

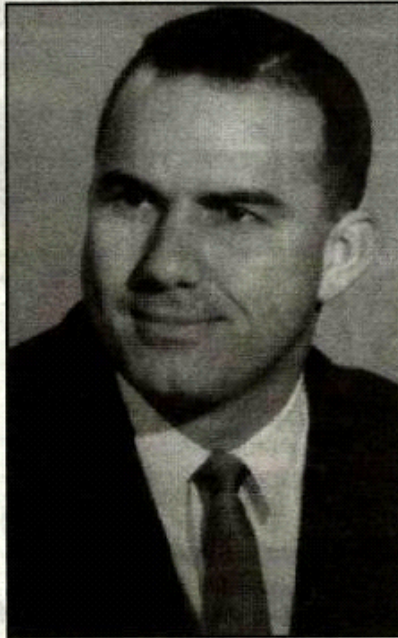
# Bill Hunt: A Man

*By His Family*

Bill Hunt was called many things: Husband, Dad, Granddad, Great-Granddad, and to the Malvern community, he was Coach, Principal, Superintendent, and Leader. Bill might have conceded that a few other names should be added to the list, some of which probably shouldn't be printed in this family newspaper. That's inevitable when you step into the public arena and stay there your entire career.

In fact, Bill was pretty good at coming up with names himself. His family will always remember his beloved dog's name, "We-Be-Lu-Me," which he created using the first two letters of each grandchild's name (Wesley, Ben, Luke, and Meredith). Then there was the "Lu-Be-We-Me Deck" that he helped his family build, and the "pomes," as he liked to call them, including "An Arkansaw Pome for the Grandkids." Bill's family will remember his whimsical nature in later years, silly songs and magic tricks, boating trips to Lake DeGray, and his devotion to his wife, Betty. But there is another part of Bill Hunt's life that deserves to be remembered, a part that his grandchildren and great-grandchildren didn't witness: The role he played in guiding Malvern Public Schools through a tumultuous time in our country's history.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court decided



Brown v. Board of Education, which overturned desegregation and the doctrine of "separate, but equal" created by the 1896 Supreme Court decision, Plessy v. Ferguson. Brown created the possibility of a new standard for interaction between the races—particularly in America's public schools—but it would not happen overnight. Because the Supreme Court did not establish a timeline for desegregation, the door was opened for extended delays and strong opposition to the integration process in school districts throughout the nation, particularly in the Deep South. Perhaps the most well-publicized and infamous example of such opposition occurred right here in Arkansas when nine African-American students attempted to integrate into Little Rock Central High School. Not only were the students jeered and threatened by a mob of angry citizens outside of the

school, these young men and women met continued harassment inside the walls of Central High. Sadly, the federal troops sent by President Dwight D. Eisenhower were forced to stay with the students throughout the 1957-1958 school-year.

Following the crisis at Central High, integration of public schools in Arkansas became almost non-existent. By the mid-1960s, only a handful of the state's schools had fully integrated because administrators feared creating violence in their own communities. But after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made segregation of public schools illegal, the Supreme Court had the legislative support necessary to enforce integration of public schools immediately. The practical impact at the local level was the implementation of "Freedom of Choice" at many schools and the creation of final plans for desegregation of all grade levels. The Little Rock story is not the only way that integration came to the public schools in Arkansas. In Malvern, the process did not involve violence, hostile mobs, or federal troops. Rather, it simply entailed the efforts of a school administrator who was determined to comply with federal law and his own deep-rooted belief in fundamental fairness.

Bill Hunt believed in discipline. A standout, three-sport collegiate athlete, the young coach earned the reputation of a hard-working, no-nonsense leader at an early age. "Do it right, do it light—do it



# of Many Names

wrong, do it long" was one of Bill's favorite sayings. After earning his stripes coaching at Rison, Monticello, and Hot Springs, Bill came to Malvern Public Schools in 1954 as head basketball coach. Only two years later he was named head football coach and athletic director, and it was immediately apparent that there was more to Coach Hunt than "Ra-Ra" antics. He fundamentally believed that every student should have the opportunity to graduate and to make a positive difference in their communities, and he taught each of his players about commitment to something greater than themselves. Named principal of Malvern High School prior to the 1967 term, the 1966 Mirror - Malvern High School's year book - noted:

"Mr. Bill Hunt, former Head Coach and now principal of our school, combines the best of two worlds in his administration. The fair play and co-operation that so exemplified his nine years of coaching is beyond a doubt carried over and magnified in his new capacity...Mr. Hunt has proven his sincerity and conviction by initially establishing an excellent relationship with both students and faculty. It can be said in all honesty that this year and many to come will bear glowing witness to his willingness and efficiency."

The Malvern School Board and longtime superintendent, L.L. Bruce, selected Coach Hunt to take over as high school principal for a very specific reason. They recog-

nized that he possessed the unique abilities to oversee the integration of the high school in 1969-1970, and Coach Hunt's selection was tied directly to the administration's desire to start integration at the highest grade level, rather than the lower grade levels, as many schools throughout Arkansas were doing at the time. The young principal's fair play and equal treatment of all students lead to his promotion to superintendent of the Malvern School District in the spring of 1970 after the retirement of Mr. Bruce, who served admirably for 17 years as a dedicated and beloved public servant in the Malvern community. Coach Hunt would oversee the final integration of Malvern Public Schools. He embraced the opportunity.

On July 1, 1970, Coach Hunt presented a final, updated desegregation plan to the Office for Civil Rights. While the school district had made progress in its desegregation efforts at the high school level, significant issues remained unresolved at the junior high and elementary levels. In his personal documents, Coach Hunt remembered his efforts to geographically rezone the Malvern School District as a tedious process, and one of the "...greatest difficulties of fulfilling the integration mandate." He also made tough choices to close underfunded and inadequate elementary and junior high schools, and he developed creative solutions for additional classroom space until construction of new classrooms could be

completed.

With a tough disciplinary program, uncanny organization skills, and strong leadership, Coach Hunt smoothly integrated hundreds of students into their new schools, holding true to his words throughout the process: "We treat the blacks the same as the whites and the rich the same as the poor. The mayor's son gets the same treatment as everyone else." By continuously emphasizing that every student would be treated respectfully and equally under his watch, Coach Hunt molded a fully integrated school district and gained the support of the Malvern community. He not only promoted the inevitability of the integration process, but the genuine good that could emerge from it as well. Just as he had done for his teammates and players during his playing and coaching days, Coach Hunt the administrator inspired confidence in students, teachers, and community leaders. He executed desegregation and affirmative action plans that brought about a smooth transition to a new reality where, finally, equality was attainable.

Bill Hunt remained in the arena as superintendent for Malvern Public Schools until his retirement in 1989. For this, for the poems he wrote, for the trips to the lake, and for the many other things he did in his life, Bill Hunt deserves another name. For his family, at least, that name is "hero."