

I REMEMBER THE NIGHT BATMAN DIED

By G. W. Brown

Writer's Corner

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN

Special to the Herald-Citizen:

Thursday, 12, 2009, Section B

I remember well the night that Batman died. It was unseasonably cold for the middle of winter. However, Batman was undaunted and went on Bat Patrol since he knew some citizen might need help. Some thought during the night the cold on the lower levels of a parking garage overcame him or possibly he succumbed to carbon monoxide from the Batmobile in a futile attempt to stay warm on Bat Patrol. Rumors farfetched circulated that he lost a battle with the Joker, or Mr. Freeze had got him.

By now you probably believe I am pulling your leg. We all know that Batman is a fictional character created by Bob Kane for DC Comics. Others remember Batman as a television character portrayed by Adam West.

In reality, the spirit of Batman did live in flesh and blood. He was Afro-American and patrolled the streets of Birmingham, Ala., during the '70s and '80s. He helped motorists and whatever other good deeds he could in memory of the television character he so idolized.

His Batmobile was a fin-tailed 1971 Ford Thunderbird fixed up to resemble that of his idol. Modifications were made to give the appearance of the original concept except he sported the more cheerful and daytime colors of orange and white. Likewise, his costume differed from the traditional blue and gray. His were purple and yellow. But like the original he bore the bat insignia and answered to batman at sporting events, comic book shows, store openings and other social events. In Birmingham, he was recognized as our hero.

The first time I saw Batman was at a comic book show. I was new to Birmingham and knew nothing of the story. My initial thought was one of confusion. Due to old prejudices, I couldn't imagine an Afro-American as Batman. But being a hardcore comic and sci-fi fan, I kept running into him and came to call him Batman. When he had kids, I looked forward to taking them to events where they could see Batman.

Upon the news of his passing, my heart was saddened. There are so few that try to live a pure life inspired by the comics so many of us read in our youth. The Birmingham Batman was one of those few. Yet somewhere I know the legend still lives, and someone else will one day take up the mantle of Batman.

In reality, the Birmingham Batman was Willie J. Perry, who died at age 44 in 1985 of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning in a parking garage while working on his "Bat Rescue Ship." Willie was best known as a good Samaritan who cruised the streets of Birmingham at night and helped people in need. He always had spare gas, tools and

jumper cables. One of Mr. Perry's proudest moments was the day Michael Jackson came to Birmingham to meet Batman. The show "That's Incredible!" featured him in a 1982 episode. After Willie's passing, the car was kept at the Southern Museum of Flight.

"Writer's Corner" accepts any family-friendly poetry, essays or narratives of 700 words or fewer from local writers. To submit materials for possible publication, e-mail arts@herald-citizen, c/o Arts Editor, 1300 Neal Street, Cookeville, TN 38501. The editor reserves the right to edit or refuse submittals.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>