

# *Huckins, a fixture in Harlan, died July 27 at Elm Crest*



Billy Huckins was parade marshal for the homecoming parade in 2008.

**HARLAN** – Most everyone around Harlan knew him, plain and simple, identified almost immediately by the extra spring in his step, or by the bicycle on which he cruised around town for years in downtown Harlan.

Billy Huckins, an icon of Harlan if there ever was one, died Sunday, July 27 at Elm Crest Retirement Community. He was 79 years old.

Services were held Wednesday, July 30 at 11 a.m. at Pauley Jones Funeral Home in Harlan with burial in the Pleasant Township Cemetery at Griswold. Huckins is survived by sisters-in-law Betty Polledo of Kallspell, MT, and Freda Huckins of Council Bluffs.

Huckins meant as much to Harlan as Harlan meant to him. He certainly was a character embedded in the uniqueness of Harlan, and came to find himself in the hearts of many friends and families.

In particular, Huckins “adopted” the Pam and Roger Rust family. Rusty’s Shoe Store owner, Roger, knew Huckins’ history and successfully mastered Billy’s unique way of communication through self-administered signs. Back in 2007, Roger said,

**Huckins** *please see next page*

# Huckins an icon in small town Harlan

**Huckins** *from front page*

"As long as I can remember, I can remember Billy. We are not related, though, I get about once a month somebody who wants to know the relation.

"I can just communicate with him because I've been with him my whole life."

Roger explained that Huckins' own childhood was spent in Kirkman, where his parents Harlan "Huck" and Gertie Huckins raised their four children, three boys and one girl, all of whom were deceased before Billy. The Huckins family owned and operated the Kirkman Grocery Store for 37 years beginning in 1938, and were the Kirkman postmasters for 23 years.

History has it that Billy was probably born with the inability to experience sound; and back then, an able doctor specialized in such cases simply could not be accessed at the time his father was away overseas in the First World War. Billy attended the Iowa School for The Deaf in Council Bluffs to learn standardized communication skills.

While in Kirkman, volunteering was one of Billy's hobbies, and he was even featured in a historical Harlan Tribune photo of the Kirkman Volunteer Fire Squad dating back to 1952. When he was 18 years old, he began working for Mel White at the auto dealership known as White

Motors. He would clean cars, change oil and perform an assortment of other automobile mechanical work, featured as "Billy Huckins, Clean-Up and Buff & Wax Pro."

He was a motorcycle rider, insisting on the joy ride, Rust said. "He always drove a motorcycle...man, he loved that motorcycle," said Rust, until he was involved in an accident in town where he got banged up pretty well. He gave up the motorcycle for his signature bicycle that many will remember him riding through town for years.

During the past seven years or so, Billy spent a lot of time with the Rust family, and dabbled in his other loves such as drawing, working on cars, or putting together a puzzle he eventually framed and hung on his living room wall. He was always walking around town, visiting with friends and passers-by.

When a fire completely destroyed the apartment complex where he was living in downtown Harlan in 2012, the outpouring of support for him was amazing, Rust said. He moved to another apartment along 6th St. soon thereafter. "He lost everything and started a whole new life," Rust said. "Everyone was very supportive of him" offering everything from money to clothes and household items.

A major highlight for Huckins was when he was named

parade marshal for the Harlan Community High School Homecoming parade back in 2008, and he has been recognized by the school and through the Southwest 8 Senior Services as well.

A couple of years ago he started having some minor medical issues, and last November on his 79th birthday he learned that he had Leukemia. "On his birthday he was in Clarkson Hospital," Rust said. Treatment included blood transfusions that left him feeling better intermittently, but roughly six weeks ago things took a turn for the worse, Rust said.

He landed in Elm Crest Hospice for a month and a half before he died last Sunday. And until the end, he was still going as strong as he could. "Heck, he went fishing last Friday," said Rust. "Then Friday night he started going downhill. It wasn't two days after (that he died). We knew when it began that it was going to go fast."

Many have turned out to help with the funeral, including an area church and bank, who are providing baked goods and food for after the service.

It's no doubt, Billy will be missed by many.

Said Rust, "He was a special guy. He was a great man...a smart man. I have been blessed (to have known him)."