

Bill Sherman (1918-2003)



William P. (Bill) Sherman, the last of the founding members of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, died March 5 (2003) in Portland, Oregon. “Citizen” was the only epitaph Bill would have wanted, but like Thomas Jefferson, he was a person whose achievements and contributions to society were many and varied: fighter pilot, entrepreneur, art collector, historian, philanthropist, mentor, and teacher.

When he was nine years old, Bill saw a silent movie that motivated him to be a fighter pilot. The day after Pearl Harbor, he volunteered, and eventually flew fighters in the Italian theater, chalking up 84 missions and earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and so many other medals they had to be listed on an addendum to his discharge papers.

A native Montanan, Bill and his beloved wife, Marian, settled in Portland in 1945 and in his words “got hooked into a (fire-place implement) business with four men in a basement of a house and built it into a national organization.” The company grew to \$20 million in sales and a work force of 500.

His success as a businessman allowed Bill to pursue his strong interest in western art. He became an early supporter of John Clymer, and his early backing of the Charles M. Russell Auction of Western Art benefited the Russell Museum in Great Falls. His financial support and wise counsel also contributed immeasurably to the success of the Montana Historical Society, the Museum of the Rockies, the Holter Art Museum in Helena, the Multnomah Athletic Club of Portland, the Oregon Historical Society, and the High Desert Museum (Bend, OR).

He served the LCTHF as president in 1984-85. He gave crucial advice and financial assistance to the Portage Route and Headwaters chapters, based in Great Falls and Bozeman. He also obtained the Foundation’s support for the authorization to create the Lewis and Clark interpretive center in Great Falls-then made a cash gift of \$228,000 to help match a federal grant and raised a like amount from another foundation.

Bill attributed his success to the nuns who taught him in his formative years. In gratitude, he commissioned a life-size bronze statue of a nun for the St. Helena Cathedral. His motto was, "It is easy to get things done when you don't care who gets the credit."

He was deeply concerned about passing to the next generation an understanding of, and love for, our nation's heritage. Last year he made substantial gifts of cash and art - more than 50 signed, limited-edition prints of historical subjects by nationally prominent artists - to schools throughout Montana.

Bill was born in Butte on June 1, 1918, and was buried in the Veterans Cemetery at Fort Harrison, near Helena, on March 24. He received full military honors, including a 21-gun salute by an Air Force honor guard and a black-powder salute by the Lewis and Clark Honor Guard, another of the many organizations he assisted. In addition to his wife, survivors include his son, Roger, and daughter, Charis.

-Bob Doerk

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(with minor corrections submitted by Bill's son Roger on Sept. 6, 2011)

(Sherman was a Director of the Foundation, 1979-1982; Vice President, 1982-1983; President Elect, 1983-1984; and President, 1984-1985.)

Prepared by Bob Gatten, 2011