

A Local Treasure Is Lost

By: Darrell Huckaby

I didn't get to go to J. Hope Branham's funeral. You know how it is. I needed to. I even meant to - but I had pressing business matters and it wasn't at a convenient time and I have the kids to watch and, well . . . you know how it is.

I really could have worked it out to go.

I should have worked it out to go.

I wish I had gone.

I hope they buried him with his hat.

J. Hope Branham and his hat are well known commodities to long time Newton County residents - especially those who were here before I-20. The early '60's - those were the days. Oxford College was just plain old "Little Emory". Three mills in Porterdale were running full time and folks were driving from all over to eat with Effie Boyd at the Porterdale Hotel. Major League sports were still years away and the Newton County Rams were synonymous with excellence in high school basketball. Their loyal fans were legendary throughout the state, and none were more loyal - or more visible - than J. Hope Branham. More specifically, J. Hope Branham and his hat.

J. Hope Branham was a war hero. He trained fighter pilots and helped the United States defeat Japan in World War II. Very few people would ever know that about him. But everyone knew that he loved sports and that he loved young people and that he loved watching Newton County young people play sports. J. Hope attended every game he possibly could involving the young athletes of Newton County. It didn't matter if the game was football, basketball, or little league baseball - if young people were playing it, J. Hope was going to be there. Basketball was his favorite. Lot's of people in Newton County could say that in the '60's.

J. Hope always wore a hat. Ever the gentleman, he always took his hat off in the house. This included the high school gym. But J. Hope was never one to sit still. He was often out of his seat - waving his arms - cheering on the team he was supporting. Since his hat was in his hand, he got in the habit of waving his hat. The more exciting the game, the wilder J. Hope got with his hat. Soon the crowds started watching for

him and the wilder he got, the louder they got.

He even developed different waves for different situations. There were the “in your face waves” for moments when the local team took a commanding lead; there were “we need a rally waves”, which were particularly effective for encouraging the crowd to come to life during a tough game; and there were “superduper double pump waves” for those moments when his team had rallied from a deficit and caused an exasperated opposing coach to call time out in order to regroup his forces.

My personal favorite was the “Bubba Hill 54 foot shot against Druid Hills wave”. I only got to see it once.

J. Hope was to hat waving what Michael Jordan is to slam dunking.

J. Hope Branham was an institution within an institution. Before the days of million dollar salaries for athletes and televised sports on a twenty-four hour a day basis, Newton County basketball was an institution. It was a source of pride for an entire community. It meant something to people. Anyone who wasn't a part of it or a witness to it can never understand. J. Hope Branham was a big part of that institution.

I know from personal experience that when the young people of Newton County saw people like J. Hope, who obviously cared about them, it made them feel special. When people feel special as teenagers it stays with them and helps them over lots of rough spots in life.

Over the past twenty years I only saw J. Hope Branham a handful of times. But I was always glad to see him and he always seemed glad to see me. He always had his hat with him and I usually troubled him to wave it for me. He never seemed to mind.

The last time I saw J. Hope was in February. He had made the trip from Oxford to Loganville to watch a high school basketball game. His old friend Ronald Bradley, former Newton High basketball coach, after spending nearly two decades in private schools, was plying his trade at the public high school there. He was proving all over again that even in 1995, hard work and discipline could still produce excellence, and that young people could still galvanize and energize an entire community. Like me, J. Hope wanted to be a part of it. Apparently so did alot of other Newton Countians, because the stands were full of Covington people.

J. Hope looked old and feeble. He couldn't hear well and could barely walk. Someone told me he was eighty-something. He sat quietly on the first row, leaning on his cane, as the Loganville team fell behind by eleven at half-time. Toward the end of the third quarter the Loganville team, still trailing, got hot and made a comeback. They

took the lead and the crowd was up. So was J. Hope. Almost painfully he hoisted his hat above his head and twirled it in slow, short circles - once - twice - and a third time. Then he turned and smiled at the large Covington contingent behind him who were still standing and clapping - long after the rest of the gym had settled back into their seats. They were applauding the play on the floor; they were applauding J. Hope; they were applauding their own revived memories. There were tears in more than one eye that night.

And now, J. Hope Branham, the man who named the Rams, like so many of our other institutions, is gone. I hope the county realizes what a treasure they have lost.

I wish I had gone to his funeral.

I hope they buried him with his hat.

Darrell Huckaby is from Porterdale. After twenty years of teaching and coaching he is in the process of pursuing his lifetime dream of becoming a writer. He has written a novel, Need Two, about a fictitious journey to New Orleans for the 1980 Sugar Bowl game. He hopes it will be out late this year. Darrell currently resides in Conyers with his wife Lisa and three children.