
Warren County Historical Tidbits: A Man of Many Stories

And a Laugh That Lit Up Our World



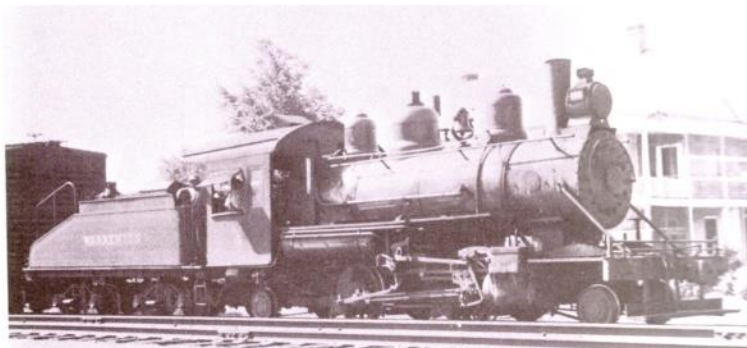
*Mr. Julian Jackson "Jack" Smith
- A Warren County Treasure*

As I've gone about uncovering these stories of Warren County treasures for myself, and in turn sharing them with you, I've found each tale (and its time for telling) in a slightly different way – some come after driving past a beautiful home on a country road & talking with the owners...some come after reading through the accounts of writers who have preceded me...and some have come after listening to the memories of people who have a lifelong love for our home. This treasure, and in turn our Tidbit for today, came to me in an entirely different way – he walked into my office one warm summer day – and opened up the door to at least 100 other treasures. Find a comfortable chair in a quiet place and let me tell you *my* story of a true Warren County Treasure – Mr. Jack Smith.

Now I'm not entirely sure when I first met him, but I know it had to be in the past two years. In fact, I'm almost certain it was just after I began writing these stories. As I sat in my office, a tall, thin man with a pile of papers in his arms walked past my window and into my door. "Good Morning!", he said with a full-body smile as he extended his hand. "I'm Jack Smith and I have a few things you might be interested in."

Well, a number of people had mentioned that I needed to meet a man named "Jack Smith", who was said to know the town of Warrenton, its history & businesses, like a man who had lived through the entire 238 years of her existence...and now, he had found me! "Absolutely," I said, shaking his hand. From a plain manila folder, Jack Smith proceeded to pull out articles and pictures (some over 100 years old), all about our famous "Warrenton Railroad". And this railroad was indeed famous nationwide as the shortest publicly-owned railroad in the country (just 2.9 miles) for the 101 years it ran.

But, I digress...let's rejoin my talk with Jack Smith...



Warrenton Railroad Engine No. 4. Julian J. Harrison standing in the door of the engine.

As I pored through these snapshots of history, Jack Smith stopped me on one particular picture...you see it now to your left. "That man there is my great uncle Julian J. Harrison, who I was named for..." And it was at this point that I was to hear the first of scores of stories about Warren County from Jack Smith, told as only he could tell it. "You see," he began and then had to stop as his entire body shook with a laugh. He gathered himself and went on,

"There was this time that my uncle was acting as conductor on the Railroad. The engine was struggling to make it to town from Warren Plains and it finally crept to a stop. Now there were two very large ladies on the train that day, in addition to the freight that was being hauled, that

had not missed a single meal in their entire lives.” Another pause in the story as he erupted in laughter again. “In order to get the train going again my uncle had to ask these two ladies to step off the train. Once they were on the side of the tracks, the train restarted the trip to town.” And he ended with another laugh to cap his story.

I learned in those few brief moments that Mr. Jack Smith *WAS* a wealth of knowledge about our local history, but even more memorable was the full-bodied laugh that would accent each story. The weeks and months passed and I could count on regular visits from Jack Smith...each time he came bearing books or old invoices he found in a warehouse or pictures or stories...and his unforgettable laugh.

And then, a little over a month ago I realized I hadn't had a visit from Jack Smith in a little while, so gathering several books he had lent me and a few other artifacts, I stopped by his home early one afternoon to check in on him. As I sat down to talk, his wife, Dot, mentioned that I had come at a good time...they had just finished meeting with the Hospice Nurse. Well, as much as I thought that I showed zero reaction to that statement, apparently, my face gave me away. Until that moment I didn't know (or more likely chose to ignore the fact) that he had even been sick. So we talked for a while longer...and just like always, I got at least two new stories from Jack Smith punctuated with laughs as well as a new armful of historical artifacts to add to examine. Just before I left I decided to nonchalantly ask, “So, what's up with this Hospice visit?” To which Jack Smith smiled broadly and said, “Oh, I'm just getting old.” And we said goodbye.

Fast forward to today. Honestly, I'm still processing the news I got Wednesday, that on a cold December morning we lost a treasure here in Warren County as Jack Smith passed. Now, the history he saved and the stories he told...to everyone...qualified him in my estimation as one of our true treasures; however, the man I was privileged to know for what was turned out to be a brief moment, was even more than that. In my mind, Jack Smith was one of a few rare people with something “extra” that earned him a place among the Crown Jewels of Warren County and indeed our World.

But, what was that “extra”? Was it his smile? His laugh? His stories? It was right in front of me...but I couldn't find the words.

Until... I've been listening to memories from dozens of people these past few days, each re-told with big smile. With each story it became clearer and clearer until suddenly it jumped out at me like his full-bodied laugh. I knew the “extra” that made visits with him so special. You see, Jack Smith had a priceless gift for taking something he loved – our rich history here in Warren County – and sharing it with you in just such a way that made his passion and his memory one just for you as you heard it. Old watchmaking tools & books that he passed along 30 years ago...an Art Deco watch that he repaired and sits on a local resident's dresser...a Red Ryder BB Gun...and pictures & tales of the historic Warrenton Railroad. Each memory Jack Smith shared with us is now forever tied to him and the things he loved and a permanent part of our lives. What a gift he gave!

And so, one final time, I shake your hand, Jack Smith and say “Thank you for sharing your memories to become memories for me.” And I have to chuckle and smile a little thinking that sometime in the late morning this past Wednesday, Jack Smith stood inside the Gates of Heaven after he was welcomed in with open arms, turned to St. Peter and after recovering from a laugh that lit up the skies said, “Do you remember the time my uncle Julian had to ask two ladies to get off the train?”

Blue Skies, Mr. Jack Smith. It was an honor and a gift to have known you.

Wherever you turn in Warren County we have a jewel...and a few special Crown Jewels.

“Warren County Historical Tidbits” is a project of The Chamber of Commerce of Warren County.