



Med School Grad Photo



# Zest for Life, a Life of Service:

DOCTOR ROBERT MCELROY, A FOUNDING MEMBER OF AOK

MICHAEL L. DONNELLY

A cursory glance at his vita up through medical school suggests that Bob McElroy is just a regular guy. A native Kansan, the son of a high school principal and later school superintendent (Washburn Rural in Topeka), Bob attended Wanamaker Grade School and Washburn Rural, where he played football; his religious faith played a major role in his life, taking him, along with his twin brother, William “Bill” J McElroy, to Geneva College, in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania (later famous as the birthplace of “Broadway Joe” Namath). Geneva College is the only undergraduate institution in the U.S. affiliated with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, which traces its roots back to the Scottish Covenanters of the seventeenth century. It was through their Geneva College connection that Bob met his future wife, Katharine Jean Finlay, a native of New Jersey, who while attending Geneva College traveled with her roommate, who happened to be Bob’s sister, back to Topeka on

semester breaks. There she met Bob and his brother, Bill, after Bob had moved to K-State after one year.

After transferring to Kansas State University in 1954, Bob received his Bachelor of Science in Premedicine in June 1957. Both brothers went on to KU Medical School, both graduating with the M.D. in June 1961, Bill specializing in ophthalmology, Bob in surgery. Both did internships in California, but Bob continued his residency at Highland Alameda County Hospital and Oakland Veterans Hospital in Oakland, California, while Bill went on to become a resident and fellow in ophthalmology at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. from 1966 to 1970.

At this point in his career, however, Bob’s path diverged from the normal pattern of career advancement. He followed that path, indeed, but he was able to combine

it with an extraordinary commitment to service to neglected populations. Inspired by their religious tradition, both brothers developed a deep interest in medicine in the developing world. Bob interrupted his surgical residency in Oakland after three years and embarked with his new wife, Katharine Jean, for a stint at a remote Presbyterian mission hospital in Ethiopia, 700 kilometers from Addis Ababa. He recalls that “I was one of two physicians for a very large area and over nearly two years saw patients and performed surgery,” while Jean taught science in the local school. While this was the first of several ventures as a medical missionary bringing his skills to remote third-world locations, Bob came back to the States to complete his surgical training and practice for five years in the Santa Cruz Watsonville area of California. He returned to Topeka in 1973, and entered a practice with Dr. Charles Joss, where they pioneered a number of procedures in abdominal and colorectal surgery that had not previously been done in Topeka, or had been attempted only on a very limited basis. He was one of the first two surgeons to perform laparoscopic surgery in Topeka. The contrast between working on the cutting edge of late twentieth-century medical techniques and what he had been confronted with in Ethiopia must have been mind-boggling.

Nevertheless, as he recounts, **“My interest in the developing world continued after coming to Topeka and I have served for one to four weeks in Ethiopia, Zaire, Honduras, and Ecuador. I established a relationship on the north coast of Haiti where I would do surgery for one to two weeks several times a year.** Since 1980 I have been to the Bon Samaritan Hospital in Limbe, Haiti over thirty times, sometimes going during periods of considerable civil unrest when the hospital was the only functioning medical institution in the north of Haiti. The crush of patients needing surgery could be overwhelming, and I often had to turn aside patients with tragic conditions for which I could do little or nothing.” Committed to doing tropical medicine, Bob found it meant usually going from one tragedy to

another, one impossible situation to another. In Haiti, he remembers being asked to see a late-teenage girl who was obviously quite pregnant; when he examined her, “she’s late-term, and her belly is rock-hard—which means placenta previa, which causes the uterus to go into spasm—DIC, disseminated intervacular coagulation, requiring immediate surgery. When I asked the nurse what her hemoglobin was, the answer was ‘3’ (NORMALLY UP TO 10).” This turned out one of the success stories: the patient did not die. There was the father who brought in his young daughter whose eye was hanging out of the socket, and asked if Bob could operate on it. Frequently in third world medicine, says Bob, you get hardened, but you think, can I do this, and you think “I can” —but if you penetrate the eye capsule, there’s a very great danger of meningitis, and a likely fatality. A grim situation. But Bob’s sometimes gruff manner belies his fundamentally positive attitude toward life: “Nevertheless, there were many patients that I was able to make a real or even life-saving difference for.” When I said, “Bob, you must be a native optimist to work in such circumstances,” his response was, “Native or ‘naive.’”

More recently, Bob has worked with a group called Provadenic in Managua, Nicaragua, that supervises health clinics in distant rural areas where there are no other medical or government services. The health workers there have an average schooling of three years plus ten weeks of intensive training by Provadenic, but nevertheless have made a profound difference in the state of health for these villages, especially in the case of children. On one visit of two weeks in the month of February, Doctor Bob traveled eight hours by car over mostly unimproved roads, plus a five kilometer walk to the first clinic, followed several days later by a twenty kilometer mule ride to the second clinic. In 2003 he was awarded the Fred and Anne Pillsbury Distinguished Service Award “To Honor His Compassionate Service in Providing Exceptional Surgical Care to Those in Haiti and Nicaragua.”



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*Doctor Robert McElroy teaching suturing techniques in Nicaragua, using forceps and surgical gloves*

Meanwhile, in this country, beginning in 1980 he served on the board of the Mendenhall Ministries of Mendenhall, Mississippi in the south-central part of the state. This is a Black-led self-help group closely associated with a local church that over the years has established an independent school for poor Black children, the only church-related community law office, family service outreach, and vital youth and recreational activities centered on the only gym in that Black community. In a region where segregation had been the norm for many years, Mendenhall Ministries has been very active in reconciliation between the Black and White communities. For twenty plus years, Bob has also been on the board of the Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kansas, a graduate institution training pastors and church workers with a special interest in working with minority students.

During this same period, his twin brother was serving on the staff of the All African Leprosy Education and Training Center at Addis Abba, Ethiopia, from 1976 to

1977, and on the staff of the Mobile Eye Work of Kijabi Hospital, Kijabi, Kenya, for two years from August 1977 to 1979. He trained nurses in Karawa, Zaire from 1986 to 1990, and worked at the Baptist Eye Hospital and Lunsar Eye Hospital in Lunsar, Sierra Leone in 1992. At the time of his death in August 1998, Bill was associated with Hope Unlimited International of San Francisco, an organization dedicated to directing and establishing orphanages in Brazil.

Like his brother, Doctor Robert McElroy has had a distinguished career in medicine. In this country, he has been Chief of Surgery, Chair of the Credentials Committee, and Chief of Staff at Stormont Vail Regional Medical Center in Topeka; he has held an academic appointment at the Kansas University Medical School as a Clinical Professor of Surgery; he headed the McElroy Surgical Group in Topeka which combined with other surgical groups in Topeka after 1998 as the Tallgrass Surgery Group, the largest independent surgical group in northeast Kansas. He served as their founding president until his retirement. For three years he served on



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*Bob working in his shop on one of the wooden boats he built*

the board of Kansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield.

In all of this record of career accomplishments and advancement, the elements bespeaking a deep, professional and religious commitment to public service and community involvement loom large. It is in his devotion of his skills and compassion and his adventurous spirit, which have led him to the most remote corners of a needy world, that Doctor Bob has most distinguished himself from the safe, conventional career path. But we are concerned here particularly with his contributions to Audubon of Kansas (AOK), and at first glance, making a connection between the record of relentless commitment to human needs in remote corners of the earth and grassroots conservation initiatives here in the Midwest would seem to be a stretch.

The connection, I think, can be found in the largeness of spirit, the zest for life and experience, revealed in the activities he loved to pursue outside the surgery and the board room. When he began his residency in California, this Kansas boy discovered a passion for wooden boats and sailing. (He said, “Back in those hippie days, though I was never a hippie, reviving folk crafts and getting back to nature became a thing.”) Traditional wooden boats

became Bob’s route to participation in the trend. During his residency, he learned to sail on San Francisco Bay; after residency, he bought a twenty-four foot sailboat and sailed on Monterey Bay. Eventually, he and Katharine and friends would rent larger boats and sail the Maine Trail, for which he has extensive logs, Desolation Sound north of Puget Sound, the Keys off west Florida (where Katherine worried about running into cigarette boats smuggling drugs), and Solomons Island south of Chesapeake—always with his brother’s or several other families along. “Bare boat rentals” were his thing—you just rent the boat, and you captain and crew yourself. The challenge of sailing these boats in coastal waters requires both intellectual and manual skills—and also, perhaps, sometimes, a challenge to the nerves. An ideal avocation for a surgeon. It appealed to all aspects of living life to the fullest for Bob.

Being a surgeon of course requires deft hands and intellectual acuity. So does building classic wooden boats. Characteristically, he was not content merely to rent and sail the craft he’d come to love; he undertook to build wooden boats himself (see picture). One, “The Green Bean,” was “basically a rowboat,” says Katharine, but he went on to build bigger sailboats. Despite his

professional immersion in the latest medical technology and techniques, he's drawn to traditional, old-fashioned things. (In Central America, they were in the "wild west of Nicaragua, where sometimes the steers would come roaring down the main street." Bob really liked that—it made him feel as if he was back in the wild west days of Kansas.) The man of science perhaps finds in traditional things and the "wild" and unspoiled traditional ways a foothold in the "real." One thinks of Henry David Thoreau, in that famous passage in *Walden* beginning, "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is and no mistake . . . ." There is that element of waving off sham and conventional platitudes and committing to the real in Bob McElroy, too.

The wooden boats are part of this, confronting wind and water and elemental risk, and so is his delight in horseback riding. When he was in the seventh or eighth grade, his father bought a farm of eight to ten acres out on Wanamaker Road—"just big enough to have a cow and a horse or three—that's where my interest in horses came about," he says. When his father retired from Washburn Rural, he bought three or four Tennessee Walkers. Bob loves to ride horses on the prairie. Grown up, he acquired for himself some land south of Lake Shawnee, and he bought three Tennessee Walkers. "If you ride a Tennessee Walker, you'll never ride anything else." The farm aroused in Bob another reverence for old-fashioned, vanishing ways of life: there was an area never cultivated, and Bob became interested in the virgin prairie there, and he set about learning all the wildflowers that grew in unplowed land. He had students from KU come out to study the native plants and ground-based insects there. "They'd come out and put flags out to mark ground-nesting bee and hornet nests and beetles." The native, the unspoiled, but now to be studied and catalogued by science.

He was an avid upland bird hunter—some years ago he passed along to me a wonderful print of an English pointer pointing a covey of quail under a deadfall—though he was never a "life lister" of birds. But it was the bird hunting and the horsemanship that brought about the connection with Audubon of Kansas. Somebody at work, knowing his passions for wildflowers, quail hunting, and horsemanship, asked if he'd like to meet the Regional Vice President of the National Audubon Society, who was based in Manhattan and spearheading an effort to create a Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve. So he said, "Sure," and met Ron Klataske.

Ron wanted Bob to host a group of doctors to hear his pitch about Audubon. Bob figured, "Well, they want to interest doctors because they want to raise some money, but that's okay," so he asked several doctors if they wanted to hear Ron. It happened that all these doctors were avid quail hunters, so after Bob had rounded them up, and they came to his house, Ron talked to them, and "he made a fatal mistake, saying he had quail on his farm; that was immediately snapped up." About six of them went with Bob to Ron's place, and Bob had never seen anything like it; "Ron's property held huge coveys that took off with a roar like a B-29." There are many roads to the celestial city, and let it never be held against Audubon that a passion for upland gamebird hunting can lead to years of loyal commitment to the cause of conservation in Kansas.

Ron was a horseman, too, and they organized a horseback tour of the Spring Hill (Z-Bar) Ranch while it was being considered in Congress as a new unit of the National Park Service. Bob and Ron later took Bob's Tennessee Walkers up to the Hutton Ranch on the Niobrara River, where they inspected on horseback the 5,000-acre property gifted to AOK for the organization's first sanctuary. They shared the perspective that experiencing the land and its features from horseback gives an intimate connection that cannot be obtained



*Bob on his Tennessee Walker.*

from an ATV or pickup. Bob and Ron repeated those rides on that magnificent landscape several times during a span of fifteen years. They are among Bob's favorite memories.

They also toured the Haverfield and Barnhardt ranchland in western Kansas, location of the Black-footed Ferret reintroduction into the state in 2007. On one occasion a jackrabbit sprung up from beneath the horses; the Tennessee Walkers went sideways and left both riders dusting themselves off.

Bob McElroy has taken a major role in Audubon of Kansas ever since its founding in 1999. He has contributed five articles to *Prairie Wings* over the years, three of them relating to his interest in preserving the memory of the past: articles on horsehair bridles, the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon, and the near-extinction of the Plains Bison. He has served on the board from the beginning, and held office as Vice-Chair, Chairman of the Board, member of the Sanctuaries Committee,

member of the *Prairie Wings* Committee, and Chair of the Development Committee. His has been a steady, sane, practical and moderating voice, as well as sometimes a robust advocate, in board meetings and on other occasions. These are qualities he has shared with numerous other boards to which he has been appointed. In 2003 he was recognized by Audubon of Kansas with the Excellence in Conservation Leadership Award.

A Kansas boy who has lived an extraordinary life, a man of medical science and of passionate religious conviction, equally at ease in the practice of the most advanced surgical techniques and in shaping the hull of a traditional working sailboat, in managing a flourishing independent surgical group and in relaxing in the saddle of a Tennessee Walker surveying the virgin prairie, **Doctor Robert McElroy can count among his many contributions to the enjoyment of a better world his services to AOK over the twenty-three years of its existence as a voice for wildlife and the environment in the Great Plains.**