

Writer, outdoors enthusiast Dennis Clay passes away



This photo accompanied Clay's prolific writings in the Columbia Basin Herald for many years.

Moses Lake Mayor Karen Liebrecht reads aloud a Lifetime Achievement proclamation for Dennis Clay at a city council meeting in June 2018. Clay, a lifelong Moses Lake resident, with the exception of military duty, served in the U.S. Army for nine years, served 30 years with the Washington State Employment Security Department as the Disabled Veteran Outreach person and was a contributing writer for the Columbia Basin Herald for decades.

By
Connor Vanderweyst

MOSES LAKE — Dennis Clay, a longtime contributor to the Columbia Basin Herald, passed away on Thursday, April 9, at the age of 72.

Clay submitted his first story to the Herald in 1982. The well-regarded writer was also known for his positive influence on others.

“Dennis was a very giving person,” said longtime family friend Kirk Wilson. “He gave to the community, he gave to his wife, he gave to us, he put himself out there for seniors and he was a very big conservationist. I loved Dennis. He was a wonderful person.”

Clay was born in Ephrata on July 3, 1947, and was raised in Moses Lake by parents Max Clay and Enid Grimshaw Clay. He graduated from Moses Lake High School in 1965 and joined the Army a year later as a private.

Clay was selected to attend Officer Candidate School and flight school, where he became an officer and Army aviator at 19 years old. He flew the Bell UH-1 Iroquois, nicknamed Huey, and other helicopters during the Vietnam War for the 9th Aviation Battalion of the 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta. During his service, Clay attained the rank of captain and received the Bronze Star and 17 other air medals.

“He was so proud, really, of being in the service and serving his country the way that he did,” said Denise Clay Dodge, his sister.

Clay married his wife Garnet Wilson in 1998, and they enjoyed 21 years together.

After submitting his first story to the Herald, Clay blossomed into an internationally known writer, columnist, photographer and broadcaster. Clay’s outdoors column in the Herald began in 1990 and his well-read “Bits & Pieces” historical column debuted in August 1996 under then-Herald publisher Steve Hill. For the Herald, Clay also contributed to editions of Progress and Strength, wrote hard-news stories, and contributed to an annual hunting and fishing booklet.

Clay also helped write “Once a Hobo: The Autobiography of Monte Holm” — a book chronicling the life of Holm, a Moses Lake icon, who left home at the age of 13 during the Great Depression. Clay worked with Holm for hundreds of hours to help turn transcripts of recordings into a true narrative.

“If it wasn’t for Dennis doing that, history would be lost,” said Steve Rimple, Holm’s grandson.

Clay was also published in Alaska Outdoors, Wild Sheep Magazine, British Columbia Sports Fishing, Ted Nugent Adventure Outdoors, The Outdoor Press, Boys’ Life, and Fishing and Hunting News, among other publications.

Clay earned a number of awards for his writing and photography. Clay’s short story “The Time Has Come, And Will Again,” which was published in the 1991 edition of Progress, took first place in that year’s National Hunting & Fishing Day contest.

“Dennis was one of the first to welcome me to Moses Lake and to the Columbia Basin Herald,” Columbia Basin Herald Publisher Caralyn Bess said. “He was quick to offer to show my husband the ropes with respect to fishing and hunting upon learning that David loves the outdoors. I will remember Dennis fondly for a lot of reasons: his work with the food bank, Job Corps and of course his historical knowledge of the Columbia Basin, but first and foremost, I will remember Dennis for his kindness and for his generous soul.

“I think I will miss his monthly hugs the most along with his wonderful smile and the stories he’d share every time he would come into the office or when we’d see each other at a Chamber event. My heart hurts for Garnet and for all of Dennis’ friends and family, but also for all of us who knew him and loved to read his ‘Bits & Pieces’ as well as his outdoor column. Dennis, heaven has gained another angel, and I know you are smiling down on all of us and this wonderful community you called home. I will miss you.”

Clay also received awards from the Inland Northwest and Pacific Northwest chapters of the Society of Professional Journalists. Clay and rock-and-roller friend Ted Nugent placed third in an SPJ Sports Reporting contest for a story about hunting ethics.

Clay was also a member of the Outdoor Writers Association of America and the Northwest Outdoor Writers' Association in which he was elected to serve on the board of directors. Clay also graduated from the Washington State University Master Gardener program and the Master Composter program in Spokane.

"I'm saddened by this because he really was a great guy and he had so many more stories that he wanted to tell, I know, and he had so many more projects," Rimple said.

Beyond his professional life, Clay was known as a selfless, charitable person. Whether it was weekly trips to the Moses Lake Food Bank for deliveries to assisted-living centers or serving as the chairman of the Columbia Basin Job Corps Community Relations Council, Clay gave his time to everyone.

"It didn't matter if it were family or strangers, he cared for everybody," Clay Dodge said.

An example of his generosity was when a local fish hatchery near Winchester Wasteway was preparing to dispose of older fish that were unable to produce eggs, Clay decided to load up the bed of his truck with the unwanted fish and make donations.

"He gave a lot to people that probably wouldn't have anything if it wasn't for Dennis," Kirk Wilson said. "I'm not sure where that's gonna get picked up."

Those who were close to Clay recounted how personable he was; it takes some charisma to befriend someone like Nugent or have the confidence to casually ask former Van Halen front-man Sammy Hagar to take a picture.

"He had such a positive outlook on life ... I just never met anybody like him," said family friend Cathy Kersey.

Clay's charisma was on full display during Moses Lake Chamber of Commerce events.

"Dennis was a true gem in our community and he will be greatly missed," said Chamber of Commerce President Debbie Doran-Martinez. "He and Garnet regularly attended chamber events and he always had a huge smile and hug for all."

"I loved Dennis' laugh," Kirk Wilson said. "If you were down and you saw Dennis and he'd laugh, it would just bring you back up. He was just that way. I never saw Dennis down one time."

Clay is sure to be remembered for how he lived, never down, always looking for a positive outlook.

"I could see the smile on his face right now," Rimple said. "I could just see him smiling. I don't think he ever didn't smile."



Dennis Clay, high school graduation 1965



Dennis Clay, Army, about 1967



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File photo

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