

Family, friends, colleagues and neighbors:

James Thomas Bonnen was born to be a teacher.

Born in the college town of Brookings, South Dakota in 1926 to Clarence and Alice McDonald Bonnen, the Bonnen name went to the very earliest days of our profession. His father was a faculty member in agricultural economics at the universities of Illinois, South Dakota State, and Texas A&M. One of six children, Jim received the gift of a love of learning from his parents. A perceptive child who grew up in the segregated south, Jim also learned from his parents a sense of justice toward all persons. These two aspects of his personality defined Jim Bonnen the person and Jim Bonnen the professional.

Jim's Christian faith, learned at an early age, was simple and based on the two simplest Christian teachings. First, a daily thanks for those blessings which we have or are about to receive and the duty to share those gifts with others. Second, a daily duty to the least of among us—the sick, the hungry or the poor.

Jim's high school yearbook described him as "A boy with pleasing disposition and much efficiency. We are sure he has a real future ahead of him." Little could his high school classmates imagine what that future would be. But as my fellow graduate student from the 1980s, Ralph Christy, observed, Jim fulfilled that future by becoming "respected deeply by his peers...his contributions are enduring... [He was] a humble intellectual giant who gave unselfishly of his time and talents to society."

Jim's future began when he volunteered for the U.S. Navy in March of his junior year of high school, 1943. Underage for military service, he was assigned to the Navy's V-12 training program, then assigned to officer training at Tulane before serving in the Pacific theatre. After returning from military service, he finished a degree at Texas A&M, then a Master's degree at Duke and a PhD at Harvard. While his love of learning was absorbing every aspect of the Harvard experience, he was still the small town boy from Texas – and aware of his educational deficiencies compared to others. When a professor told him "if you want to be a good writer, read good writing," Jim doubled down on reading the best writer he knew – Zane Grey's western cowboy novels.

Then, after two years at Harvard, he met Sarah Smythe. Her love of learning matched his and her sense of justice just as strong as his. She added to his life a love of art, music, and literature beyond Zane Grey. And one more thing – recognized as one of the best writers in the agricultural economics profession, he often said "I never knew how to write until I met Sarah." The entire agricultural economics profession has Sarah Bonnen to thank for that.

Jim and Sarah married and came to MSU in 1954, his academic home until 1996. His areas of professional activity are too numerous to detail at length, but there were two subjects of his work of which he was proudest. From 1963 to 1965, he served on the President's Council of Economic Advisers for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. This experience shaped his professional career for the rest of his life. Moreover, it led to his appointment to President Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Rural Poverty. Jim's professional skills had met his sense of justice.

The work of this Commission redefined the issue of rural poverty in America. Until that time, two myths dominated public policy on poverty issues. First, poverty was assumed to be an

“urban” issue, not a problem for bucolic rural areas. Second, to the extent that there were issues related to poverty in rural areas, it was assumed that traditional farm programs were adequate for addressing rural poverty. The Commission’s report disproved the first myth, demonstrating that the poverty rate in rural American was nearly as high as in urban areas, and telling the story of rural poverty in the title of its report “The People Left Behind.”

The second myth, about the effectiveness of traditional farm programs in alleviating rural poverty, was put to rest forever by Jim’s chapter in the Commission report. His chapter in the report, using simple but powerful data techniques, found that traditional farm programs had very little effect on alleviating poverty among the smallest farm producers and none at all on the much larger rural non-farm population. His work on this topic so defined the subject that even today, any research discussing the issue of the distributional impacts of farm programs begins with a citation to Jim’s work.

The second area of his work of which he was especially proud was his work on data systems and public data provision. Jim’s work in this area also provides the starting point for any agricultural economist dealing with data policy issues. Economists can be notorious for our neglect of the data we use – at least until we need it. But Jim didn’t see it that way. He had learned from his father’s generation the need for reliable data if we are to understand the operation of the economy. Furthermore, he knew that maintaining public data is a collective enterprise – essential for all professionals but often neglected by individuals. Jim began to raise the issue of data reliability in the late 1960s. By 1972 he was appointed the first chair of the Economic Statistics Committee of the American Agricultural Economics Association. Four years later, his presidential address of the association dealt with that issue in great depth.

In 1978, President Carter appointed him as Director of the President’s Federal Statistical System Reorganization Project. So respected was his work in this area that he received the ultimate professional tribute – he was elected a fellow of the American Statistical Association, giving him the unique status of having been named a fellow of two professional associations.

And so you can understand the immense pride that Jim felt when one day out of the clear, his grandson David, at about the age of 10, announced that when he grew up he intended to become the Director of the U.S. Bureau of the Census and that he intended to conduct the entire counting of the U.S. population by himself because he intended to minimize errors in counting.

Every student enrolled in Jim’s graduate class on agricultural policy knew one thing for certain on the first day of class: we were in the presence of a true scholar. To students, Jim appeared to be in a race with Professor Carl Eicher, with each man aiming to have the longest reading list in the department. But in reality, this simply reflected Jim’s love of learning. Because of his own reading habits and his ability to see connections between seemingly unrelated issues and trends, Jim sought to convey this ability to his students. And on top of the reading list was a stack of daily newspaper clippings that began each class. And the cartoons. Each day’s stack of handouts included a roundup of editorial cartoons. As our colleague John Staatz observed, Jim had “the analytical skills to figure out [how the world worked], and the sense of humor to laugh at the absurdity of some of the things he figured out.”

True to his sense of humor, there was absolutely nothing that Jim enjoyed more than cartoons. Nothing delighted Jim more than a pointed, on target editorial cartoon. But he loved all forms of cartoons – his three favorite cartoons were anything by Rube Goldberg that reflected his

childhood interest in mechanics and engineering –later Herbert Block or Herblock from the Washington Post — and later in life – Calvin and Hobbes, the cartoon based on the theologian John Calvin and the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, was a strip that appealed to both the kid and the intellectual in Jim Bonnen.

What greater evidence is there of the love of learning by Jim and Sarah Bonnen than their children and grandchildren? Professionals in law, art, engineering, and education – Jim and Sarah’s children reflect the breadth of their parents’ interests. And now a new generation with the Bonnen name continues to benefit from the lessons that Jim and Sarah taught with love of learning as their eldest grandchild Kate has just begun a PhD in the exciting field of cognitive science and the other grandchildren reaching in their own directions. Jim was so proud of you all.

When I prepared these remarks, I finally realized: Jim Bonnen the economist, Jim Bonnen the teacher and mentor, Jim Bonnen the Christian, Jim Bonnen the husband, the father and the grandfather, Jim Bonnen the man – these were all the same Jim Bonnen and that one Jim Bonnen was born to teach the same lessons in every aspect of his life: A love of learning. The dignity of all people. And our reliance on the collective community in whatever endeavor we undertake in life.

And so now, with those lessons in mind, we must say goodbye to the boy who became the man with the “pleasing disposition and much efficiency.” Through his lessons and gifts to all of us, we can be sure that we have a real future of memories and life ahead of us. Thank you, Jim.

David Schweikhardt, Phd

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