

# Bill Wittliff, ‘Lonesome Dove’ screenwriter and Texas State archive namesake, has died

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Bill Wittliff, a celebrated writer, filmmaker and photographer who authored the screenplay for the iconic 1985 television miniseries “Lonesome Dove” and co-founded a popular archive of Southwestern writers and other artists at Texas State University, died Sunday from a heart attack. He was 79.

“It’s impossible to overstate the influence Bill had on writers, photographers and filmmakers, all throughout Austin, Texas and United States,” his friend, author and journalist Stephen Harrigan, said Monday. “He made it possible for people with raging ambition to plant a flag in Austin and Texas and make this their hometown. He defied the dictum that you had to move to Hollywood to be successful. He is completely irreplaceable. Fortunately, he created a self-perpetuating inspiration machine through the Wittliff Collections, a place where you can see how it is done and how it can be done. Although his accomplishments are staggering, that’s probably how he will be best remembered.”

An assiduous book collector — he owned first editions of the published works of J. Frank Dobie, another key Texas storyteller — sculptor and ink sketch artist, Wittliff was born in Taft in 1940. He attended Blanco High School and graduated from the University of Texas with a degree in journalism. As with the rest of his life, however, Wittliff did it his way.

“His greatest achievement at UT was that he never took typing,” said Sally Wittliff, his wife of 56 years, co-namesake of the Wittliff Collections, and often the public face of the family on Austin’s social scene. “He walked around with his arm in a sling for a year, so he didn’t have to learn typing. He never did learn. He wrote everything by illegible hand.”

Wittliff’s film credits also included screenplays for the films “Raggedy Man” (1981, starring Sissy Spacek) and “Barbarosa” (1982, starring Willie Nelson), as well as the 2000 box-office blockbuster “The Perfect Storm,” starring George Clooney. He also wrote and directed the 1986 film “Red Headed Stranger,” which starred Nelson and Morgan Fairchild.

Right out of UT, Wittliff worked as a business and production manager for Southern Methodist University Press in Dallas. In the meantime, he and his wife founded Encino Press, which they moved to Austin. He joked that he financed the press with poker winnings, a skill he also said got him through UT. Encino Press served as his primary job as he launched his writing career.

A natural storyteller, Wittliff was game for almost anything. Last year, he completed his imaginative trilogy of “Popa Tales,” three short novels about a boy’s adventures in the Texas Hill Country. Critics have compared these picaresque dialect novels, published by the University of Texas Press, to those of Mark Twain, Larry McMurtry and Dobie.

Noting a pressing need to preserve the creative process of authors and artists in this region, Bill and Sally Wittliff created the Wittliff Collections in 1986.

“Because of their continued support, today the Wittliff includes more than 500 special collections in literature, photography, music and film, and attracts visitors, researchers and lifelong learners from around the globe,” Texas State University President Denise Trauth said in a public letter on Monday. “He was an inspiration to all who knew him, but particularly to our students. During special programs at the Wittliff attended by hundreds of people of all ages, Bill could usually be found in the corner of the room, surrounded by students as he patiently answered questions about the creative process.”

As news of his death spread on Monday, tributes poured in.

“We are all stunned and saddened at the news,” said Hector Saldaña, Texas music curator for the Wittliff Collections. “His last visit at the Wittliff Collections, he was enjoying himself and sitting right in the middle of the galleries under construction. We all loved this man so much. Bill Wittliff was one of a kind.”

“Bill was a fountain of creativity and a lodestar for Texas literature.” said Steven L. Davis, the Wittliff Collections’ literary curator: “He was dedicated to authenticity and he led by example, but he was also incredibly generous and encouraging to other writers.”

“This is indeed a sad day and huge loss for Texas film,” said Austin Film Society CEO Rebecca Campbell. “Bill Wittliff is so essential to the legacy of Texas film that he was inducted into the Texas Film Hall of Fame in its very first year, in 2001. It is through his eyes and distinct voice that people around the world have had a window into Texas history and culture.”

“I’m still in shock,” said prominent screenwriter William “Bill” Broyles Jr. “Bill was my mentor and friend and inspiration for almost 50 years. The Wittliff Collections truly embrace and define Texas culture. He was the hub. We are all the spokes. He was rooted in tradition and embraced innovation. He had an almost mystical belief in the creative process and a horse-trader’s eye for the beautiful and the true. He was old Texas and new Texas too. He was a poker-playing, horse-trading boy from Blanco and he remained that joyful Blanco boy his entire life.”

“Bill was an artist, a mystic, a tale-spinner and a mentor to the Austin arts community,” said author, playwright and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lawrence Wright. “I also think of Bill as the great appreciator. He bought J. Frank Dobie’s estate so our greatest folklorist’s legacy could be preserved. And then, to house it, he built the Wittliff Collections at Texas State. There he was able to preserve the work of such great writers as John Graves, Cormac McCarthy, Sarah Bird and Stephen Harrigan. Some years ago, Bill came to me in a dream. If you knew Bill, you’d know that was normal behavior. In the dream, he told me, ‘Austin is Florence.’ If there’s any truth in that prophecy, it’s in part because of Bill’s work and his joyful spirit.”

“I have long described Bill as the ‘Primary Texas Cultural Lightning Rod,’” said gallerist Stephen L. Clark, whose award-winning shop is located below Wittliff’s former office. “By that I mean that he didn’t invent it all, but so much came through him. The films, the photographs, the books, the collections. The statues of Dobie, Bedichek and Webb (subjects of ‘Philosopher’s Rock’ at Barton Springs). Of Willie. The connection with (author) Bud Shrake. When my team was successful in naming Russell Lee Elementary, he said: ‘Stars in your Crown!’ I couldn’t ask for a better compliment.”

“I will miss his friendship,” said author Sarah Bird. “Bill was a celebrator and elevator of all things Texas. Most especially Texas writers. Extraordinarily generous to all his fellow writers, Bill gave me the television writing job that helped launch my career in screenwriting. I will miss his wisdom, his humor, and ever again hearing the best story about Elvis Presley ever told.”

At public speaking events, Wittliff sometimes told the story of how he and two teenage friends from Blanco drove to San Antonio in 1956 for an Elvis Presley concert, only to find it was sold out. Wittliff’s version of the story, which may or may not have been embellished, was that he climbed a tree at the back of the venue, hung from a window ledge, and saw Elvis talking with some associates. Presley noticed Wittliff and asked who he was. Wittliff explained that he and his two friends had driven from Blanco for the show.

Presley grabbed a paper towel and wrote on it: “To the doorkeeper: Let these 3 fellows in. I know them. Thanks, Elvis Presley.” That paper towel is part of the Wittliff Collections and was on display at a fundraising event last month when Wittliff gleefully recounted the tale.

Monday, close friends gathered at the Wittliffs’ Tarrytown house to offer condolences.

“Bill had a way of making even the hardest things feel manageable, and idea that he’s not here to do that today for all of us who loved him is just impossible to fathom,” said author Elizabeth Crook. “His passing isn’t just a loss to his family and friends and community. It feels like a blow to the world.”

The Wittliffs have two children, Reed Wittliff and Allison Andrews, along with four grandchildren. Sally Wittliff said a memorial will be timed to the return of his son to this country.

“Saturday was our 56th wedding anniversary,” she said. “He got to be a habit.”

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