doing odd jobs. In turn, he drove them to Cookeville’s Tennessee Central train station (now the Depot Museum) when they went home for holidays and woke them up when they had early exams during finals week and further befriended them as best he could.

The Bockmans provided no food so the boys usually ate at the college cafeteria or at the Campus Grill up the street on Dixie Ave. known, Norman said, variously as Myrty’s Grill, the Gypt Joint and Momma Gypt’s (named after the restaurant’s operator; Myrtle Jared).

According to Norman, Sundays were the hardest day of the week. The movie theaters were closed – Cookeville had so-called ‘blue laws’ then – and there was little to do.

At one point, TPI students tried to get the laws changed so theaters could have showings on Sundays but “we lost to the churches,” Norman said.

“Instead, on Sunday we’d go to church and then fight the Cookeville residents for food at the cafeteria. Gladys Crawford was the best cook in town and many a Tech student was elbowed out of the way by town people eager to get to the food she cooked on Sundays,” he said.

“She would also stage elaborate dinners for special events. Many students there learned etiquette, what to do with all the different forks, and were introduced to new foods other than the beans, potatoes and fried meat they had been reared on,” Norman said.

The boys were even able to break the ‘no girls on the second floor rule’ when they smuggled the girlfriend on one of the boys up to see him after a breakup. They helped the couple ‘talk’ it through,’ he said. The couple made up and later married.

“We liked her very much,” Norman said, “And we didn’t like the girl he had started dating at all. We were happy to get them back together.”

Few of Bockmans’ boys had cars. The students mainly came from families with modest means and getting home meant either taking the Tennessee Central train or a Trailways bus.

But, one student, Joe Jones bought a tiny little two-seater American Motors car with a propeller on its nose cone.

“Passing students regularly picked it up and deposited it in Mr. Bockman’s back yard,” Norman remembered.

The boys became so much a part of the Bockman family that four of them served as ushers at Lucille Bockman’s marriage to Ernest Robertson.

Robert Bockman was still renting rooms to college students when he died in 1962.

And for 36 years the Bockman boys went on with their lives, many of them keeping in touch.

Then in 1998, Doug Norman and Wallace Frierson decided that their memories of Tennessee Tech were so attached to Roe Bockman that they wanted to hold the first Bockman Boys reunion at Tennessee Tech, TTU provided the room and the food and the ‘boys’ provided the memories.

When it became harder for everyone to meet annually, the Bockman boys decided to give up the reunions but start an endowment scholarship fund for the university.

“We hope to build it to \$10,000 which will provide a nursing scholarship,” Norman said.

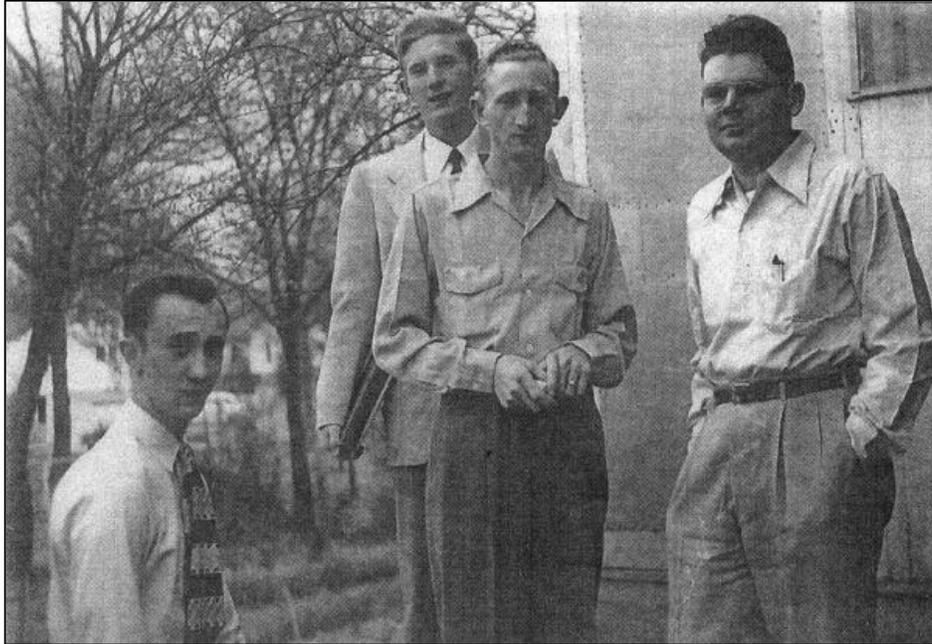
For Lucille Robertson, she appreciates the endowment as a memorial for her father that is in keeping with his involvement with Tennessee Tech.

“He loved his boys and he considered them all as his son. They made his life full of meaning,” she said.

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Some “Bockman Boys’ and their wives got together for one final reunion this fall. Seated are Lucille Robertson, at left, daughter of Roe Bockman; Pat Frierson, Esther Wilhite, Dot Baxter, Grace Harbison, Margaret Cook, Shirley West and Bobby West; standing, Ernest Robertson, at left, Wallace Frierson, Bob Wilhite, Jim Baker, Nat Harrison, Wren Harbison, W. O. West and Clyde Thomas.



Bockman Boys Relaxing on Campus

Doug Norman, at left, Wallace Frierson, Dudley Massey and James Baxter at Tennessee Tech probably in the early 1950s.