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William Ellis Phillips

William Ellis Phillips, son of Adolphus and Velvrittie Byram Phillips, was born on November 23, 1914. Bill, as he was affectionately called, was the third son born to a loving, hard-working farm family. As a child, he had many friends and loved to spend time with them, often sleeping overnight in each other's homes. Bill liked to fish and hunt and was a model student in school. His great passion at the Tishomingo County High Agricultural School (TCAHS) was football, where he played halfback. The last minute of the final game of the season played on his 18th birthday, November 23, 1932, changed his life and the lives of his family forever. His sister-in-law, Lorena Nash Phillips, a teacher in the Tishomingo schools, wrote the following tribute to him:

The time held the gun high above his head and pulled the trigger. The report cracked the crisp November air and the gay holiday crowd became a milling mass on the football field, congratulating the winning grid forces and consoling the loser. A long punt in the last fleeting seconds had brought the struggle to an end. The thud of impact could easily be heard from the sidelines. Bodies piled high and all were able to get up and walk off under their own power—all except one. Ellis Phillips, a halfback on the winning team, had the life pounded out of him temporarily and there he lay on the cold ground. The blood had drained from his face, and he lay very still. Instead of hitting the ball carrier with his shoulders, he misjudged the tackle and hit him with his head.

From the day that Bill made that tackle, his body, from his shoulders down, was paralyzed. Two vertebrae were crushed. He could use his arms, but his fingers were paralyzed. He spent months in a Memphis hospital, with the best of medical care, but

physicians could do little for him. Because of this condition, he was bedridden at his farm home in Dennis, Mississippi. But he did not give up. He was the inspiration of a father, mother, sister, brother, and friend.

Bill's paralysis in no way impaired his mind. He was the axis around which the entire farm turned. He learned to write by holding a pencil in his mouth and spelling out words by moving the paper over the pencil point. Keenly alert to modern farm methods by reading newspapers and farm journals, Bill induced his parents to enter a farm contest in 1938. He figured it out that by keeping the production records of his parents' farm that an agriculturally poor layout might be transposed into a paying proposition. Bill put the proposition up to his heavily burdened Dad, and soon things began to "hum" around the farm.

With the help of the County Agent and farm specialists from Mississippi State University, the Phillips family won the 1939 Sweepstakes Awards in the "Plant to Prosper" contest. The farm was the first in the Tennessee Valley to qualify as an Electro-Development Demonstration Farm. All records were kept by Bill. By listening to the radio, he kept the family posted on farm quotations and world affairs. His picture appeared in *Look* magazine and many newspapers and farm journals. People from all parts of the United States wrote him, admiring his courage. He was an agent for a magazine, writing orders by holding the pencil in his mouth. While the future held little for Bill, he had a happy outlook on life. The much improved farm home radiated sunshine. One never heard Bill complain. He always had a lovely disposition, although he was in one position—flat. His eyes fairly sparkled with the same determination he had when at 18 years of age he misjudged the tackle and made it with his head instead of his shoulders.

Bill's devoted sister, Ruth Phillips Bolding, taught school in Tishomingo County several years, then took a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. The distance from home did not deter her from helping out with the family. Every weekend she came home to do her part, which she did faithfully and unselfishly for many years. The same could be said of their brother, Hoyt, and his wife, Lorena. The entire family rallied around this unusual situation which will always be an inspiration for all to emulate.

In the summer of 1949, Bill emerged from the four walls that comprised his world for 17 years, into what would be comparable to a modern-day astronaut's flight into outer space. A local funeral director, Noonan Deaton, and his son, Otha, consulted with Bill's doctors and with a Birmingham specialist, who agreed that an outing trip would do him good. Bill hesitated for some time before he agreed to go for fear of the consequences he might have after being a shut-in for so many years.

The Deatons put Bill on a stretcher bearer and wheeled him around his home. Had he not enjoyed some of the comforts of the modern conveniences, he would have thought he was in someone else's home. He saw the kitchen where his mother and sister, Ruth, prepared daily meals for the family. This is the kitchen where they "put up" 488 quarts

of vegetables and 90 jars of jelly and preserves in one year. The Deatons took Bill outside where he saw for the first time the improved farm with modern equipment. He saw the fields where feed for the livestock and poultry were grown, fruit trees and gardens that supplied fresh fruit and vegetables from spring to winter, and a beautifully landscaped lawn where his hard-working father had labored so diligently. He saw a smoke house where meat was cured and a fish pond on the place to provide fish whenever they wanted it. They produced their own potatoes, smoking tobacco, honey, syrup for home use, and made their own soap. Since they raised most of their food, the family's grocery bill for one year was only \$67.40. They sold enough extra food to pay for new equipment and improvements on the farm.

After this tour of the farm, Bill felt as if he could go for a ride in the ambulance. They drove slowly up the new highway toward Dennis so he could observe the countryside he had not seen since the depths of the great depression, then on to Belmont. They paused near the cemeteries where he remarked that some thought he would take up residence there many years ago. Besides the improved roads and bridges, the most noticeable changes were in the new homes and the repaired older homes which he recalled were in run-down condition before his accident.

On another occasion, the Deatons took Bill on a trip to Tishomingo. On the campus of the new high school grounds, he saw a big new structure being built on the site of the old Tishomingo County Agricultural High School building. Most everything had changed. The grassy football field where he played was still there, unused since the day of Bill's accident. He had no bitterness about the sport and enjoyed watching football games on the television set given to him by the Lion's Club of Belmont. He saw his brother Hoyt Phillips' successful service station and many native stone buildings which made an impression on him.

From there, they toured Tishomingo State Park where Bill's desire to see trees, big trees, little trees, green trees, and all kinds of trees was satisfied. He remarked that perhaps he was getting a little sentimental, but when one cannot see trees for so long, they are something to see. He said the coolest spot in the park was under the trees near the creek.

Another time, the Deatons took Bill to the Tupelo fair. There he planned to see the grandstand show, but it rained. Afterwards he remarked, "All I got to see was the crowds, but it was good to see people." In letters to the editors of local newspapers, he expressed his appreciation to the Deatons and to the Lion's Club of Belmont for their generosity.

After the "Plant to Prosper" honor, letters, poems, books, souvenirs, gifts, and a steady stream of visitors (2,876 in one year) from many states, made a path to the Phillips' home. He kept abreast of current events and shared his zest for life with all who came to call. People from all walks of life, who wanted to know the latest farm practices, the best techniques on almost any subject or world news, came and were caught up with his enthusiasm. He carried on a steady correspondence with people in 38 states and Canada from all walks of life, writing by moving the paper over the pencil point held in his

mouth. He did this until his eyesight grew worse. A sample of his handwriting, which would put any handwriting expert to shame, was pictured in *Look* magazine in 1940. All this would not have been possible without the unselfish, self-sacrificing devotion of a loving family who gave of themselves so that Bill could have a life of his own.

When Bill's parents retired from active farming, the decision was made to move from the farm near Dennis to Tishomingo. This disturbed Bill because the four walls of his old room had been his life for 24 years. The new home in Tishomingo was somewhat removed from his old friends, his old routine of visits, and his old surroundings. Although he was unable to see the family farmland from his bed, Bill still knew it was there outside his windows, changeless and ever familiar. However, the same brand of courage that led him to adjust to a lifetime in bed led him to accept the new room in a new town.

Articles appeared in such publications as *The Progressive Farmer*, *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, *The Rural Electrification News*, *The Birmingham News*, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, *The Furrow (Moline, Ill.)*, *The Acco Press* published by Anderson-Clayton Cotton Co., *Look* magazine, and many other publications around the country. They came to interview this truly remarkable person and went away feeling good about themselves. They also felt good about themselves and admiration for a guy who was indeed "down but not out." William Ellis Phillips was truly a hero in every sense of the word.

The information above was prepared by Christine McNutt Oates for W. R. Nettles' *Tishomingo County Agricultural High School: A History*. It was transcribed by RaNae Vaughn on July 2, 2006.