

Columbia historian John Hammond Moore dies at 92

By John Monk, The State

September 05, 2017 3:53 PM

Longtime local historian John Hammond Moore, who wrote comprehensive histories of Columbia and numerous other subjects, has died at 92.

“He was a grand master of the English language,” said Sam McCuen, a longtime friend who three years ago with other Moore fans organized a dinner in the historian’s honor.

Moore died over the weekend of complications from illness in New Hampshire, where he had gone in recent years to be near family.

Blessed with an abundance of persistence, Moore over the years wrote 25 books, all apparently nonfiction. His advice to other writers, he once told a reporter, boiled down to two words: “Keep going.”

That’s what he did when in 2009, at 84, he was walking to the University of South Carolina’s Caroliniana Library, when his way was blocked on Pickens Street by one of Columbia’s infamous stalled freight trains. Not one to be halted by a mere train, Moore climbed between two 30-plus-ton railroad cars when the train gave a lurch. He fell, and the train lopped off his right leg inches above his knee.

“I won’t be doing that again,” Moore told friends, displaying the dry humor he was known for. After that, he continued to write and research.

Moore worked mostly by himself without the benefit of graduate students or paid researchers. His work was accepted by five university presses, and he had seven books published by the University of South Carolina press, including “Columbia and Richland County, 1740-1990,” a history of the capital city area. The Richland County Library still lists 12 of his books as available to readers.

Of his seven USC titles, the one that sold the most was the nonfiction “A Plantation Mistress on the Eve of the Civil War” – based on the diary of a Richland County widow who lived on her plantation with 200 slaves just southeast of Columbia.

Of all the books he wrote, his favorite was “Faustball Tunnel: German POWs in American and their Great Escape.” It was published by Random House.

His most sensational book was “Carnival of Blood,” a history of lynching, dueling and murder in South Carolina from 1880 to 1920. Published by USC Press, it is indispensable reading for anyone interested in the Palmetto State’s violent side.

Walter Edgar, South Carolina’s best-known historian and USC professor emeritus, described Moore’s work in a 2014 interview as “just absolutely first-rate.”

Moore was a heavy contributor to Edgar's 1,927-entry "S.C. Encyclopedia." "We asked him to write more than any other single author," Edgar said at the time.

A Navy veteran during World War II, Moore took part in the battle of Okinawa. He received his doctorate from the University of Virginia.

Born on a potato farm in Houlton, Maine, he came to Columbia in the 1980s and settled in as a writer-researcher after teaching at several colleges, including Winthrop and Georgia State. A historian of the old school, Moore wrote with an electric typewriter and rarely used email. He believed that a writer owes the reader not just the facts, but a summary of what the writer has found.

"After all the digging you've done, what does it add up to?" he said once.

A memorial service is planned for Sept. 15 at 11 a.m. at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Columbia.

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