

# In Memoriam: William Brinker

There are many unsung heroes in the history of SHAFR, but William John “Bill” Brinker should rank near the top of the list. For twenty-three years (1980-2003) – over half of his professional career – Bill served as editor of the SHAFR Newsletter. He published nearly 100 quarterly volumes, often operating with but a few work-study students, a borrowed administrative assistant, and a shoestring budget. Despite these limitations (and a four-four teaching load) he “oversaw tremendous growth in the quality and quantity of its articles”, and “built it into a publication that SHAFR members were eager to receive and read.”\* Bill cleared a path on which the newsletter evolved into today’s *Passport*.



Bill passed away February 13, 2021 after a brief illness. He was 86. Bill was born in Drayton Plains, Michigan (halfway between Detroit and Flint) and graduated from Waterford County High School in 1952, after which he enrolled in the architecture program at the University of Michigan. Disappointed with his progress, he left in 1956 and joined the Army. After basic training the Army sent him to their language school in Monterey, California. Bill sometimes joked about this “tough assignment,” which included time at the beach, forays into San Francisco, and much frivolity. Bill became a German linguist for the Army Security Agency, and spent 18 months in Germany. The first six in Frankfurt included some eye-opening experiences for a small-town Michigander. The year in isolated West Berlin featured occasional high culture, and continued efforts to overcome what he called “German distance keeping.”

Bill returned to the United States in 1959 and received his honorable discharge in June. He reenrolled at Michigan and received his B.A. and M.A., this time majoring in history. He taught for a time in Indiana, first at Valparaiso High School, and then Manchester College, before enrolling in the doctoral program at Indiana University. He married Marilyn (Hardman) Brinker, a native Indianan, in 1966. Under the mentorship of Robert Ferrell and David Pletcher, Bill received his Ph.D. in 1973.

Bill came to Tennessee Tech in 1971, after brief stints at Wisconsin-Oshkosh and Miami University of Ohio. He served for over 40 years as the Department’s Asian specialist, teaching popular courses on China, Japan, and Vietnam, as well as American Diplomatic History. Bill also taught American survey, including a specially designed section for foreign exchange students. Bill spent nine years as Department chair before retiring as an Emeritus Professor in 2003. He continued with part-time post-retirement teaching until 2012.

Bill returned briefly to Germany as part of a Bradley University seminar in the summer of 1987, but his professional focus remained in Asia. In 1988, he spent a month in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia as a participant in the US-Indochina Reconciliation Project. This came at a time essentially devoid of diplomatic and economic relations with those countries. Not long after his return

Bill received a grant from the Tennessee Humanities Council to publish a collection of interviews with local soldiers entitled *A Time for Looking Back: Putnam County Veterans, Their Families, and the Vietnam War* (1990). In 2012 he published a follow-up, *And We Did Cope: Stories of Thirty-Six Wives, Fianceses, Mothers, Daughters, and Sisters of Men who Served in Vietnam*. Bill dedicated this volume to Marilyn. He conducted many speaking engagements, and helped construct a museum exhibit alongside these projects. The William Brinker Papers at the Tennessee Technological University Library contain 28 boxes or tapes, notes, photographs and sound recordings related

to this work.

Bill also published a variety of other works beyond the oral history of Vietnam. These ranged in topics from Cookeville’s interwar 109<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Troop to Harold “Mose” Sims, a career foreign service officer and local politician from Sparta, TN. Bill even collaborated with a political science colleague on an article about foreign firms relocating to Tennessee. As is the case with many editors, Bill routinely postponed his own pursuits while aiding the research of his colleagues. He genuinely liked to see others do well. This caring attitude not only benefitted SHAFR, it also left an indelible imprint on his home department.

Bill hired roughly half of our current faculty. He helped foster a climate of cooperation that persists. When describing Bill, our faculty use adjectives such as professional, collegial, organized, focused, honest, caring, concerned, affable, generous, nice, respected, neighborly, witty, fun, sincere, and kind. Many students paid him the ultimate compliment: He was tough but fair. A few of the less motivated stopped at “tough,” (perhaps they should try architecture?) but some of our most gifted students found a true mentor in Bill. Many individuals were impacted by his professionalism and friendship. Personally, I owe much to Bill. While debating the positive aspects of a position at Tennessee Tech with the salary offer, Bill gave me a call. He spoke frankly as a man who had come to Cookeville not expecting to stay, but had grown quite fond of the town and university. I will always thank him for that.

Bill is survived by Marilyn, his wife of fifty-five years, a daughter and son-in-law, EveLynn and William Holden, a son, Nicholas, and two granddaughters, Lillie Katherine and Caroline Grace Holden.

Donations may be made to the William J. Brinker Scholarship for Study Abroad at Tennessee Tech, a fund established by one of Dr. Brinker’s successful advisees (Mr. Scott Hickman) in 2008.

—Jeff Roberts  
Tennessee Tech University

\*These two quotes are from Amy Sayward’s email to SHAFR sent February 25, 2021. I appreciate these statements and cannot think of a way to improve them.