

PETER J. R. HILL – OBITUARY

November 9, 1922 – June 13, 2017

Peter (Pete) Jack Robbins Hill, 94½, of Ames Twp., Athens County, died peacefully at home under hospice care on June 13, 2017 of old age after a long, interesting and fulfilling life. Marty was by his side through his final hours.

Pete was an intrepid, visionary, magnetic man who lived a life of love and friendship, service to the world, building and fixing things, traveling and meeting folks, and telling jokes. He was an inveterate tinkerer and loved boats. He couldn't pass by a garage sale, a junkyard or curiosities of any kind. He wore flip-flops in the snow. If you walked with him for a while you would see him speak and laugh with every human within range, and stop to look at insects and leaves and weather and machines. He would sit down next to a stranger and say, "So, what's your racket?" and engage in deep conversation.

Family members who died before Pete are his parents, a sister, a brother, two brothers-in-law, and his first wife. Those surviving him are Marty, his wife for 40 years, a sister, three children, two grandchildren, six great-grandchildren, and one great-great-grandchild. Also surviving Pete are his two best buddies: Kevin Smyth and Mac McAvoy, and his community mates here at Currents.

Pete was born November 9, 1922 in New York City; he liked to say, "I'm an island boy" and make people guess which island (answer: Manhattan). After his parents divorced, Zip took Pete and his older sister Barb to Fairhope, Alabama where he attended second grade at the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education. From there they moved to southern California to live near other Robbins family members, and Pete grew up in Laguna Beach when it was a small town with open dirt lots for play. There he roamed the canyons barefooted, dived for abalone, and surfed. Voted "Least Likely to Succeed" as a high school senior, he followed his sister to attend progressive Black Mountain College in North Carolina from where he was drafted for WWII at the end of 1942. He considered conscientious objection to war given that his father was a pacifist, but at the tender age of 20 feared he was just feeling cowardly so mustered into the Army. In the swamps of Camp Gordon Johnston, Carrabelle, Florida he trained to be an amphibious engineer and was shipped out to the Pacific War Theater. He served under General McArthur whose strategy, it was said, was to "Hit 'em where they ain't;" thus Pete luckily saw little action. Had the war not ended, he would have been part of a Japan invasion. Instead, he enjoyed his time in the tropics from New Guinea to the Philippines, feeling as though he'd been given "an all-expenses-paid trip to Paradise by his Uncle (Sam)."

After the war, on the GI Bill, he studied Wildlife Management at the University of Connecticut, then completed a BSF degree in Wildlife Management at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. During this time he met a beautiful artist and champion high diver, Alma Vander Velde. Just after their marriage in 1948 they were sent to the Micronesian island of Palau and worked two years to set up a scientific field station as a Pacific War Memorial. When the project ran out of money they returned to the University of Michigan where Pete earned a Master's Degree and became a PhD candidate in Plant Ecology in 1955 but never completed his dissertation on the ecology of old fields. During this period his daughter Viktoria and son Brian were born.

Pete and his family returned to the Trust Territories of Micronesia in 1955 to begin his career with the U.S. Department of the Interior. He worked in education on the island of Truk for 12 years, first as a science teacher, then a principal and finally as district superintendent. His marriage ended when Alma moved with the children to Guam where son Lance was born. In 1967 Pete moved to the Micronesian island of Ponape and worked as an adviser in community and economic development for five years, officially retiring in 1972. He liked to say it was "Catch 23" that brought him early retirement: he had achieved 20 years of government service (including his military duty), his adviser job was abolished, and he turned 50 years old all in the same year. After two more years on Ponape playing and unofficially advising, he returned to the mainland USA in 1974 because he felt his country needed him.

Upon returning, Pete visited Community Service, a nonprofit organization in Yellow Springs, Ohio where he was immediately hired for the next two years. While there he became involved with both Movement for a New Society (MNS), a national network of nonviolent activists for social change, and Re-evaluation Co-counseling, a form of peer counseling for self-development. From there he moved to Philadelphia, the headquarters for MNS to link up with others who were interested in developing rural nonviolence communities. There he met Marty Zinn, also involved in MNS, and they declared their marriage under Pennsylvania common law on June 21, 1978. That summer they visited friends who had re-located to Athens County, Ohio and they too moved there eight months later. They were delighted to find several other intentional communities already in the area, but ended up joining a group ready to start a new community based on cooperative principles. In 1981 the group formed a non-profit which bought 163 acres in northern Ames Township and began developing Currents Community.

Living in community in Athens County was Pete's "cup of tea." He enthusiastically applied his many skills working with others to develop community buildings, infrastructure and gardens. He did plumbing, electrical and mechanical tasks, dug ditches and holes for water and sewage systems, and was a mason and a mower. In

later years he liked to say he was a “pathologist” who loved making and maintaining new walking paths in the woods at Currents. Another project late in life was hand-hewing an 18-foot dugout canoe from a big poplar tree given him by his friend J. Paul Linscott.

But it wasn't only physical skills Pete had to offer. He also excelled in leading groups (facilitation, planning, etc.), nonviolent action organizing and training, and interpersonal communications like active listening, mediation and conflict resolution. He applied these skills both at Currents and in the wider Athens community. Pete could really listen; he was sought out for advice and solace. He made a point of sharing with young men the mistakes he had made in his first marriage and the lessons he had learned about communicating in relationships.

Pete helped start a number of organizations whose purposes were to bolster community, protect the environment, improve the happiness and health of the peoples of the world, and to learn about and do the work of fixing injustice wherever he saw it. Among local groups he participated in were Save Our Rural Environment, Athens County Coalition Organized Against Longwalling, Central America Solidarity Committee, Appalachian Peace and Justice Network, Athens-Area Mediation Service, People for Peace, Safe and Appropriate Forms of Energy, Ready Response Team, and others. He did many trainings in nonviolence and activist skills, not only locally but regionally in other Appalachian states. As a concerned and caring citizen he attended Federal Hocking School Board meetings for many years, offering assistance when tensions arose. And he joined the Athens Vietnam Veterans of America chapter to offer support to veterans younger than himself.

As an ordained Universal Life Church minister Pete became licensed by the State of Ohio to perform marriages, enabling him to conduct “scores if not hundreds” of local weddings. He also gained renown as an effective unofficial “counselor” of couples with relationship troubles.

Throughout his life Pete enjoyed pretty good health. He had a total hip replacement at 65, and a quadruple bypass at 78 after which he had Type-2 diabetes. He slowed down as he neared the end of his eighties and began dealing with ongoing non-invasive bladder cancer. Shortly before his 90th birthday he suffered from bradycardia and experienced cognitive decline. In spite of these new limitations, Pete continued to enjoy life from his living room recliner, visiting with many friends and gazing out the front window at a “most magnificent view” of bucolic scenery and varied wildlife. Throughout his life persons of all ages were drawn to him and his good humor, intelligence and curiosity. He had a big laugh and a big twinkly smile. He was a big man and he will be missed in a big way.