



James "Buddy" Thompson

November 13, 1931 - April 5, 2019

James "Buddy" Thompson, former chairman of Glenmore Distilleries, head of the Louisville Airport Authority and many charitable organizations, politician, philanthropist, farmer and aviation advocate, died on April 5th in Palm Beach, FL. He was 87.

Buddy was best known as a leader in the Louisville business community, who for many years ran the family liquor business, Glenmore Distilleries. He initially took on the role, rather reluctantly, after his brother, Frank Thompson, was diagnosed with brain cancer in October 1974. Buddy hit the ground running and in just a few years, the company expanded operations, increased imported products, and eventually made a pair of ambitious acquisitions: Fleischman Distilling and Medley Distilling.

Buddy deferred leadership of the family business to his younger brother so he could explore other interests. He attended Law School at night while he ran Old South Life Insurance Company by day. In 1966 he ran for Congress but lost in the Republican primary. Three years later, in 1969, then Kentucky governor, Louis Nunn, who considered him to be "honest, dependable, reliable, capable", appointed him state auditor.

Despite being busy raising four young children at home, he was active in numerous local charities, and his commitment to philanthropy included the United Way, the Louisville Cancer Center, the Fund for the Arts, Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Speed Museum and others. He served on the boards of Citizens Fidelity Bank, the Regional Mental Health Agency, the Regional Cancer Center and the Airport Authority. As one life-long friend put it, he was a "Type A masquerading in a Type B personality."

Buddy's true passion was anything off the ground. He learned to fly at age 13 and never stopped trying to get airborne. To him the sky was the last refuge from the chaos down below. He built aircraft in his basement and was forever tinkering with airship designs. At one point, a weather balloon he was testing pinned him to the wall and then exploded. A fine particulate haze enveloped the house while a character resembling a blackened "Yosemite Sam" emerged from below.

That didn't deter him from hot-air ballooning. He collaborated in the design of a hot-air airship which was equipped with an engine and propeller allowing it to be maneuvered about, a feature that caused other "ordinary" balloonists to cry foul. He boasted of breaking the low-altitude record in ballooning when he was forced to crash-land in the Chesapeake Bay. This led him to develop an entirely new design of helium airship. The formula and methodology of the design, which he developed on an Atari home computer, was accepted by and presented to the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics.

As a regular at the local airport, Buddy ultimately directed the Louisville Airport Authority. He said, "I complained so much about the way the airport was being run, they dared me to join the board". He helped initiate and lead a massive modernization and expansion of the airport terminal. The large glass dome that greets visitors is the exact dimension of a coffee cup that he placed upside down on the architect's model.

He was born James Thompson (no middle initial) in Louisville, Ky., on November 13, 1931. His parents Frank Barton Thompson and Ida Maney Webb named him after his paternal grandfather James Thompson who, at age 16, emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland and later founded the family liquor business. With every telling of the emigration story, the amount of money in James Thompson's pocket, upon arrival in the U.S., grew less. A friend of Ida Maney was said to have gazed upon the young child and declared "He looks like a little Buddy".

He attended Woodberry Forest School in Virginia and the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis before joining the Marine Corps. He graduated from Yale University with an engineering degree in 1954. That year he married Alice Carter Dupee who was attending Vassar College, a frequent destination for eager young men of Yale.

In 1964 he and his first wife, Allie bought a farm on the east side of town. Their first purchase was a bull they named "Big Business". To out-of-towners he would boast of having the largest cattle farm in Jefferson County. They did not know it was the only cattle farm in the mostly urban county.

In 1988 he married Sandra Norvell Street. Sandy introduced him to her childhood summertime paradise, Harbor Springs, Mich. Soon they joined other Louisvillians who spent summers there. The couple also bought an apartment in New York. There he became active with the Explorers Club. At one of their annual dinners, Buddy had the honor of introducing Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones, the first balloonists to circumnavigate the globe. The balloon trip had taken nearly three weeks. Piccard is also a

psychiatrist, and Buddy introduced Brian Jones as “perhaps the most psychoanalyzed man in history.” In the mid-1990s, Sandy and Buddy relocated to Palm Beach, Fla., where they continued their involvement in the arts and other philanthropies.

One of buddy’s other passions was singing. He was a very proud member of the Yale Whiffenpoofs, a prestigious collegiate a cappella group. As he had joined after graduation, he would joke that he was a “retread” rather than legitimate lifetime member. Strangers may have encountered him singing at a local lounge where he had a regular stint. He probably knew every song from the “Great American Songbook.” Between ballads, he would regale the audience with jokes and stories. Another singer in the group was a retired police officer that he affectionately referred to as “The Singing Dick”.

Buddy had so many different interests and was involved in many activities. Like blind men alone in a room with an elephant, everyone who knew him might have had a completely different experience.

Last month Buddy released a special batch of bourbon that had been in the barrel for 45 years, since the time of his brother’s untimely death and his taking of the reigns at Glenmore. Consistent with his character, all the profits are being donated to charities in support of veterans. He called the product “Final Reserve”.

Buddy is survived by his wife Sandy; children by his first marriage Elizabeth Thompson, Emery Thompson Guder, James Thompson, Jr., and Samuel Thompson; and three grandchildren.

Visitation and Burial Private.

In lieu of flowers, please consider a donation to The Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation (<https://themedalofhonor.com>).

Comments



“ My heart goes out to the Thompson family for their lost. My Father was president of Old South for many years back in the 70's and 80's he died in 1984. I remember Mr Thompson very well and visiting his home. He was a very generous man and a good man. My family will pray for you all during this sad time. Cindy Spradlin Stilz

Cindy Spradlin Stilz - April 12, 2019 at 10:36 AM