

Horton, KS



Robert Paul Jones, 87, passed away at Baptist Health Fishermen- Community Hospital in Marathon, Florida, on the evening of January 8, 2024.

He was born at Horton Hospital on March 17, 1936, and grew up on the family farm, homesteaded in 1870 by his great-grandfather. Young Bobby never tired of hearing the story: Owen Jones, a Welshman, had come to the Kennekuk post office seeking a piece of land to homestead. The postmaster recommended a quarter-section a mile and a half to the northeast that had a spring and a stand of timber on it—oak and walnut. Owen and his wife spent the first winter in a wagon sheltered in a draw of the timber, but over time they thrived.

When he was four or five, Bobby and his older sister Margaret liked to visit that little spring and shape miniature animals and houses out of the nearby clay.

Bobby attended the one-room Mound Valley schoolhouse on Highway 73. There, at a pickup baseball game against a neighboring country school, he first met Ken Koger, who would become a lifelong friend. He often walked home from school with Harold Bennaka, a year younger, whose parents lived up the road east. To pass the time on the two-mile walk, the two would bounce a sunflower ahead of them on the gravel road as they walked, holding it by the stem, in a contest to see which one- sunflower head broke off first.

When Bobby got a speedometer for his bike, daredevil Harold rode on its handlebars as Bobby pedaled down the steep Kennekuk Cemetery hill—Harold wanted to see for himself what m.p.h. the speedometer registered.

The Rock Island line cut through the Jones farm, on a slight upslope from west to east. Lying awake at night, Bobby could hear the steam locomotive struggling against that gradient. As he described it, it went “WHOMP!!! ... WHOMP!!! ... WHOMP!!!” He thought it sounded like a giant- footsteps crossing the land, making it shudder.

As a youth, Bob enjoyed going for airplane rides with his Uncle Hugh, who piloted a two-seater. Once, Hugh landed in the hayfield east of the lane beyond the barnyard, and Bob and his father,

Claude, had to pick up three loads of hay before he had runway enough to take off again.

Claude constructed a basketball backboard and goal above a spacious planked platform up in the barn- hayloft so Bob could practice shooting. It paid off, as Bob, at 6'4", started at center for Horton High, graduating in '54. At a banquet a few years later his coach, John Putnam, remarked to him that Bob had never lost a tipoff. Before the opening tip, guard Bill Hudson would on occasion throw Bob a wink, and Bob would tap the ball to the side as Hudson raced by, grabbed it and burst through defenders to score.

Like his father before him, early in life Robert began building and adapting, trading and improvising. From an article in Popular Mechanics, while in high school Bob built a boat out of Fiberglass in the front room of the farmhouse and tore out part of the wall to get the boat out. He attached a motor and took the boat out for spins on Mission Lake with Sam and Tom Gaskell. (A picture window replaced the missing wall section.) The three also modified a '32 Ford coupe that they entered in area dirt-track races, usually winning. (The car eventually wound up junked out in an overgrown creek south of the house but mysteriously disappeared and has not been seen in decades.)

Robert had a small cannon, about 18 inches long, that his dad had found at the Horton dump, that Bob thought must have been fashioned by a worker in the Rock Island shops in his spare time. Now and then, he and Koger would shoot it off downtown or at Mission Lake after buying blasting potash at Armstrong Sundries. The town cop had an idea who was behind the mischief but could never catch them at it. In later years, to his children- delight, Bob fired the cannon each Fourth of July.

He met Evelyn Ann Ratzlaff through mutual friends at a wedding and dance in Topeka, and they married in September 1957, setting off from the church in a glass-topped Ford Crown Victoria. The births of two boys and two girls followed, and the family of six lived in the downstairs of the farmhouse, with Bob- parents living upstairs. Bob, Evelyn and kids attended Zion Lutheran Church in Hiawatha.

Evelyn worked full time as a nurse, but she and all four children pitched in to help Robert work the farm. Bob served in the National Guard for one stint and enjoyed it, especially the marksmanship contests, but declined to reenlist because the two-week commitment for camp in summer interfered with harvest and placed an undue burden on Evelyn, who was left to run things in his absence with four kids under five years old and a full-time job. He also worked as a mechanic at Foster Ford one or two winters with his friend Bill Edman.

Early in their marriage, he had the chance to purchase land to the east, north, and west of the farmhouse from the Burney family. It stretched the young couple financially, but luckily they proceeded to have two good years of harvest yields, which, with Evelyn- paycheck, got them over the hump and out of danger.

Through oddities he bought at auctions or constructed, Robert gave his children an unorthodox but interesting childhood—you never knew what he would bring home, but it was usually large. On one of the big farm ponds he built, the kids paddled a rowboat made of two 1940s

snub-nosed car hoods welded together. Down country roads, they rode a World War II Army surplus Cushman motor scooter and drove a pair of pint-sized Japanese pickups.

In 1967, Bob purchased a massive old pontoon boat, filled the three-foot-high cast-iron pontoons with foam to make it float, built a plywood cabin with a corrugated tin roof, winched it onto a flatbed truck, and hauled the thing to Tuttle Creek Reservoir, where it attracted as much attention as the Loch Ness Monster might have.

Near the farm- corncrib he built a lookout tower for his children, sinking four poles to support a platform 10 feet high, with a ladder as well as a knotted rope attached to the frame for climbing up to it, and a wall on one side for a basketball goal. Summer weekends the family went camping and boating, and one time Bob tried—unsuccessfully—to pull all four kids up on skis at once with the Larson outboard. The motor wouldn't do it.

During harvest he sometimes ran the combine till midnight, but after the 1978 death from sudden illness of his son Allen, who had already begun farming with him, Robert largely relinquished the operation of the farm, which had never been his passion. In its place, he pursued buying and selling heavy earth-moving equipment—Caterpillar D8s and such—at Forke Brothers auctions, while renting the crops out. Using the trade journals, he was good at assessing the value of used equipment, and his mechanical aptitude allowed him to spot most any problem and fix it. (He wore a trademark leather cowboy hat with enamel pins in it to make himself easily recognizable to the auctioneers.) With the dozers and scrapers, he pushed out trees, shaped terraces, built 13 ponds on the farm, and cut channels to straighten the winding course of Otter Creek until a government regulation prevented it.

Prompted by inheriting his dad- collection of Winchester rifles, in the '80s and '90s he also began attending gun shows, where he traded the Winchesters off to deal instead in tiny derringer pistols such as a gambler might hide in his boot.

At one show he met Con, a New Zealander with a dairy farm, and that friendship led to journeys to New Zealand and Australia with Evelyn and Ken and Chris Koger, and many colorful encounters with Aussies. He had a hankering to visit Alice Springs, a oasis town 3,000 kilometers into the Outback, taking 32 hours from Brisbane. Following an Aussie- advice to never pass a petrol station without topping off and to get clear off on the shoulder when the giant truck-trains came barreling past, they made it safely to Alice Springs and back.

After several winters spent exploring Las Vegas, he and Evelyn, for the last 30 years, had wintered in the Florida Keys, in a low-slung house with a broad patio on a bay of the Atlantic, where he could dock his sailboat and watch boats come and go while sipping his morning coffee. The house had been built by a Massachusetts politico, and former president Harry S. Truman used to drive up from Key West to play poker there at the round table in the living room. Robert savored the laid-back Keys lifestyle and made friends easily in Marathon.

As a farmer, he was attuned to clouds and sunsets, and, even as he lay in a Miami hospital bed after the first of this year, would notice and describe particular shapes in the clouds.

Robert is survived by his second son, Benjamin Clay Jones (wife Irma), of Kalamazoo, Michigan; his daughters, Beth Louise Rizza (husband Andrew), of Georgetown, Texas, and Sarah Lynn Jones, of Lake Ozark, Missouri; grandchildren Shawn (wife Pam) Rizza, Grace (husband Mark) Kucza, Luke (wife Jess) Rizza, Zach (wife Katie) Rizza, and Will Rizza; and great-grandchildren Kate Rizza, Harper Rizza, and Otis Kucza.

(Once warmer weather arrives, a graveside service will take place at Kennekuk Cemetery. In lieu of flowers, the family suggests mourners wishing to do so can make a memorial contribution to their favorite charity.)

Robert was preceded in death by his parents, Claude and Ruby Banning Jones; sister, Margaret Gaskell; and eldest son, Allen. His wife, Evelyn, passed away last September; he had devotedly taken care of her during the last eight years of her life, when she suffered from dementia. They had been married 66 years—a span of longevity that would have merited their being mentioned as “today- newlywed couple” on Paul Harvey- national radio broadcast, which, for so many years, they had listened to at noon every day during dinnertime on the farm, when Robert had come in from the fields.