

Earl Hamner In Memoriam

By James Person

When Earl Hamner was a boy growing up in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge, with its little rivers and villages, its pine forests and small hillside farms, he sometimes wondered about the world over the horizon. Although raised amid a close, loving family, he dreamed of seeing the world and making his mark as a writer. He dreamed big, but I suspect that even he had no idea of how large his life and impact as a writer would someday be.

For many of us, Earl is remembered as the creator of two long-running television series—*The Waltons* and *Falcon Crest*—and as a writer for many other programs, novels, and films. All of us remember his distinctive speaking voice: warm, intelligent, reassuring. For the more fortunate among us, he is remembered as something more.

When I was conducting research for his biography, it was hard not to be struck by a recurrent theme mentioned by every friend, business associate, actor, director, or writer who had worked with Earl. Every one of them said he was a good-hearted man, considerate, polite, a man with an infectious laugh and a sense of humor that was wicked without being mean-spirited. Friendly and very giving of his time and attention to others. A humble man in a world of outsize egos. One of the good guys. *Everyone I spoke to* considered him a representative from the last generation of true gentlemen.

Earl carried the manners of his upbringing throughout his long life, and his beliefs as a writer and as a man coincided entirely with the famous words of William Faulkner's Nobel address. Earl kept a typed copy of that address posted on the wall of his office. The specific words that moved him included Faulkner's statement that the problems clouding the national news reports tend to consume the minds of young writers, leading them to forget "the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."

Faulkner believed that the writer must cut through the noise and distraction to leave nothing in his or her workshop for anything but "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths, lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice."

Then Earl would come to the money-quote: Faulkner wrote: "I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal . . . because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. . . . The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

Those words were almost Earl's motto. In his autobiographical works of imagination especially—*Spencer's Mountain*, *The Homecoming*, *The Waltons*—the past flows into

the present. The present blends with yesterday. Through these and other works, we have seen yesterday and now look to tomorrow.

Until the very end of his life, Earl knew he had one more great idea for a television special that might be made into a series, and he worked hard to make it happen: one last presentation that would play a part, however small, toward redeeming the time. It was a modern-day story that would take the viewer back to the Virginia Blue Ridge and the stone foundation of a long-vanished family farmhouse, in search of the lost bedrock qualities that give life purpose and centeredness. It was to be called *Foundations*, and Earl and his agent, Mike Wise, and I did everything we could to interest the decision-makers who would green-light the program, but none were interested. Be that as it may, to the end of his life, Earl held to his vision of television and motion pictures as media for affirming the better angels of our nature, and to remind us that the past is never dead; it's not even past.

As it was with his friend Ray Bradbury, his lost world of wondering boyhood and moral imagination can never stale. In Depression-era Walton's Mountain, in the opulence of *Falcon Crest*, even in the unnerving alternative worlds of *The Twilight Zone*, he has created worlds for us to delight in and revisit time and again.

Rest forever in peace, Earl: dear husband, beloved father and uncle, devoted brother, superb writer, mentor to many grateful protégés, most faithful of friends, and true gentleman.