

PROFILE

Bill Hiatt

FULL NAME: William Seth Hiatt
OCCUPATION: Semi-Retired;
 Co-Owner, Hiatt And Mason Enterprises
BIRTHPLACE: Mount Airy
AGE: 59
FAMILY: Wife, Rita
 Five Daughters, Shelia, Gina,
 Melody, Crystal And Ashley
EDUCATION: B.S. In Physical Education
 From Brigham Young University;
 Vocational Education Classes
 At N.C. State; Grad Work At
 Appalachian State University
HOBBIES: Tennis, Woodworking,
 Working With People

By TERRY COLLINS
 News Staff Writer

SHELTONTOWN — Bill Hiatt began the conversation with an understatement.

"I come from a big family," he said.

With seven brothers, three sisters, five children and six grandchildren, Hiatt wasn't kidding.

"I'm the seventh son — there's one brother and two sisters younger than I am. ... I have fond recollections of home. I recall we used to have a family home evening one night a week."

Hiatt continued: "We would read Scriptures, talk — most of the time we would make homemade ice cream. We used to fight over who would get to lick the paddle. It was established as a rule that whoever stirred the ice cream got to lick it."

Seated in the dining room of his home, Hiatt gestured over his shoulder, indicating the house next door. "My parents lived in the adjoining house. I was born and raised there. My dad was a well-known lawyer in Mount Airy, David L. Hiatt. (He) was a very good disciplinarian. He kept us straight, but he always gave us a fair trial. We used to accuse him of being the judge and Mom of being the jury."

Growing up in the late 1930s and early 1940s was not easy for any family. The Hiatts raised crops and kept animals. Hiatt remembers milking many a cow before getting on the school bus.

"We raised a lot of our own food. We'd have to work in the cornfield and in the garden — if the chores were not enough, Dad always had a list of things to keep us moving. But he was a very kind and loving individual, and so was my mother, so growing up was a joy," Hiatt said.

He attended Shelontown School until the school was closed, then went to Flat Rock School and graduated there. Hiatt remembers the routes over Quaker Road and Lovers Lane as being extremely tiring. Since both roads were dirt, whenever bad weather crept up the ride took hours.

"We had a Rainy Day Schedule. They would dismiss school at 1 o'clock so everyone could get home before dark."

Hiatt was a good student, enjoying history and physical education classes. As a teen-ager he liked playing sports and keeping in shape, and when he made the long journey by Greyhound bus to Provo, Utah, he knew he wanted to major in P.E. at Brigham Young University.

Most of his siblings also attended Brigham Young. Hiatt recalls three sisters and five brothers going to the famous Utah school. Hiatt worked part-time on weekends driving a truck for a commercial tire company, while refereeing basketball games during the week.

Hiatt married in December 1952. After graduating from college, he and his wife Rita returned to Surry County, where Hiatt taught social studies and was an assistant coach at Flat Rock School.

But this didn't last long. He taught one month and got drafted. Hiatt went through basic training at Camp Pickett in Virginia. For a lover of physical activity the training was a challenge, and Hiatt says he enjoyed himself while in the service — although he wasn't happy about being separated from his new bride.

After basic training, Hiatt ended up at Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Aberdeen, Md. After some shifting of duties, he worked for the remainder of his two years in the service as an administrative assistant.

The experience taught him much about working with people, and at times it seemed like a normal 9-to-5 job. Hiatt and his wife lived off-base and he drove to work every morning like millions of other Americans in the 1950s.

"My job was basically to approve leaves, write letters for the company commander and make sure reports were filed. I supervised the clerical staff. After being discharged, I came back (to Mount Airy) and taught school in Westfield," Hiatt related.

The next decade was a blur of activity for Hiatt. He taught and/or coached at Dobson High School, Jamestown Junior High School, Ragsdale High School and Beulah School.

At Jamestown, Hiatt coached basketball, football and baseball. His second year there, all three teams had perfect records.

"Out of all the coaching I've done, the most enjoyable was junior high. There are fewer discipline problems and the kids will play their hearts out for you," he said.

Hiatt also had started a part-time construction business, which kept his summers busy. This interest led to his long tenure teaching carpentry at North Surry High School.

After the carpentry class was phased out and the Industrial Cooperative Training program started, Hiatt helped place kids in



Judy Dickerson/The Mount Airy News

on-the-job training in a variety of occupations and was the sponsor of the school's VICA club.

And, of course, one must not forget his stints in Raleigh, where Hiatt served a two-year term in the state Legislature in 1972, and was re-elected in 1980.

Hiatt is proud of three bills he introduced during his first term which became North Carolina law. The first was a measure that succeeded in keeping Nov. 11 as Veterans Day.

The next two bills dealt with the handicapped. Hiatt introduced the Curb Ramp Bill and the Architectural Barrier-Free Bill. The Curb Ramp Bill states that if a city sidewalk is replaced or constructed, a ramp must be placed on each corner and in the middle for handicapped use, while under the Architectural Barrier-Free Bill all government buildings must be accessible to the handicapped.

For his work with the handicapped, Hiatt received Citations of Meritorious Service from both President Richard Nixon and Gov. Jim Holshouser.

"I guess my concerns for the handicapped grew out of my own experiences. The last few years of her life, my mother was handicapped, and ... I experienced firsthand what it was like to try and get those folks around," Hiatt said.

During his second term, Hiatt crusaded long and hard for a Voter Initiative and Referendum to restore some of the power the people in the state have turned over to the General Assembly. Although ultimately thwarted in his efforts, Hiatt still drew notice to the problem.

Hiatt ran unsuccessfully for lieutenant governor in 1976 and again in 1984. The second time he ran, he worked closely with Gov. Jim Martin during Martin's campaign, and this led to Hiatt being appointed the state's commissioner of motor vehicles on Jan. 7, 1985.

Hiatt soon put his work ethic to good use within the Department of Motor Vehicles. He shuffled positions, brought in new blood and began to try to figure out a way to decrease an infamous car title backlog.

"When I first toured the building to meet everybody, I remember going down this hallway to the data entry section, and there were all these cardboard boxes piled to the ceiling. I later learned there were 365,000 to 400,000 title applications stored in those cardboard boxes. This, I was told, was the backlog," Hiatt said.

Under the Mount Airy native, the backlog was slashed. By the time he left office, the hallway was clear.

"The morale of the entire division was improved tremendously in six years — at least, that's what employees told me, and I think it showed by the increase in productivity," Hiatt said.

"They were treated as professionals and I think they responded to that."

Hiatt also served in many capacities (eventually becoming the president of the southeastern region) with the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. For his work in the state capital, Hiatt received one of North Carolina's most-prestigious awards from Gov. Martin — The Order Of The Long Leaf Pine. He also was given the Road Gang Award from the Department of Transportation.

"I always told my people, 'You are a public servant. You work for the people of North Carolina and the people of the state can always expect prompt, courteous and efficient service,'" Hiatt said.

"I miss it, but I'm enjoying having more time to spend with my family. I think the Lord has blessed me beyond what I deserve. I can certainly say that my life has been good."

Favorite Book:

The Book of Mormon

Favorite Food:

Creamed corn and tomatoes

Favorite Movie:

"Gone With the Wind"

Favorite Song:

"God Bless the U.S.A."