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Renowned local author, folklorist Lynwood Montell dies at 92

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Dec 28, 2023



Local award-winning author and folklorist William Lynwood Montell died last week, leaving behind a wife, two children, five grandchildren, four great-grandchildren and a long list of books penned over his 92-year life.

LYNWOOD
MONTELL

Montell was renowned for documenting life across Kentucky. He played a crucial role in forming Western Kentucky University's folk studies masters program, where he taught for over 30 years, and dedicated much of his time to studying the Upper Cumberland region.

Erika Brady, a WKU professor of folk studies and longtime friend of Montell, said the author was a "folk hero himself" who was well respected among his academic peers.

“He was somebody who people did not forget,” Brady said. “It’s so common when I’m talking to someone about basket weaving or any number of things, they’ll say, ‘Did you know that fellow Lynwood Montell?’ and they would recall encounters from sometimes decades ago.”

Montell’s most recent book series, published between 2003 and 2015, explored the life and culture of professionals in Kentucky, including “Tales from Kentucky Lawyers,” “Tales from Kentucky Doctors” and “Tales from Kentucky Funeral Homes.”

He served in a variety of roles through his career, including vice-president of Campbellsville College, visiting professor at UCLA, head of WKU’s Center for Intercultural Studies and president of the American Folklife Society, his obituary stated.

He was inducted into the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame in 2001 and received the Governor’s Arts Award in the Folk Heritage category in 2003.

He was also recognized for his contributions to music preservation by the Kentucky Southern Gospel Association in 2020.

Montell attended Campbellsville College, the University of Kentucky and Western Kentucky University, eventually working as a history teacher at Temple Hill High School in Glasgow. He then applied for his doctoral degree in Folk Studies at Indiana University, his obituary stated.

Brady later met Montell while studying at Indiana University herself in the mid-70s when he visited during his summer research while working at WKU.

“I had already read several of his books, and he was one of our star former students,” Brady said. “That was quite exciting for me, and we maintained a loose professional connection.”

Montell soon left to teach at Notre Dame, opening up a position at WKU that Brady would take over. She

began teaching his former classes and even staying in his home in Smiths Grove.

He retired – for the first time – in 1991, celebrating with a party planned by Brady. His retirement would be short-lived as he soon returned to WKU for several years to work as the head of the folk studies department.

“That was important because then we had another generation of graduate students who could work with him, learn from him, go on field work adventures with him and be a part of that period of scholarship,” Brady said.

Brady and Montell maintained their friendship well after his second retirement and even continued some of the work he’d begun.

Brady, who was raised around Washington, D.C., had family connections to Kentucky before living here and said moving to the state felt like a “homecoming,” in part because of Montell’s guidance and work.

“He helped me realize the things in the region that were also part of my growing up (and) finding my place in my community and culture,” Brady said.

She said the role of folklorists like Montell often becomes that of a mediator – a “go-between” to help introduce people to different cultures. She said it can be a difficult job, one requiring strong observation and an open mind, but Montell was the right man for it.

“That was one of Lynwood’s real gifts. He understood that we all have some capacity to recognize our place in a group, but that’s a skill that can be developed too,” Brady said. “You learn what to look for, and he was very gifted with that.”

Brady said she’d occasionally stop outside Montell’s classes just to listen and admire his personal relationship with students. She said he always tried to learn the background of each student, sometimes teasing them when he learned where they were from.

Brady said when a student would tell Montell they were from a city outside Kentucky, his “standard response” was always, “Now, what part of Kentucky is that from?”

“In Lynwood’s world, Kentucky was the world,” Brady said. “I think that’s a nice little crystallization of that.”

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