

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Bobby “Bob” Martin – the Math Teacher

What does a nuclear blast look like?

Bob Martin saw several in Nevada.

Long before, about a year before Einstein was persuaded to warn Roosevelt of a nuclear Nazi Germany, Bob was born in Sharp, Louisiana, about twenty miles west of Alexandria. When he was six years old, his family moved to Warren, Texas, in 1938.

“Been here ever since,” he said. “Went to Warren ISD from the first through the twelfth grades.”

Six in his class made that journey together through all of the twelve grades: Dorothy Chambless, Johnny Moyer, Wayne Forehand, Anna Gay Williams (Riley), and Eugene Read.

“Dorothy and Anna Gay are still around here. Eugene is in Vidor,” he said.

Bob was first, too, the Valedictorian of his Warren High School class. He graduated in the old building that has been boarded up for many years.

“But not for long,” said Gwen, kind of sad, because the old building is going to be torn down soon.

After only three years, Bob graduated from Sam Houston University in 1953 with a major in math. He liked math. “I just like to figure things out.”

He spent two years in the U.S. Army. His observation battalion during the Korean War was responsible for setting up survey points for infrared cameras around Camp Desert Rock, Nevada, to record atomic blast tests.



Camp Desert Rock was set up in 1951 as the home of the Army's Atomic Maneuver Battalion to watch and train people to operate in and around the aftermath of nuclear explosions. Today it is known as the Nevada National Security Site.

"On two of our surveys, we beat the Coastal Geodetic Survey," said Bob. "They were the people who surveyed the coastlines. Our surveys were more accurate. We could be off by one foot in 3,000 feet; they could be off one in 10,000 feet." Bob's battalion was that good.

On the option of watching the nuclear blast itself, that was "strictly voluntarily," he said. It was left up to them, and they chose to watch.

"We were in a trench about two miles away," he said. "The bomb was on top of a 500-foot tower. They set off a stick of dynamite ten seconds before the blast, to let everyone know it was coming." They had to have a warning, so that they would be sure to duck down when the atomic blast ignited. See the photo, one of several he kept from his time at Camp Desert Rock.

Imagine waiting for the dynamite blast that signaled the beginning of a ten second countdown for an experimental nuclear blast two miles away.

When the dynamite blew, that was the signal to DUCK! for in ten seconds – yeah – a nuclear explosion!

"The blast melted the tower," Bob said emphatically, "turned the sand of the desert into green glass. It was green *glass*. We had to duck down into the trench until heat wave and sound wave passed over us. The huts and vehicles *behind* us caught fire. After the blast, we stood up to watch the fireball and mushroom ... every color imaginable, just boiling and rolling. It was beautiful."

Beautiful? Yes, as nature exposed itself in all of its fearsome strength.

Which leads to another kind of exposure.

On one weekend, Camp Desert Rock hosted up thirty-two generals and admirals. Often entertainers would come from Las Vegas to give a show.

"Our battery commander and Jerry Lewis were old school buddies from New Jersey," Bob reflected. "Lewis invited the whole battery to come to his show, free eats and drinks." Bob smiled broadly.

They saw the Demarco Sisters and others.

Gypsy Rose Lee (1914-70) made an appearance. She was famous for her striptease act, more for that than the thirteen movies and several television shows in which she appeared.

She got the attention of those in Camp Desert Rock.

Bob laughed. "All of the officers sat up front! I'll tell you that. Of course, she did not get fully naked. She smiled. She had a little patch over her privates. 'Oh no,' came from one of the officers up front, when she did not take off everything. Big laugh, everyone laughed." Bob paused. "But she had taken off enough clothes ... and had wiggled enough."

Not quite as shocking as a nuclear blast, yet, one supposes, she was as captivating.

Back in Texas, Bob taught a couple of years in Aldine in North Houston. When his father died, he came home to take care of his mother.

He taught Math six years in Silsbee, which was when he met Gwen.

Bob's sister and Gwen's mother worked at Keller Industries just north of Woodville, and they conspired to get the couple together.

"Gwen asked me to go to her Senior Banquet," Bob said.

That was in May, and they married in August of 1962, and will have fifty years together in August of 2012.

Bob came to Warren ISD in 1963. After a brief interlude in the late 1980s, when he was principal of Warren High School for five

years, he went back to teaching math and retired for the first time in the early 1990s.

They have three children, Robert, Kyle Ray, and Kristi. Their youngest son, Kyle Ray, was killed in a motorcycle wreck in 1988. He was just twenty-two years old. It broke their hearts.

Gwen said, “I think it was the hardest thing I ever had to go through.”

“It was,” Bob resonated, shaking his head, reflecting on how he had a sense of his son’s tragedy as it happened. On the day their son died, Bob and Gwen were delivering their daughter to Abilene Christian University.

“As she was going into her dorm door, I felt something had happened. I felt something odd, as though something had left me,” he said, waving his hand upward. His eyes glossed, still hurting from the loss. They did not find out about the accident until they got back home.

Bob remembers many of his students and recalled one who still lives in the area.

“Treyson Stockton was one of the best math students I have ever seen,” Bob said. “He could just look at the problem and see the answer.” Treyson lives in Wildwood and owns Stockton Enterprises, a landscaping business specializing in large jobs.

When one of the two math teachers in Warren ISD became ill, Bob came to the rescue and taught the latter half of the day. He helped her until she could retire. Catching the teaching bug again, he went back to fulltime teaching for a while, then substituted until 2003 when he finally retired.

Bob loved teaching math and has forty-three years under his belt!

“Had a call the other day,” he said, “a friend in Arkansas said, ‘how do you work this problem.’ I still get calls on how to work math problem.”

That’s Bob, always willing to help, just like his wife.

Qwen taught kindergarten for twenty-seven years and reading for a few more years,

for a total thirty years at Warren ISD, retiring in 1998. “My goal was to help them desire to attend school and desire to continue on through their grades. I kind of think that today they are teaching too much too fast. Yet the world is a challenge.”

“I taught kindergarten one day,” Bob interjected, raising one finger. “Gwen had to get some blood tests. She told me what to do. But the kids complained, ‘Ms. Martin didn’t do that, she didn’t do that either.’ I told Gwen I did not want to do that anymore.”

Bob continued, “I did not have a lot of problems with the high school kids. Back then you could apply the board of education to the seat of understanding.” He smiled. “I liked teaching more than being a principal. I’d still be teaching if I wasn’t so old.” He just turned eighty.

Bob taught the current Warren High School principal, James Swinney, known as Jim Bo in back then. “He was a smart student, a really smart kid,” reflected Bob. “I had absolutely no problems out of him whatsoever. One six-week term Jim Bo got everything perfect.”

When Warren ISD integrated, “I told all my students that I would not give them any grade because of one’s color, or mistreat anyone. I just treated everyone fairly.”

Robert Louis, their son, reflected that well, “He is the kind of person who always does the right the thing, even when no one is watching. He is the most honest person I know.”

Gwen likes hats. “It started when I did recess duty. A lady gave me some hats,” she said.

“She has a red one she wears to Red Hats,” said Bob.

The Red Hats is a local social organization.

“We mostly go out to eat,” Gwen said.

She wears hats to the district and regional meetings of her sorority, Alpha Delta Kappa (AlphaDeltaKappa.org), and their local

chapter, Texas Gamma Phi. She has been a member of this honorary sorority for women educators for almost forty years.

“I wear a hat every Sunday morning to church,” she said, smiling broadly.

Dr. Keith Bellamy, the minister of the Woodville Church of Christ, said, “Gwen is a wonderful Christian lady! Love to hear her sing.”