

rural Highland, KS



William Edward Gomer, affectionately known as "Bill", was born in Stockton, CA on August 14, 1940 to William Edward Sr. & Lois Gomer. Shortly after his birth they moved to Tampa, FL, where Lois would remarry to Emmet Strickland. Bill and his sister Gerraldine would retain the Gomer name.

Bill fell in love with saddlemaking and harness making at an early age, as his adopted father and grandfather were both cobblers, harness, and saddelmakers. Bill worked around his father's shop at the tender age of five, punching holes for stitching. Working on horse tack to elephant training harnesses for the famed Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, then headquartered in Sarasota, FL near Bill's home.

Bill admitted that his father was a good teacher, but often discouraged him from going into the family business. He felt that the "Horse and Buggy" days were over, plus his father didn't want to share his many years of knowledge with young Bill. So at the tender age of fifteen, Bill sought out what he desired most- Knowledge! He openly admits to "Hoboing" on trains, from his home in Tampa, FL to Pendelton, OR to the home of the Hamley Brothers Saddlery, the "Cadillac" of custom saddles.

During a hard earned apprenticeship, Bill learned a very valuable skill, the sharing of secrets! He was often frustrated that the older makers and artists disliked sharing knowledge or skills. At that defining point, he swore that he would share his knowledge with anyone and everyone, he didn't care. He thought that if you've got a secret and you are going to take it with you to the grave, it wasn't worth it. There shouldn't be any secrets.

Bill entered the United States Army in 1963, he was trained as a M-113 Gavin APC driver, and assigned to the 172nd Infantry Brigade, at Ft. Richardson, AK. He disliked working in the armor battalion, but fate was smiling on him one day while passing the base craft shop. During a freehand leathercarving demonstration, the commanding officer of Army Forces in Alaska was so impressed with his skill, he transferred him that day. He became the Arts and Crafts Supervisor for Ft. Richardson.

Between the years of 1963 & 1965, Bill worked as a Arts and Craft Specialist. On March 27th, 1964, during the "Good Friday Earthquake" he participated in "Operation: Helping Hand". A joint military and civilian recovery effort. His talents were utilized and proved invaluable in the survey and photography of the Anchorage area. During this time he would work with fellow legendary leathercarver and magicians Ken Griffen and his wife Roberta. Both influenced Bill to do a tour with them for the USO, entertaining wounded troops aboard aircraft carriers, with other stars such as Bob Hope and Jane Mansfield.

His military career was cut short due to circumstances beyond his control, and was given a hardship discharge. Bill returned to his home to help care for his sister, who had been injured. Bill's father had sold the business, tools and all. This setback did not discourage Bill. He opened his own store in a small feed shop. He was approached by the students of the University of South Florida to help make sandals. He initially declined, but four thousand pairs of sandals later, the Arts and Craft Center at the University of South Florida was established.

Being very spiritual, Bill was very active in the Jackson Heights Southern Baptist Church, where he was introduced to scouting. During a Scouting trip to Ocala, FL to teach leatherwork, Bill forgot all of his tools. Once there, he improvised makeshift tools and taught the class. This led to a lifelong love for scouting. In 1976 he completed the "72 Miler" at Philmont Scout Ranch in Cimarron, NM at the age of 36.

While in Florida, he proposed to Eloise McRae of Tampa, then making the move to Chattanooga, TN to the Simco Saddle Company in early 1970. In 1970 Bill and Ella had their first child, William Kim Gomer. Bill would go to re-enlist in the US Army again, as a Arts and Craft Specialist. Bill was assigned to the US Army Combined Arms Center, US Disciplinary Barracks at Ft. Leavenworth, KS in 1973. At last he found his calling- Teaching. He found the task challenging and very rewarding. Teaching inmates and serving on the Honor Guard Drill and Ceremony Detail, and in 1975 their second child, Tonya Christine Gomer was born.

Between the years of 1976 and 1980, Bill would move his family back and forth between Kansas and Alaska, Teaching leatherwork before settling down in the Jarbalo township in rural Leavenworth county. Bill would teach there for many years, and in the early 2000's Bill relocated outside of Highland, KS, where he would set up his saddle school.

In 1986, he was awarded the Al Stolman Award for Achievement in Leathercraft, and in 2016 Bill received the Academy of Western Artists Award for Master Leather Artisan. It was often said that the crowning achievement of his career was the 125th Anniversary Kansas Saddle. Built as a birthday tribute, he would decline and would point out that, "he had been seconded to one of his students, it is a high honor when your student beats you."

Over the years Bill has worn many hats. He has taught hundreds of students, helped reform the most hardened of criminals to become a functioning and productive member of society again. Bill has formed guilds

in Alaska, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri. He has competed in local, state, national, and even on the international stage. Bill served as a Master Artist for the Kansas

State Historical Society.

Bill is survived by his wife Ella, his son William K. Gomer (Las Vegas, NV), his daughter Tonya C. White (Hiawatha, KS), stepsister Vivian Nguyen (San Jose, CA), 6 Grandsons, 2 granddaughters, and 12 Great grandchildren.

He will be missed

Celebration of Bill's life is planned for 2 p.m. Saturday, June 25, 2022, at the Brown County Historical Society Ag Museum, 301 East Iowa, Hiawatha. Join the family for a meal and story telling. Bring a side dish or desert to share. Text RSVP 816 377 0332.