

Robert Evander McNair

Son of Berkeley County. Husband. Father. Grandfather. Great-grandfather. Friend. Churchman. Veteran. Legislator. Governor. Statesman. South Carolinian. How does one go about composing a proper farewell for someone who has meant not only so much to this state, but to all of us present? It was my privilege to know and work with Bob McNair the past thirty years in a variety of capacities. He was a gentle man; a humble man; a good man.

My father who departed this life—just a few weeks shy of his 101st birthday told me repeatedly over the years the advice that his father had given him. “When in doubt, son, go to the good book. Go to the Bible.” And, in preparing these remarks, that is what I have done.

There are two passages that strike me as critical in understanding Robert Evander McNair. The first is from one of the Apocryphal books, widely used in the early church: Ecclesiasticus or Sirach. In chapter 44, the author has written a “Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors.” He starts with Noah and Abraham and lauds every major figure of the Jewish nation for many generations. It is a passage that I frequently use in discussing the American Revolution in South Carolina and the heroic men and women who, “through bloodshed and devastation and the depths of wretchedness,” brought our state back into her place in the American republic “by their own heroic courage and self-devotion, having suffered more, and dared more, and achieved more, than the citizens of any other state.” I use it because their praises should be sung and their deeds should be remembered. And, so should the life and times of Bob McNair.

A reading from Ecclesiasticus, Chapter 44, verses 1-7.

Let us now sing the praises of famous men, our ancestors in their generations. The Lord apportioned to them great glory, his majesty from the

beginning. There were those who ruled in their kingdoms, and made a name for themselves by their valor; those who gave counsel because they were intelligent; those who spoke in prophetic oracles; those who led the people by their counsels and by their knowledge of the people's lore; they were wise in their words of instruction; those who composed musical tunes, or put verses in writing; rich men endowed with resources, living peacefully in their homes—all these were honored in their generations, and were the pride of their times. Some of them have left behind a name, so that others declare their praise.

I believe it is totally appropriate to sing the praises of Robert Evander McNair. He was a famous man—and worthy of the honor and glory apportioned to him in his time. He governed us wisely and led us through difficult years by his calm determination. He gave willingly and freely of his counsel to his successors, regardless of party because he was first and foremost, a South Carolinian and he believed that state government and those chosen to lead it—regardless of branch—should act for the benefit of all of the people of the state. He was honored in his generation and was a public official of whom the state was proud. He has left a legacy to which future generations should turn to for example.

That is why I think this passage from Ecclesiasticus is an appropriate reference for examining the life and times of Robert Evander McNair. For, in the storied annals of our state's heritage, he is truly a figure larger than life—although he would have been the first to deny it. Over the years we had a number of wonderful, private conversations. And, if he and I had sat down to discuss these remarks, I can just hear him say as he did in an interview in 1971—in the soft, measured tones he used so effectively: “Now, Walter, you're making too much of this. “South Carolina has moved ahead these past few years, but not because of me.” BUT NOT BECAUSE OF ME. How like the man: modest, caring, considerate of others—always willing to share the spotlight.

And again, if he and I were having this hypothetical discussion, he probably would have been more comfortable with another passage—this one from the Book of the Prophet Micah: Chapter 6, verse 8:

He has told you, O mortal what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

We historians are fortunate to have video tapes of interviews and speeches that Bob McNair made. When you see a person's facial expressions and body language and hear the tone of their voice, the inflection given certain words and phrases—then you get a much better idea as to what was really meant. You get the measure of the person—not just words on paper.

In his farewell address to the General Assembly the governor did not shy away from looking at all that had transpired during his terms of office. He referred to Orangeburg and Lamar as “scars on our state's conscience.” He was clearly distressed that they had occurred, but he was also proud that our state had managed to break away from its past because of the “human understanding and compassion” [his words] that distinguished the “character and dignity of all South Carolinians” [again... his words]. Of course, when he uttered those statements, it was in the context that what had been accomplished was good, “but not because of me” [again his own words]. Yet, if you look at what DID occur in South Carolina from 1965-1971, if you read the record, if you listen to the interviews, if you watch the films, there is no doubt whatsoever that our state was blessed with having a governor who had human understanding and compassion. He had character and dignity. And he was every inch a South Carolinian.

In the political realm he was a pragmatist who believed in being “part of the process”--or rather, “part of the solution”--NOT part of the problem. For those of us who have studied the history of the American South, in state after state, you find

examples where public officials: mayors, sheriffs, legislators, and governors, were “part of the problem,” not “part of the solution.” And, without exception, those below the office of governor took their cues from their state's highest office. Governor McNair set the example of moderation, reason, compassion, and human understanding. And, because of him our South Carolina became very much a different place, a better place. Did he consciously act according to Micah's admonition? I don't know, but I do know that he was a man of deep and abiding faith in God. In all of his positions in public life, but especially as governor, **he was concerned about justice** for ALL Carolinians—look where we were in 1971 as compared to 1965—and take another look at what was transpiring in neighboring states. He was kind. He might disagree with someone but he did not hate them or condemn them. He treated them and their contrary views with kindness and respect. His compassion and understanding were legendary. And, he was one of the most humble public figures that I have ever known. No spin-meisters touting his accomplishments, no plumping for special honors or political preferment. Instead, always giving credit to others for what was done. It takes a great man to do that. A man secure in his own being, and a man of faith.

To understand the man whose life we celebrate today, we need to take a brief look back at who HE was.

Robert Evander McNair, the son of Claudia Crawford and Daniel Evander McNair, grew up in the Hell Hole Swamp area of Berkeley County – in a rural South Carolina where electricity and in-door plumbing were unknown. His father's farm on the Santee River provided a comfortable living for the family, but they were surrounded by rural poverty and one-crop agriculture that offered barely a subsistence living for many of their neighbors.

McNair remembered fondly his first three years at Jamestown School – where there were seven grades and three teachers. He later attended Macedonia, a

graded school that included high school. Like many other young men from farming communities, he elected to attend Clemson College. However, after one semester, he realized that he wanted to be a lawyer, not a farmer and transferred to the University of South Carolina where he majored in English and political science. He was fascinated with words and language and took every course offered by Professor Havilah Babcock – but I wonder whether it was the professor’s linguistics lectures or his bird hunting stories that attracted McNair to class? Another favorite English professor was Dr. James Milton Arial who taught 19th century romantic poetry. Among the poets studied was John Greenleaf Whittier—who, although a New Englander, like Bob McNair had a deep and abiding faith in God and a love of rural life.

In your bulletins is a line from Whittier's poem entitled, “My Birthday”:
'Before me, even as behind, God is, and all is well.' I believe it appropriate to hear this powerful line of poetry in its context because it deals with coming to grips with age—as we all must—and expresses a humble thankfulness for blessings bestowed.

“My Birthday”

Beneath the moonlight and the snow

Lies dead my latest year;

The winter winds are wailing low

Its dirges in my ear

I grieve not with the moaning wind

As if a loss befell

Before me, even as behind,

God is, and all is well!

Not mindless of the growing years
Of care and loss and pain,
My eyes are wet with thankful tears
For blessings which remain.

World War II interrupted McNair's college career as it did the lives of hundreds of thousands of young South Carolina men and women. From college classrooms and factories, from farms and fields they answered their country's call. As a LT (JG) in the U.S. Navy in the Pacific, Bob commanded an LCT (Landing Craft Tank). He participated in numerous small operations in and around New Guinea and several major ones in the Philippines – most notably the Leyte invasion. In 1945 he returned home after twenty-two months of combat service. His wife, Josephine Robinson of Allendale was waiting for him. They had been married just prior to his shipping out for the Pacific Theater.

Returning to Carolina, McNair completed his undergraduate and law degrees. In 1948 while still in law school he filed for a seat in the SC House of Representatives from Berkeley County and, after a hard campaign, lost.

After much soul-searching, the young couple decided to move to Josephine's home town of Allendale. There he established himself as a sole practitioner until he convinced Tom Lawton to move back to Allendale and join the practice.

In 1950, McNair ran for an open House seat. It was an old-style political campaign. Later, McNair commented: "I do not think I missed a single house or a single person who was a voter at the time." He won the Democratic Primary in June and, without any opposition was officially elected in November. In January 1951, Bob McNair was sworn in and began his active political career.

House Speaker Solomon Blatt, recognizing the freshman legislator's abilities, placed him on the powerful judicial committee where he did his

homework. In his second term he became chair of the Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee. And, within another two years was chairman of the Judiciary Committee. With his easy-going personality and acute political skills, Representative Bob McNair from Allendale soon was an acknowledged leader in the General Assembly.

In 1962 he decided to run for lieutenant governor. McNair opted to run an old-fashioned friends and neighbors campaign while his opponent went in for a modern media blitz. Josephine recruited friends and acquaintances who dressed in red, white, and blue as “McNair Girls,” traveled the state and extolled the virtues of their candidate. In the last month, the primary campaign turned nasty, but McNair proved his mettle and bested his opponent in debate after debate – whether on the stump or on television. When the votes were counted, McNair had won handily with 57% of the vote – and he had carried 37 of the state’s 46 counties.

In the general election Donald Russell was elected governor and Robert E. McNair was lieutenant governor. In just a little over two years – on April 22nd, 1965, McNair became governor upon Russell’s resignation. The new governor was just 41.

It was a tumultuous time for South Carolina and the nation. The Civil Rights Movement was underway; decades-old traditions and laws were being challenged and overturned. In the other states of the Deep South, governors shouted defiance; stood in school house doors; and condoned violence against demonstrators. Bob McNair did none of these. After fifteen years in public life, he had forged friendships not only with legislators, but also community and business leaders across the state. And, he was more than willing to meet with the state’s black citizens. The governor openly talked about bringing people together the people of South Carolina – not keeping them apart or driving wedges between them. It was something rarely heard in Southern capitals.

Then came the tragedy at Orangeburg and the fracas at Lamar-- “scars on our state's conscience” he called them. In their aftermath, it took all of the Governor’s tremendous powers of persuasion to keep the state on an even keel; to rebuild bridges across the racial divide; to keep the state moving forward responsibly, moderately.

In 1970, when the federal courts ruled that school desegregation must proceed immediately, there were demonstrations by white citizens and threats of school boycotts. Using television to get out his message of moderation, McNair kept South Carolina calm and its schools open as violence wracked many Southern communities. Utilizing his personal contacts across the state, he appointed fifteen prominent Carolinians to the South Carolina Education Advisory Committee – and this committee – another example of McNair’s talent for bringing people together – worked effectively with business and community leaders in making the transition from dual to unitary school systems.

The governor’s stand for law and order and public education caused him to be disowned by the rabble-rousing governors of other Southern states, but it also drew the notice of political observers and editorial cartoonist Eugene Payne gave McNair and South Carolina national publicity with an illustration showing a door – labeled “South Carolina Public Schools” – and a door stop – labeled “McNair” – keeping the school house door OPEN!

In an era of turmoil, South Carolina became known as a moderate Southern state – with a moderate governor. This was healthy for the people and the state – and it was very good for business. Under McNair, investment grew almost exponentially as economic development became one of the cornerstones of his two administrations – for in 1966, he had been elected governor in his own right for a full term.

In his inaugural address he said: “I give you a firm commitment to *responsible forward movement...*”

In 1968, the governor commissioned Moody’s, a New York investment securities firm, to examine South Carolina’s institutions and government. The resulting *Moody Report: Opportunities and Growth in South Carolina, 1968-1985*, was a blueprint for what the state needed to do to improve its services and improve the quality of life of all its people. Education was one area the report singled out as a real problem. An unfortunately large number of students were repeating the first grade because they were ill-prepared for even the most basic instruction. And the state ranked forty-ninth in the number of school years completed and the percentage of literate adults. Using the report, McNair pushed for a penny increase in the sales tax to fund teacher salaries and a statewide kindergarten program.

As governor, Robert E. McNair was a conciliator – a man who worked diligently to bring people together. And he was indefatigable on this score. Not widely known was his effort to improve communication and cooperation among the hundreds of state agencies, boards and commissions. He created something called “interagency councils” that brought together related groups – such as health and welfare. While willing to work within the complex and Byzantine administrative structure that had evolved since the 1890s, the governor did see the need for a new agency to promote the state’s newest industry. He proposed – and the general assembly enacted--legislation to create the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism. National advertising and welcome centers along interstates helped make South Carolina a destination state rather than a drive through.

And visitors found a lot to see and do in South Carolina in 1970 as the state celebrated its Tricentennial. Through exhibits, public programs, and the

publication of pamphlets and books, Carolinians and outsiders were better able to understand the rich and diverse history of the Palmetto State.

While Governor McNair, like all Carolinians, knew from whence he had come – and he understood and appreciated the past. As governor – and in the decades after he left politics – his focus has been on the present and the future. As a historian, I had read the record of the McNair administrations; examined the documents, including *Opportunity and Growth in South Carolina*. I know the vision that this distinguished public servant had – way ahead of his time. He had a vision that this state could be better; its citizens could do better. And he strove mightily to make that happen.

The great American poet Robert Frost wrote:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

As governor of our state, Bob McNair stood at the crossroads of history. He had a choice; he could have taken the well-worn road that looked to the past--and followed the voices of division and hate. But he didn't. He chose to follow the road less traveled – the road of moderation and justice-- the road of the future, a road that all South Carolinians could travel And that, in shaping the future of our state, made all the difference.

What a legacy! Instead of bricks and mortar; of iron and steel: man-made structures that crumble and rust, he bequeathed to our state a spirit of nobility; of tolerance; of fair-play—the road less-traveled, but a road down which ALL Carolinians could walk--together.

After six years in the governor's chair, he retired to private life, but was never far away when his successors called upon him for advice and counsel. He was above petty partisanship and factional bickering. For, he was that truly rare person in today's world, A STATESMAN.

Yet, despite all his accomplishments and stature, he was a modest—almost shy—man. Someone who could move in corporate boardrooms with complete ease, but who relished the quiet of his farm in Berkeley County and the folks with whom he grew up.

Our service here today, in this magnificent church, is one of two services. This is a service for his many friends and admirers to come together to remember a great South Carolinian, to celebrate his life, to mourn his passing. Later there will be a private ceremony for the family at the farm. Robert Evander McNair, a son of Berkeley County, will be laid to rest in the family cemetery with his parents and with Annie Beauford, the woman who helped raise him. When I envision that scene, I cannot help but recall the epitaph of another South Carolina farm boy—Ben Robertson of Oconee County. When his remains were brought back from Europe in 1943 and interred in the soil close by the Valley of the Twelve Mile, this was his epitaph:

I rest in thy bosom, Carolina.

Thy earth and thy air around and above me.

In my own country, among my own, I sleep.

God Bless you, Governor. Rest in peace.