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Ranger Bart's story ends at age 66

BY KEVIN JENKINS
kevin@thespectrum.com

ST. GEORGE - Bart Anderson, the iconic folklorist who brought Southern Utah history to life for generations of local residents and visitors, died Monday evening at his home after months of declining health, said his family and friends.

Anderson, 66, was best known for his lectures on area history, told in what he described as "Barttonized" style, as well as the hikes that he led while he described the significance of local landmarks. He also wrote a weekly column that appeared in The Spectrum under his name or as "Ranger Bart" for about 20 years.

"A lady called this morning wanting a lecture. I had to say, 'No, I'm sorry he can't do that,'" his widow, Delorice, said Tuesday. "He loved Southern Utah history. He could tell you so many stories."

Former St. George Mayor Karl Brooks said the area was lucky to have been associated with Anderson.

"He was one of the great men in the state, and we had the good luck of having him here when he was at his peak," Brooks said.

Brooks' mother, Juanita, was a world-renowned writer about the history of the region and Utah's pioneer settlers, and Anderson said her work on the Mountain Meadows Massacre drew him to St. George during the 1960s. She fed his love of folklore as it grew and developed.

"He was still reading quite a bit about the Mountain Meadows Massacre (during the past year). He was very fascinated by that," said Russell Behrmann, the St. George Chamber of Commerce president.

Behrmann said that in spite of the health issues, Anderson was the kind of guy that kept bouncing back.

"I really thought I'd see him again and it (the news of his death) caught me off guard," he said. "There were times when he came in to volunteer here where, if it had been me, you wouldn't have got me out of bed. He came into the chamber every single week. He'd sit here and answer the phone and talk to people who came in. It's just hard to believe that he's stopped."

Anderson learned perseverance as a child when polio left him disabled. Doctors told his parents that Anderson would never walk again, but his father pushed him to swim and exercise until he regained the ability to walk and compensate for his disability.

Behrmann said the chamber took the step of advertising Anderson's schedule two years ago when his health began to decline so that people who might seek specialized information - such as where to hike to see interesting petroglyphs - would know when he would be available to answer questions.

"He was valuable," Behrmann said. "He could answer questions nobody else could answer."

Murray Gubler, the chamber's chairman of the board, said visitors to the chamber's offices got more than they bargained for when they talked to Anderson.

"Even in bad economies, he made people feel like they were worth something," he said.

Gubler said he joined the St. George Kiwanis Club around 1976 and that Anderson had just recently joined the club, which raises money for projects that benefit children.

Kiwanis was one of many organizations in which Anderson participated. Others include the Sunshiners, the Southwest Symphony, the Zion Natural History Association, the Arizona Strip Interpretive Association, the American Heart Association, the Washington County Historical Society and the Folklore Association of the University of Utah.

He was proud of the "Quiet Pioneer Award" he received from KSL-TV and the Days of '47 committee work he provided free of charge, as well as the Outstanding Volunteer award he received from Hillary Clinton as one of five people so honored in the country.

Not only was Anderson a storyteller, there is no shortage of people who tell stories about him.

"He was a big HAM radio operator. He kept that up right up to the end," said Robert Blair, a family friend who says he walked across the Grand Canyon with Anderson, rim to rim, perhaps six or seven times.

"He used to have a lecture on the anniversary of the Mountain Meadows Massacre, up there on the scene at night," Blair said. "He'd go up and build a campfire, and people would come and sit around the campfire."

Blair described his friend as a "gentle egotist," someone who wasn't perfect by any means.

"He loved to be before an audience," Blair said. "He could be down and out and put him up before an audience and he'd come to life. He enjoyed honors. He took them very seriously."

Regarding the "Bartonized" stories, Behrmann said when he first met Anderson he took issue with some of the tales' historical inaccuracies.

"I pointed out that some of those stories were hurting my Native American friends," Behrmann said. "He was humble enough and teachable enough that he wanted to know how he could make them more accurate. He knew history is tied to the present."

Behrmann described an instance when he was giving a lecture and followed a talk by Anderson.

"He ran over (time), so of course I was annoyed," Behrmann said. "But as soon as he was done the room went from 300 people to about 30 that wanted to listen to me. ... When I got to know Bart, I learned that part of what he was into was telling stories and entertaining people."

Lyman Hafen, the executive director of the Zion Natural History Association, where Anderson worked for years to help support the park through fund-raising activities, said Anderson was an original character whose like may not be seen again.

"I'm up here in Zion," he said. "I just look up at these towering stones above us. ... He has a heart as big as Zion Canyon."



