*Jim Langley outside Oak Hill Cemetery, which is the subject of his most recent book.*

At age 65, Jim Langley finds himself with a new career of creativity—one of writer, storyteller and artist.

To date, the “retired” resident of the James Hill subdivision of Ross Bridge has authored three self-published books, is researching and conducting tours of historic areas of Birmingham, and has begun testing his talent with brushes and canvas.

“I guess you could blame part of what I’m doing on my ADD brain. But a lot of people say they got bored in retirement and I’ve definitely avoided that,” Langley said. “My wife says I’m working harder than ever.”

According to Langley, his first writing venture came about by accident, resulting from ongoing visits with his mother during a nursing home stay.

“There’s not a lot of conversation during those situations, so my daughter and I started talking with my mom about her life and experiences during the time of the Depression, which really turned into interviews,” he said. “I took lots of notes and after she passed away, I began compiling the stories and put them in a little book for the family.”

It wasn’t just family members who enjoyed “The Pearls of Pauline.” Word of mouth spread and eventually brought the volume to the attention of the editor of Tombigbee Country Magazine, Destry “Bo” Webster.

Webster, whose monthly publication features “old time stories, humor and folklore,” said he got such raves from readers when he spotlighted a few of Langley’s stories, he printed the entire 125 pages over the next 18 months.

“It was such a huge hit, we had lots of people calling each month asking what Miss Pauline was going to do next,” Webster said. “All our readers loved it, and I know would love a volume two.”

The author’s second book, initially entitled “Delmont Says” and now known as “Delmont’s Slang Blade,” was taken from about 4,000 comical sayings and comments made by family, friends and other sources Langley had jotted down over several years.

“It has a lot of humor and some anecdotes and, for example, about 20 ways to say someone is lazy, including ‘he’s not afraid of work; he can sit by it all day,’” Langley said. “Everyone likes to have something fun or witty to say, and this gives you a few comments you can put in your back pocket.”

Hoover City Council President Jack Wright was so taken with “Delmont’s Slang Blade” that he purchased 30 copies as Christmas gifts for family and friends.

“It’s slapstick humor. Very unusual and people love to get unusual things,” Wright said. “Jim’s a colorful guy who writes colorful stuff.”

And Langley continued penning “colorful stuff” with his most recent book, “Tales of Oak Hill.”

Inspired by a pilgrimage presentation by students portraying people buried in a historic Columbus, Mississippi cemetery, Langley began researching Birmingham’s first cemetery, Oak Hill, founded in 1871.

Located behind the Birmingham Jefferson Civic Complex, about 10,000 people are buried there, he said.

“There are a lot of original landowners who sold or gave land to start Birmingham and many names you see around the area on buildings and parks, such as Sloss, Linn and Caldwell,” he said. “And families who own plots continue to have burials there, including that of Fred Shuttlesworth, who passed away in 2011.”

From his research, Langley included about 55 people in “Tales of Oak Hill”, which is subtitled “The Famous and Infamous Citizens of Birmingham Tell Their Stories from Their Final Resting Place.” The book, which contains photos and a map of the cemetery, portrays the individuals as if they are speaking. It is also used as a cemetery tour guidebook, he said.

“There are Alabama governors, a survivor of the Titanic and an exiled Austrian count,” he said. “And Louise ‘Lou’ Wooster, Birmingham’s first madam, who during the city’s cholera epidemic stayed when most had fled and helped nurse the ill and prepare the dead for burial. She eventually built a big home across from city hall and, until her death, claimed the love of her life was John Wilkes Booth.”

Stuart Oaks, director of the Oak Hill Memorial Association, said it’s great to have enthusiastic visitors like Langley to the cemetery.

“I really appreciate Jim’s keen interest in Oak Hill,” Oaks said. “He’s one of those great guys who gets together great groups for tours, and they have a whole lot of fun.”

Langley’s latest project, an historical tour of Birmingham, is being readied for print as a guidebook. To date, he’s conducted three groups through the tour, which includes sites pertaining to Civil Rights and black history in the morning and an afternoon of visits to Vulcan, Sloss Furnace and some of the original downtown streets. He doesn’t charge for any of the outings or the presentations he gives on his books to various senior groups, churches and historical societies.

“I just get lunch and expenses,” he said.

Asked about future plans, Langley said he hopes to write some historical fiction and has had several ideas, though “none have jelled quite yet.”

But what is definite is he will continue to pursue his interests.

“It’s really two-fold”, he said. “I had an aortic heart valve replacement at 45, which gave me an epiphany about doing the things I’ve never done. Plus, whether you’re serving in the Army or working in the business world, there’s not a lot of room or time for creativity. And this is my time.”

Tags

Tales of Oak Hill Jim Langley writing Oak Hill Cemetery Author

by MARIENNE THOMAS OGLE

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