

LATE PUTNAM COUNTY POLICE CHIEF, SHERIFF WAS TOUGH BUT FAIR

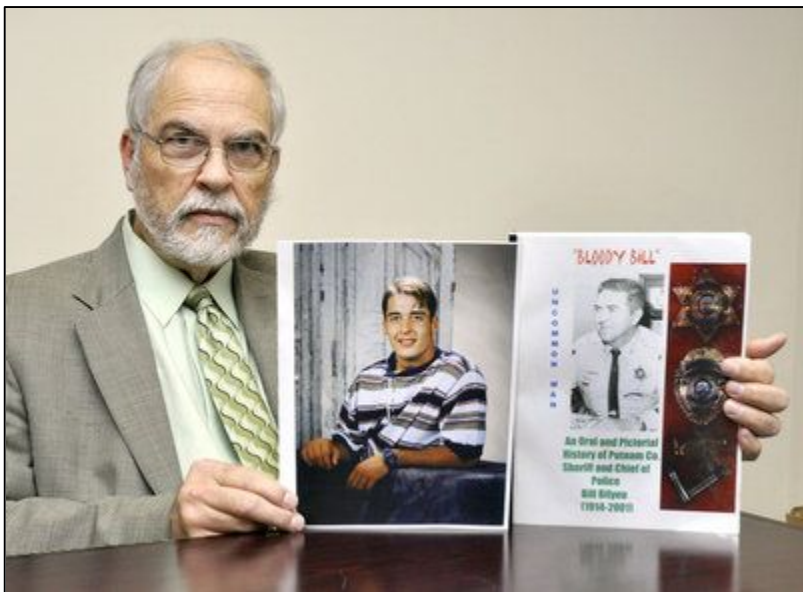
BILL BILYEU

by Megan Trotter



Cookeville Police Chief Bill Bilyeu clocks the speed of passing traffic on a "new" radar device that can clock speeds of vehicles from inside the police car. This photo ran in the Herald-Citizen in 1973. Joe Farris | Herald-Citizen file

PUTNAM COUNTY — Bill Bilyeu served three terms as sheriff in Putnam County, beginning in 1960, and served as police chief starting in 1968 and staying on as a consultant after he retired until 1978. He was known for not taking any nonsense from those breaking the law, though tough as he was, Bilyeu was also compassionate.



"I saw tears run from his eyes when he had to sit in and talk to a young person because he didn't want to turn the jail key on that person before he knew what his problems were, what was going on," his son Mickey Bilyeu said. "He would go to the young person's home, talk to the parents, do everything he could to help the person stay out of trouble."

Mickey Bilyeu holds up a copy of the book he has written about his father, Bill Bilyeu, along with a photo of his late son, Michael. Bilyeu plans to make his second

book about his son's struggle with bipolar disorder. Ty Kernea | Herald-Citizen

Before his passing in 2001, Bilyeu kept copious notes, photos and voice recordings about his work and life. His son has gone through all this information and put together a biography titled "Bloody Bill: An Oral and Pictorial History of Putnam County Sheriff and Chief of Police Bill Bilyeu." Inside is the transcription of the voice recordings, as well as old photographs, newspaper clippings and notes — and it's only a portion of what Micky has uncovered.

“I could have made a book twice this size,” Mickey laughed.

According to Bilyeu, he joined the cavalry at the age of 14 by telling them he was 17. He was there for six years and he said it taught him the discipline that later became an important aspect of his job in law enforcement.



Discussing law enforcement during a two-day school for members of the statewide Association of Chiefs of Police are, from left, Dr. Paul Green, Memphis State University; Gene McGovern of Chattanooga; Cookeville Police Chief Bill Bilyeu; and Memphis Police Chief W. E. Routt. This photo was originally printed in 1971 in the Herald-Citizen. Jim Heard | Herald-Citizen file

He volunteered for service during World War II, but was turned down because of his flat feet and the torn tendons in his right arm that healed wrong after an injury as a child. He went into the National Guard instead.

He met his future wife, Christie, after an accident while driving for Cookeville Freight Line left him with a broken back and hip. She was the nurse he woke up to see. They had their first date the evening he got out of the hospital. He was 22 and she was 23 when they started dating.

“She promised to marry me if I would get a job,” Bilyeu said in his notes. “And so I said I would go to California and get a job, and then she could come out there later. She said OK, but she also said we could get married before I go to California, but not to tell her parents. I said that is all right, but I had to tell my dad so that I could get the car for us to get married in.”

When he became involved in law enforcement, it was a dream come true. He’d wanted to be a sheriff his whole life, but also knew that came with a lot of responsibility.

“It was something for me, as rough as I was, a challenge, to be a gentleman and do what I wanted to do for my family,” Bilyeu said in his notes. “I wanted to be a man among men. I didn’t want to do anything through the years to embarrass my family. I tried to be a man.”

He did his best to treat everyone as equals and to do what he thought was right — and he made sure any officers under him did the same.

“There were three ways you could get fired,” Mickey said. “Run around on your wife, get out and drink in public, or treat somebody poor or needy in a negative way.”

Those he had to take to jail would often come down once they were released and talk to him as a friend. Even when he was retired, former criminals would call him, telling him they knew who committed the crime that was printed in the paper that day.

“He had their confidence,” Mickey said. “He would not divulge anybody’s name (who told him information.) They knew they could trust him.”

Since releasing the book, Mickey has had many people come up to him and relate stories about his father that they remember. One man bought several copies of the book in appreciation for what Bilyeu had done

for him in the past.

“He said, ‘I was falsely accused of some things that happened when I was young. He grabbed my arm and pulled me around the side of the building and he said ... ‘If you’re telling me the truth, I’m going to help you all that I can. We’re not going to lock you up, we’re going to take you at your word. But if you’re lying to me, the next time you get in trouble, I won’t be able to help you’,” Mickey said.

Mickey is also working on a book about his own son, Michael, who suffered with bipolar disorder before he passed away earlier this year. “I think a lot of people’s perspectives of people who are bipolar is that they’re crazy,” Mickey said.

He wants his book to give people another view of those suffering with the disorder.

Michael was in a major auto accident when he was 14 that caused massive injuries, but after his body had healed, something seemed off in his mind.

“The nurses told me that they associated frontal injuries like he had with the bipolar condition. They said the blood loss and the traumatic experience that he’d been through at a young age, especially, maybe where he couldn’t comprehend everything that was happening to him,” Mickey said. “He probably had these symptoms (of bipolar disorder) before, but we didn’t start noticing them very strongly until he was about 16. He would make decisions that were just off the wall. It was like he didn’t have any logical decision-making in his brain. It was gone. If you told him if he would go down to the Smithville bridge and jump off and that would help his condition, he would go down there and jump off. That would be the kind of decisions that he would make, not thinking ahead of time what the consequences were.”

Bilyeu saved his grandson’s life several times, including one time that Michael decided to jump off the interstate.

“My dad had a way with people. ... He could handle almost anybody. It was almost like he was a psychologist, but he was a self-educated person,” Mickey said.

Mickey wants his book to honor his son’s struggles, as well as help the general public understand and feel compassion for those dealing with mental health struggles instead of fearing and condemning them.

“Michael was lucky. He had two parents who stayed with him through the thick and thin, the worst situations imaginable and some of the good ones too. I think the general public needs to know about these people and some of the issues they face and the lack of help that they can get.”

To get a copy of Mickey’s first book, “Bloody Bill,” or to get updates when he finishes his book on his son, send him a message at mickhook@frontiernet.net.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 14 November 2013