

In Memorium - Bob Nelson

From Message # 137798 on the Old Tools List, October 2004:

All,

I have recently learned of the death of Bob Nelson, who contributed so much to this List. Bob had written a number of times about his failing health and his last posting in mid-June talked about his impending surgery. I may have missed mention of his passing on the List while away on vacation so I hope the obituary below is not redundant. It was written by J.B. Cox, PATINA member and a past EAIA President for inclusion in the next EAIA Shavings or Chronicle. I am proud to say my wife and I have several tools from Bob's collection which we acquired at several MJD auctions a couple of years ago.

He is missed.

Tom Graham
Round Hill, VA

Robert E. Nelson

1930-2004

On August 29, the Early American Industries Association lost a long-time member and friend, Bob Nelson, to complications of lung cancer and surgery for the removal of a brain tumor. Bob was recovering from his surgery when he suffered a grand mal, from which he did not recover. Most members will recognize Bob's name as the Editor of the Directory of American Toolmakers.

Bob was a founding member PATINA, the regional tool group in the metropolitan Washington DC area. Patina lore has it that Bob really named Patina at the first organizational meeting, saying, "Let's call ourselves PATINA. Now, what does P-A-T-I-N-A stand for?" A group effort then produced the full name - Potomac Antique Tools and Industries Association. In addition to Bob's work in organizing Patina, he served as an early officer, and was a member of other tool-related organizations including the Mid-West Tool Collectors Association (MWTCA), CRAFTS of New Jersey, EAIA, and The Tool and Trades History Society of Great Britain (TATHS).

Bob said he got into tools for the fun of it, not to make money. But let Bob speak for himself, writing in his last column in the March 2003 Patinagram, as he was shipping his tools off to auction and the next happy home for them:

I could have made more [money] with a passbook savings account or, maybe, by orienting my tool buying more towards appreciation potential..I might have done a few things differently if I knew then what I know now, [but] nothing to do with making .money is among them. I can't imagine any other [hobby] or any other way of pursuing this one bringing me 30 years of greater pleasure.

Bob had a special interest in unusual measuring tools, such as calipers for rope (calibrated for weight of standard length per measured diameter), or measuring sticks for horse height (calibrated in "hands"). He used his wide-ranging knowledge in his work on Directory of American Toolmakers (DAT).

Beginning with EAIA Board approval in 1980, the DAT was a nineteen-year effort to organize, write, and publish a directory of all commercial toolmakers working in North America prior to 1900. During the last ten years of this project, almost fifty file boxes, crammed with original data

pages, occupied the center of Bob's and Betty's basement while Bob manually transferred the data from over 40,000 primary data entries into forms for computer entry. Bob told me he spent about full time (eight hours per day, five days per week) for about ten years to get all the data in the proper form. I looked in Bob's basement shortly before all the primary data boxes were shipped for storage. It was an awesome sight, not only with respect to the volume of data, but also as the visible symbol of the dedication and determination entailed to make the DAT "happen".

When the draft was printed, he edited and corrected the entire publication. The final DAT comprises over 1160 pages, listing over 14,000 toolmakers by 73 tool types. Bob's achievement was recognized by EAIA when he (and early project principal Gene Kijowski) was presented with EAIA's Long Time Service Award in 1999, just as the first copies of the DAT were being printed. Truly, if the DAT can be considered as one of the finest examples of how EAIA has served the tool-related community, a significant portion of the credit is due to Bob -- and to Betty, his wife, in support of his interest, dedication, and efforts.

Bob will be missed, not only as one who made a substantial contribution to EAIA and the tool world, but also as a friend who generously shared his knowledge.