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Harry L.W. Hopkins, banker, orphans' court judge and registrar of wills

Well-known Harford County character had held a variety of jobs throughout his life including tombstone salesman

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Harry Hopkins (MATT BUTTON | AEGIS file photo, Baltimore Sun / April 29, 2009)

By Frederick N. Rasmussen, The Baltimore Sun
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Harry L.W. "Tombstone" Hopkins, who was an insurance salesman, banker, rural mail carrier, orphans' court judge, registrar of wills, funeral home attendant and tombstone salesman, and finally a Harford County Living Treasure, died Sunday of **septic shock** at Upper Chesapeake Medical Center in **Bel Air**.

The lifelong Bel Air resident was 87.

"I've known Tombstone all of my life and he was a real Bel Air fixture," said Todd Holden, a former Aegis reporter and photographer who was a longtime friend.

"He sold insurance and worked part time for Foster's Funeral Home, which later became McComas in Bel Air, so everyone knew him and liked him," said Mr. Holden. "And Tombstone always had a big smile on his face."

"Tombstone was gregarious, and he had many, many stories to tell from being a part-time undertaker to an insurance man. You name it, and he'd tell it," said Harford County Circuit Judge William O. Carr. "He was a raconteur and a lot of fun."

The son of a Harford County banker and a registered nurse, Harry Lippincott Webb Hopkins was born at home on Roland Avenue in Bel Air and graduated in 1944 from Bel Air High School.

In 1944, he enlisted in the Army Air Forces and was stationed in Amarillo, Texas, where he was a mechanic and gunner on B-29's.

Mr. Hopkins served in Europe until being discharged in 1946. When he returned to Bel Air, he took a job in the mailroom of the Harford Mutual Insurance Co. and rose to become an underwriter.

In 1953, he left the company and went to work as vice president of the Harford Finance Co., a business that had been established by his father. He remained there until the business was closed in 1964.

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From 1964 until 1984, Mr. Hopkins was the founder and owner of the Harry L.W. Hopkins Insurance Co. During the 1960s and early 1970s, he was a judge of the Harford County Orphans' Court.

"And in the meantime, and this may be funny to some people, but this is where I started to get my nicknames. I started getting part-time businesses. The first one was when I was appointed grave registration officer for Post 39 of the **American Legion**," Mr. Hopkins said in an interview in 2011 with the Harford County Public Library.

Mr. Hopkins was then offered a part-time job selling tombstones with J.C. Taylor and Silbaugh Memorials. He also took another part-time job as a funeral home attendant for Dean & Foster Funeral Home, now McComas.

"Harry sold them for many years, and I would go out with him to measure a grave site," said Mr. Holden.

"He also got the nickname of 'Digger,'" said his son, Nelson W. Hopkins of Street.

In 1986, Mr. Hopkins ran for registrar of wills, a position he held for 24 years.

"He did a great job as registrar of wills because he was very service-oriented and people-oriented," said Judge Carr. "He and his staff worked very hard to give the best possible help that they could. He inherited that office and kept its great traditions going."

"I had the distinct pleasure of being able to serve my neighbors for twenty-four years. I ran six times. You have to run every four years. And the last time, I couldn't. My age; my old age and **arthritis**; it slows you up," Mr. Hopkins, who retired three years ago, said in the library interview.

"He was very old-school and was always dressed in a coat and tie. He was just a real gentleman," said Maryanna Skowronski, director of the Historical Society of Harford County.

"When I think of old Harry, I can't help but recall his credo of his work as an insurance agent and assistant at Foster's Funeral Home, that he took care of people 'From the Womb to the Tomb,'" said longtime friend Dave Hanson.

Henry C. "Hank" Peden Jr., president of the Historical Society of Harford County, is also a longtime friend.

"We were both members of the Highland Society. He is a fellow Scot," said Mr. Peden. "He was a heck of a guy who was always glad to see you. He had a great sense of humor and was always willing to make small talk or tell a joke."

He was a member of the Bel Air Rotary Club, American Legion Post 39, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Historical Society of Harford County, and the Mount Ararat Masonic Lodge in Bel Air.

Mr. Hopkins enjoyed target shooting, goose hunting and watching classic Hollywood Westerns.

"John Wayne was his favorite," his son said.

He was named a Harford County Living Treasure in 2011.

His wife of 29 years, the former Annie Laurie Rampley, died in 1989.

Mr. Hopkins was a member of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 1 St. Mary's Church Road, Abingdon, where funeral services will be held at 10 a.m. Thursday.

In addition to his son, Mr. Hopkins is survived by two daughters, Ellen Hope Hopkins of Bel Air and Laura Ann Hopkins of Woodstock; and two grandchildren.

fred.rasmussen@baltsun.com

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