



Albert Perrine Smith Jr.

January 9, 1927 - March 19, 2021

Albert Perrine Smith, Jr., a noted Kentucky journalist and public citizen, died peacefully at home on March 19, 2021 in Sarasota, Fla. He was 94.

Al, who was born in Sarasota and grew up in Hendersonville, Tenn., owned and published seven weekly newspapers in Kentucky and Tennessee. For 33 years, he was host and producer of Kentucky Educational Television's "Comment on Kentucky," the longest running public-affairs show on a PBS affiliate. In 1979, he was appointed federal co-chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission by President Jimmy Carter, serving in the Carter and Reagan administrations until 1982. He hosted and produced a daily radio show, "Primeline," from 1990 to 1996, and wrote two books. He was a charter member of the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame, a fellow of the national Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), the former president of the Kentucky Press Association and the former chairman of the Kentucky Arts Commission.

At 15, Al beat out 100,000 contestants to win the American Legion's national oratorical contest. He traveled the country for a year speaking to raise money for the war effort. After high school, he proudly served stateside in the Army during World War II. Al then attended Vanderbilt University (spottily) before beginning his journalism career in New Orleans, where he worked as an editor and reporter for The Times-Picayune and the States-Item. Though his 10

years in New Orleans were colorful and fueled a lifetime of stories, alcoholism derailed his career there. Al relocated to Russellville, Ky., where he became the editor of The News-Democrat, and quit drinking in 1963. He went on to accompany countless others to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and was a “friend of Bill W.” for 58 years.

In 1966, he met his future wife, Martha Helen. They married in 1967. The next year, Al left The News-Democrat to start his own weekly, The Logan Leader, and soon purchased The News-Democrat. Through the 1970s, Al was editor and publisher of his Russellville papers, and with Martha Helen and other partners acquired several other weeklies. He sold the chain in 1985. As editor, he took strong stands on public issues, particularly education. In 1974, he began a broadcasting career, hosting “Comment” on Friday nights. The popular show featured a panel of Kentucky journalists discussing and analyzing that week’s news.

In the 1970s and 80s, Al became involved in several statewide public service organizations. He was founding chair of the Kentucky Oral History Commission and chaired both Leadership Kentucky and the Shakertown Roundtable, a forum on challenging issues facing Kentucky. With the University of Kentucky, he founded the Institute for Rural Journalism and Community Issues (IRJ) and was chair emeritus of its advisory board. He retired from his television career in 2007 and went on to write two memoirs, Wordsmith and Kentucky Cured.

Al’s greatest legacy was the many people he helped along the way. He mentored younger journalists and others who crossed his path. He was a kind, generous man and a wonderful (if long-winded) storyteller, with a Shakespearean grasp of political foible and triumph. His curiosity was more than a journalist’s quest for a story; it was a wider curiosity that reflected his love for humanity and its condition. That quality brought him a wide circle of

friends from all walks of life. He loved his family, Kentucky, political stories, his dogs Chloe and Coco, chocolate and Willie Nelson. Fats Waller's "Your Feet's Too Big" transported him to the snowy rifle range at Fort Sill, Okla. or to New Orleans, where he loved the food, the music and the people.

Al received honorary doctorates from the University of Kentucky and eight other colleges and universities. He was named a Distinguished Rural Kentuckian by the Kentucky Association of Electric Cooperatives and a Rural Hero (for journalism) by the National Rural Assembly. He received the Medallion for Intellectual Achievement from the UK Library Associates, the Kentucky Broadcasters Association's Gabbard Distinguished Kentuckian Award, Leadership Kentucky's Flame of Excellence Award and several other honors. Two statewide awards are named in his honor. One Al Smith Award, given by the IRJ together with the Bluegrass SPJ, honors public service through community journalism. The other Al Smith Award is given by the Kentucky Arts Commission to an artist who has achieved a high level of excellence and creativity.

Al was the son of Albert Perrine Smith and Elvira Mace Smith. Survivors include his beloved wife of almost 54 years, Martha Helen Smith; his children, Catherine McCarty (William) of Birmingham, Ala., Lewis Carter Hancock of Louisville, and Virginia Major (William) of West Hartford, Conn., as well as an "adopted" son, Huaming Gu of Shanghai, China; his sister, Robin Burrow (James), of Abilene, Tex.; and two nieces, Robin Rutledge Sloane (Robert) of Fort Worth, Tex. and Rachel Burrow of Austin, Tex. He is also survived by five grandchildren, Evan and Connor (Ikue) McCarty, Lauren Hancock, and Susannah and Ava Major, as well as numerous cousins.

A memorial service will be held at a later date. The family suggests that memorial contributions may be made in Al's honor to the Institute for Rural

Journalism and Community Issues at 343 S. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., #206
BLD, Lexington, KY 40506-0012, and to the Hope Center at hopectr.org.