

REMEMBERING WILLIAM F. MILES—A story by Bob Hill

David Miles, son of William F. Miles, stands in front of the ponds at William F. Miles Park

By any measure you care to use – family, friends, church or community – Bill Miles made a difference.

Even now, twelve years after his death in 1998 at the age of 76, one of his sons, David Miles, will cry while talking about him. Bill Miles's family and old friends can congregate and worship at St. Patrick's Catholic Church on N. Beckley Station Road, a church that Miles helped create not far from his beloved family farm on Shelbyville Road.

It's also safe to say that were it not for his love of that farm, his willingness to renovate, preserve and protect what had become a barren dumping ground marked with a series of steadily eroding fishing lakes and polluted water, The Parklands of Floyds Fork would have a different look and attraction – or at least a very different northern entrance.

So Bill Miles, who grew up with nothing and had even less after the 1937 Flood buried his family's small dairy farm, left a rich legacy far beyond anything he could have accumulated or imagined.

“He was a mentor to so many people, but he never sought to be one,” David Miles said of his father. “He was the very essence of life itself.”

It was a life built on hard work – and a natural ability to use his head and his hands. Bill Miles's father was disabled; suffered with tuberculosis and had lost one arm in an industrial accident; his four sons and wife kept the dairy farm going, grew their food in its soil.

“They worked...and they could eat,” said David Miles. “My mother came from a similar kind of background.”

Bill Miles rode a bicycle from that farm near the Outer Loop and Minors Lane to downtown Louisville to learn a trade at Manual High School, then located at Brook and Oak Streets.

After graduation he attended a diesel engine school, sharpened his math skills, worked for a brake company and then an equipment company, founded his own automotive repair shop – and saw it fail.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s he worked as a mechanic for William Tractor Company, steadily repairing equipment as the company helped build the historic, mile-long Wolf Creek Dam on the Cumberland River creating the 65,000-acre Lake Cumberland.

He would eventually work for the construction companies on three of Louisville's largest construction projects; the Louisville floodwall; General Electric; the state fairgrounds. He would take a job maintaining the equipment for the state highway department, would become director of the Kentucky Department of Transportation.

Along the way he – and several partners – helped create the Kentucky Machinery, a coal mining equipment and construction company of which he would become vice-president and general manager.

His family, searching for words for his eulogy, described him as complex, demanding, frugal and competitive, a resilient and energetic, self-made man who was also analytical, spiritual, compassionate, forgiving, loving and blessed.

“Failure,” said David at his father's funeral “was not an option.”

Along with his other ventures Bill Miles and his brothers became very involved in buying, selling and renovating farms; one of the first was a 237-acre farm in Hardin County.

David Miles – whose family then lived in a small subdivision in Okolona at the time – has fond memories of working on weekends on that farm.

“It was another disaster that they bought,” he said. “And we cleaned that farm up and fenced it.

“As a matter of fact, that’s where I learned how to start working...From the time I was out of the seventh grade on, I was down there helping them.”

It was a routine that would become familiar over the years; the Miles family and friends picking up rocks, building fences, pushing and re-shaping eroded soil with bulldozers and tractors, much of the work done using old equipment also given new life with their ever-capable hands.

“I was operating equipment, doing all kinds of crazy stuff too young for a little kid to be doing,” Miles said, “but farm kids have a whole different perspective on that.”

In the early 1960s a brief family dispute – later peacefully settled – saw the Hardin County farm sold. David Miles, still a teenager, had strongly connected with that land. “That was the worst day in my life.”

But his father immediately went looking for another farm and in 1964 found a rolling, partially wooded 211 acres along Shelbyville Road in what was then a rural area between Middletown and Eastwood – property that stretched along Floyds Fork almost to the new Interstate-64.

Louisville development was leaning eastward, but its relentless push was still miles away. The Gene Snyder Freeway then consisted of one section between Taylorsville Road and Shelbyville Road and another, shorter piece between Westport Road and U.S. 42.

Floyds Fork meandered through the wetlands at the bottom of the new farm. The Midland Trail Golf Club across Floyds Fork had just opened. The Big Ten Farm across Shelbyville Road was the nearest big neighbor; a place to raise cattle and board horses. Valhalla Golf Club would not officially open on that property for another 22 years, in 1986.

David Miles remembers his father paid about \$750 an acre for his new farm. It had been owned by a man named Lincoln Miller, who had built a series of pay fish lakes on the property; an old man sat in a gray shack on a hill above the lakes collecting the fees. The property was littered with old building materials, junk cars and trucks and debris. It was another Bill Miles Farm & Reclamation Project – and not without a lot more work.

“I do know that Lincoln Miller evidently was a demolition contractor of some sort,” said David Miles. “They had built lakes on the property and had not done a real good job of constructing them.

“In addition they brought in a lot of demolition materials from their jobs and stored them...They had porcelain toilets, for example, and sinks...We’re talking about a mountain of stuff, like a thousand of them.

“...The junk piled up all over that place was just beyond belief. And when I saw that farm, I was just a kid, I was 14 years old...and I thought...What in the world have you bought?”

“But my father saw it as an opportunity to do something and make it better. And of course, we did. We touched every area of that farm, from one end to the other. I mean, it was amazing what all we did to it.”

Being an executive with Kentucky Machinery gave Bill Miles and his family access to the bulldozers and tractors required to clean up for farm. He became especially attached to a big yellow bulldozer he and David had salvaged from a fire – a 1950’s HD9 Allis-Chalmers the size of a small garage that he used for many years.

Over the next decade the porcelain fixtures were buried, the junk cars and trucks were cut up and sold for scrap, the more poorly constructed pay lakes either drained or rebuilt. New spillways were created to prevent erosion; their walls hand-built of stone. The old barns were rebuilt. A road was bulldozed and maintained along Floyds Fork to create better access to the back of the farm.

All the pay lakes had become overgrown with willows – and still in use. David and a friend took a bulldozer and long, three-quarter-inch cable and pulled them out.

“It took us forever,” said David. “We had the doggonedest pile of willow bushes you ever saw in your life.”

The entire front edge of the farm along Shelbyville Road had been washed away creating a deep ravine; 20 feet of dirt was moved from the top of a nearby hill to fill it in, allowing a new road to be built onto the property. A new brick house for the family was built on a hill above the road, offering a long view of the countryside.

The work was endless. The finished product was renovated lakes, green hills and protected wetlands. David Miles remembers many days when he did nothing but pick up sticks and rocks, but he holds sweet, time-worn memories of being with friends and family – and working with his father:

“We were 14, 15-year-old kids...Dad would literally take us out there in the morning, drop us off at seven o’clock, and we had to work all day long.

“He come back and pick us up that night, six o’clock or whatever, and he take us home, or stay out there with us, and we’d work later on in the evening...”

But it wasn’t all work; the boys would also take off to go fishing or paddles canoes along Floyds Fork, a mixture of tranquil beauty literally tainted with the sewage of development.

“Part of the time it was contaminated down there,” said David, “the water quality started diminishing.”

Restoring fertility to the barren land also became a family project. David and his father rebuilt an old Coca-Cola delivery truck, adding a 20-foot flatbed with side racks.

After high school, while attending classes at the University of Louisville, David would stop by the old Bourbon Stockyards near downtown Louisville, scoop up loads of manure, haul it home and spread it on the fields to enrich them.

The family and neighbors raised tobacco; the old stalks were scattered across the soil and disked in to add nutriment. The family raised cattle on the land, the first venture a mini-disaster that can be viewed with laughter 40 years later; the cattle escaped, running madly down Shelbyville Road – and more than once onto the Midland Trail Golf Club.

“It’s a wonder they didn’t sue us out of business,” David said.

Much of the work was done in the evenings and on weekends while Bill Miles – and then David Miles, who later joined the firm – were still active with Kentucky Machinery.

Over time family saved the lakes, turned erosion into grass waterways, created enough healthy pasture to raise 10,000 bales of hay a year. Equally important, it gave rise to Bill Miles as a conservation activist.

David said his father knew more development in the area was inevitable and he didn’t oppose it, he just wanted it done in a way that preserved the property and the environment.

“He was way ahead of his time on that,” David said.

In 1979 Bill Miles and David formed a new company, Process Machinery, Shelbyville, KY., which designs and builds machinery to crush stone and minerals. All three of David Miles’s children are now executives with the company.

Bill Miles was also active with the Eastwood Fire Department the Jefferson County Regional Water Management Board and as chairman of the Jefferson County Soil Conservation District. In 1990 he was selected as the Master Conservationist for Jefferson County.

But he didn’t need to attend meetings to learn about water pollution. He only had to walk down to Floyds Fork where he, too, could see the smaller package plants and subdivision lateral lines were not working; the stream was in trouble.

So with an eye toward protecting the farm – and Floyds Fork – he approached the Metropolitan Sewer District in 1995 with a plan that many others living in the area opposed: Miles would sell his 211 acre farm to MSD to build a regional sewage plant on it – IF the rest of the land would go to Metro Parks.

“It was win-win for the landowner, this community and the environment,” said David Miles. “He’d always wanted his land preserved.”

Which is exactly what happened.

Bill Miles had gotten to know Bud Schardein, executive director of MSD, from their years together on the soil conservation board. In 1995 MSD bought the 211 acre farm.

Schardein said MSD kept 80 of those acres for its new regional treatment plant and sold the remaining acres to Metro Parks for what would become William F. Miles Park.

William F. Miles Park was incorporated into The Parklands of Floyds Fork effective Jan. 1, 2011, with The Parklands to assume all operations and maintenance.

Beyond that, the MSD plant became used as an ongoing environmental educational facility by students at Eastern and Fairdale high schools, as well as the land being used many other nature groups.

“I can’t say enough about Bill Miles,” said Schardein. “That man truly loved the land. He was never happier than when he rode around out there on his tractor. He made sure it was preserved.”

