



James R. Harper

February 11, 1937 - January 11, 2023

James R. Harper, writer, advertising executive

James Robbins Harper, of Gladwyne, Pennsylvania, died peacefully January 11 at age 85. He was a writer, an advertising executive and a consummate Philadelphian known for his charm and droll wit.

Mr. Harper was the son of James Bailey Harper and the former Kathryn Robbins. He was born in Wilmington, Delaware and raised in Philadelphia's Mount Airy neighborhood. He graduated from the William Penn Charter School and went on to Cornell University. At Cornell, Mr. Harper was editor-in-chief of *The Widow* (the campus humor magazine), a brother of Delta Phi (St. Elmo), an English major and a cheerleader. Senior year he was inducted into Sphinx Head, the secretive honor society. The most important connection he made at college, however, was with his classmate and future wife, Annette Fogo, daughter of Senator and Mrs. J. Gordon Fogo of Halifax and Ottawa. Stylish, literary and committed to fun, the couple was characterized, in a retrospective essay that appeared in their 25th anniversary yearbook, as "our Scott and Zelda."

In 1960, two years after their college graduation and following Mr. Harper's service in the United States Army, the Harpers were married in New York's Trinity Church. They honeymooned at Sea Island, Georgia, and continued on

to New Orleans, where they'd decided to make their first home. Mr. Harper joined the newly-created Tourist Commission; hosting visiting journalists and producing the kind of travel writing that would draw people to the city, the job was his first foray into the world of public relations. The New Orleans years were important for him and the colorful characters, the distinctive cuisine and the sound of jazz left an imprint that would last a lifetime. Still, Philadelphia called, and at the end of 1962 the couple picked up one last muffuletta for the road and drove north.

In the Philadelphia suburbs, the Harpers lived in Devon and then in 1966 moved to the house in Newtown Square where they would remain for half a century. At Wermen & Schorr, the Philadelphia advertising firm where he worked at the height of the "Mad Men" era, Mr. Harper wrote ads and publicity for (among others) a distiller that bottled the only corn whiskey available in Pennsylvania. The young copywriter thus invented the Corn Whiskey Institute of North America, with himself as president and stationery with the motto "High Spirits Confound the Tyrant!" The bulk of Mr. Harper's career, though, was spent with Burlington Industries where he served for over twenty-five years, much of that time as Director of Advertising for Lees Carpets.

It was during the Burlington years that Mr. Harper penned his novel, *The Two Dollar Max*. A picaresque account of a carpet company executive who makes a shocking career shift, the novel has the sort of cascading imagery, wry irony, and jagged perspective that invite comparison to Thomas Pynchon. The unorthodox book attracted the attention of Knox Burger, a literary agent whose roster included names like Kurt Vonnegut, John Steinbeck and Ray Bradbury, but Burger was unable to place it with a publisher. To this day it remains a manuscript, a "little-known, and I mean very little-known, cult novel" as Mr. Harper liked to say.

In 1990, Mr. Harper left Burlington to found Harper, Hadley & Alexander

Associates, an advertising and marketing agency. The firm's niche was helping manufacturers of the products used in furnishing commercial buildings to reach an audience of architects and interior designers. Clients included Eurotex, Uniroyal, Cornell Ironworks, CertainTeed, Gencorp, and Absecon Mills. After a two decades of award-winning work, Mr. Harper closed the agency and retired in 2011.

The Harpers prized community and were joiners. They were longtime parishioners of Old St. David's Episcopal Church. Enthusiastic tennis players, they were members of Waynesborough Country Club and The Courts. Mr. Harper served a term as president of the latter club, and is remembered fondly for his decision, as the cost of a liquor license rose to a level that exceeded club bar revenues, to simply dispense drinks free of charge. A dedicated epicure and excellent cook whose specialties ranged from omelets to ossobuco, he was also a member of The Rabbit. Perhaps the most cherished of his memberships, though, was at Pocono Lake Preserve, where Mr. Harper had spent summers since childhood.

Unabashedly sentimental and a loyal friend, Mr. Harper was a regular at reunions of his school and college classes and served at least once as Reunion co-Chair at Cornell. Every June he and his wife rallied Gilbert & Sullivan enthusiasts to attend the annual performances of the Savoy Company at Longwood Gardens. And the Harpers were associate members of the Orpheus Club of Philadelphia for over forty years, enjoying the concerts from their usual spot in the third row. Mr. Harper loved spectator sports, and organized groups of friends to attend boxing matches at the legendary Blue Horizon or evening games at the Reading Phillies, where he once got to throw out the first pitch. And at home, the Harpers would invite friends to climb their cherry trees when they came into bloom, which was about the same time the mint patch would start producing. Eight feet off the ground, in the midst of the

blossoms, frosty mint juleps in hand, they would celebrate Spring.

Mr. Harper was predeceased by his wife, Annette, who died in 2020, and his granddaughter Juliet Lucia Harper, who died in 2008. He is survived by his three children, writer and photographer Hadley Harper Witcher (Robert Witcher) of Wayne, Pennsylvania, art history professor James Gordon Harper (Roxi Thoren) of State College, Pennsylvania, and editor Alexander Wetherill Harper (Fanny Mora) of Bogotá, Colombia, and by six of his seven grandchildren: James Avery Witcher, Cora Elizabeth Witcher, Eleanor Dawkins Harper, James Emery Bennet Harper, Sebastian Wetherill Harper and Bartholomew West Harper.

Burial will be private, followed by a memorial service for all at Old St. David's Episcopal Church, 276 S. Valley Forge Rd., Wayne, PA 19087 on Saturday January 28th at 2:30 pm.

In lieu of flowers, contributions may be made to The Margaret F. McKeel Family Educational Endowment at Waverly Heights, 1400 Waverly Rd., Gladwyne, PA 19035.

Previous Events

Memorial Service

JAN 28. 2:30 PM (ET)

St. David's Episcopal Church
763 South Valley Forge Road
Wayne, PA 19087

Tribute Wall

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“ *Hadley and family, so very sorry that we were unable to attend your Dad's Memorial, but he will always be a wonderful memory of special times we shared with him at Waverly. We are so sorry for your loss of a great Dad and grandfather. Love, John and Yola*

Yola Stuliglowa - January 29, 2023 at 12:43 PM