



O'Neil James Newkirk

June 12, 1924 - December 26, 2009

There are some for whom it can be said that the world is a better place because they were in it. O'Neil James "Boots" Newkirk was such a man, touching the hearts of many, whether as a teacher, a father and grandfather, or simply a mentor. Boots was a vivid storyteller who loved having one-on-one conversations, and telling stories to a group, bringing history to life and sharing lessons learned. His favorite quote came from the character Davy Crockett played by John Wayne in *The Alamo*, "There's right and there's wrong. You got to do one or the other. You do the one and you're living. You do the other and you may be walking around, but you're dead as a beaver hat." This was more than just a treasured quote to Boots, as it was in many ways his life's motto. The "Roaring Twenties" were a time unlike any other in our nation's history. It was in 1924 that The Teapot Dome Scandal was disclosed to the American public, and also the year in which two American aircraft returned from the first 175 day 'round-the-world flight. On June 12th of that same year Wilfred James and Frances Ida (O'Neil) Newkirk welcomed the birth of their son, O'Neil James. O'Neil was born in Rogers Heights, Michigan, in Mecosta County where his father worked as an operator of Rogers Dam on the Muskegon River. The oldest of four children, he was nicknamed "Boots" when he was only four years old. O'Neil's Aunt Guyrah Newkirk, a well-known artist living in New York and Arizona at the time, had sent him a pair of cowboy boots that truly caught his fancy. Although they were much too big, he put them on his feet, clomped around the house mightily, and rarely took those boots off. Tragedy struck early in Boots' young life with the death of his father, who drowned in an accident while fishing in the Muskegon River near the Tippy Dam when Boots was just four. A short two years later, their family suffered another devastating blow with the death of his younger brother, Billy. In many other ways, Boots was a typical young boy, enjoying fishing on the Muskegon River and getting into his fair share of mischief in his hometown of Stanwood, especially around Halloween. During these formative years, he spent a lot of treasured time at his Grandma Newkirk's. His mother remarried in 1937, to a gentleman named George Crandall and he and Boots enjoyed a close relationship. After Boots graduated from Big Rapids High School in 1941, he enlisted in the Air Force and served aboard a B-29 Bomber, at times stationed in Saipan, Guam, and Tinian, China. He was particularly fond of his time in Tinian where he served as the crew chief of his plane and

was well respected by the pilot and crew. This time in the service had a great impact on his life moving forward. Among many serious reflections, one of the reminders of his service time was his desire to never eat rice again! Once he was discharged from the Air Force, Boots returned to the Stanwood area where he met a young girl named Lyana June Reinoehl. She was an elementary school teacher, and they were introduced by one of her students at a local roller rink. June was immediately captivated by his wonderful eyes and truth be told, Boots was a bit smitten too. After dating for a time, Boots and June were married on June 2, 1946 at the Sugar Ridge Church of the Brethren in Custer, which began a new chapter in a love story that would span more than 60 years. As a new husband Boots needed to establish a career in which he could support a family. They moved to Mt. Pleasant where he enrolled at Central Michigan University and graduated in 1950 with a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Physical Education and Social Studies. His family grew to include four children: O'Neil James, Jr., William David, Susan Marie, and Cynthia June. Boots began his teaching career at Mason County Eastern High School in Custer. The next year he joined the staff at Mason County Central High School in Scottville where he taught history, economics, government, and driver's education. Boots also served as a student council adviser and coached many teams including football, basketball, and baseball at various times throughout his career. He truly enjoyed sharing Michigan history, and was a master at intriguing his students as he brought the subject matter to life. Boots taught his students by telling stories and sharing both life lessons and experiences. His students also quickly learned that if they wanted to avoid taking a test on any given day, they needed to get Mr. Newkirk discussing anything relating to politics and that discussion would occupy the entire class period. He rarely missed a day of school and by the time he retired in 1986, his teaching career had significantly impacted countless students over a span of 37 years. Teaching was a major component in Boots' life, but his heart truly beat for his family. He built their family home on US 10-31 with the help of his father-in-law. The Newkirk home was often the place to be, since their door was always open to welcome others. Whether it was prom night, sleepovers, or regular weekends, the living room floor was often covered with mattresses. Boots was a leader in Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts while his children were involved, and coached his boys in basketball. His sons truly enjoyed their camping trips to the Sippy Ranch on Woodruff Lake at all times of the year. Since Boots worked nearly all year, vacations were rare. When they were able to get away, their trips included traveling around Lake Superior, fishing at Wawa, Canada, and a trip to Yellowstone National Park just after their youngest, Cindy, was born. Later in life Boots treasured holidays, and there were always big family gatherings for the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Boots was a highly intelligent man whose favorite subject was United States history. He loved sharing stories and revisiting history, especially the Civil War and WWII. Visits from former students and colleagues, not usually short visits, were a favorite past time. He liked to carry around a

\$50 bill so that when he paid for something, he could start a conversation by asking the cashier who was his or her favorite general, often using the picture of Grant on the bill as his lead-in to engage in a teachable moment. Boots became involved with the local chapter of the Civil War Re-enactment Regiment with his son Jim and his grandson Jimmy. This adventure began when he purchased a cannon with son Jim on December 1, 1979. As Jim became more and more involved in the national chapter, Boots and grandson Jimmy were able to spend time together as well. All three participated in the making of the movie Gettysburg. There were many things that made Boots an extraordinary man. Things were either right or wrong with him - there was no gray area. He was a man of strong moral convictions who paid close attention to the world in which he lived. As a history buff, Boots also was intrigued by politics. His daughter Cindy said, "Dad would have voted for Barry Goldwater every election if he could have." One of Boots' proudest moments was when his grandson Jimmy was elected to state office at the age of 18. Boots was always ready to help in any way that he could and never shied away from hard work. He always felt the need to be doing something useful and that sentiment extended to his children as well. In the Newkirk home Saturday mornings were not for sitting around indoors but for getting outside and doing something! Boots worked side by side with his sons who helped him with additions to their home over the years. He and June always made sure their children had whatever they needed, even if it meant going without for themselves. They always came through tough times but never let it show. Their children saw that when faced with a challenge, Boots and June simply overcame whatever obstacle faced them. Boots was fiercely loyal and proud of his entire family, especially of their education. Going to college was never a choice for his children; it was just something they were expected to do. Sixteen members of his family have chosen education fields for their careers and more are headed that direction. Because Boots lost his father at a very young age, he promoted a deep understanding of the fragility of life in his own family and fostered a profound appreciation for those relationships, always striving to enhance those close-knit bonds. He rarely missed any of his grandchildren's events, often requiring long routes of travel that never slowed his commitment. Boots and his bride June shared an enduring love and genuinely enjoyed one another. Later in life, their backyard became the backdrop for leisurely picnics under the trees, including his favorite sandwich – peanut butter and lettuce – along with other family favorites. Throughout his life, faith was an important cornerstone to Boots. It served as the guide map he used to navigate his life's journey. He and June were members of Scottville United Methodist Church where he held office and taught Sunday school. They remained active members until health issues limited their involvement. It was also his faith that sustained him when his beloved June died on February 3, 2007. Boots Newkirk was a man of great character, treasuring his family and his faith above all else. He was able to fully embrace one of life's great truths: the quest is not so much in getting to where you are going, but more in the journey along

the way. Boots treasured each and every moment he was given and in doing so, profoundly impacted the lives of others too numerous to count. He was proud of his time in the military and had a deep love for his country; he fully immersed himself in sharing his passion for learning with the many students who shared his classroom; he was truly devoted to his family and considered being a father and grandfather as his greatest blessing. Boots leaves behind an unmatched legacy of integrity, compassion, and quiet strength that will surely withstand the test of time. O'Neil James "Boots" Newkirk died on Saturday, December 26, 2009 at his home. Along with his wife June, he was preceded in death by his parents, beloved grandson Benjamin Kelly, and brother William. He will be greatly missed by his children O'Neil James (Connie) Newkirk Jr. of Scottville, William David (Paula) Newkirk of Sanford, Susan Marie (Bruce) Kelly of Stony Lake, and Cynthia June (Marc) Yenkel of Clare; 9 grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren; his sister Marie (Harry) Michaels of Big Rapids, his brother Richard (Peg) Crandall of Vacaville, California; his sister-in-law Susan (Lee) Zajic of Lady Lake, Florida, and many nieces and nephews.

Tribute Wall

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“ *Mr. Newkirk was by far the best teacher I've ever had. Clark G.*

Clark Gibson - October 05, 2018 at 08:58 PM