

Hamner/Fortune Statues Unveiled at Oakland Museum

By Lynn Coffey



Jimmy Fortune and Kami Cotler representing both statues Photo by Peyton Stafford

Two larger-than-life size bronze statues of Nelson County's most famous native sons were unveiled at Oakland Museum on July 8, 2023, as the Nelson County's Board of Supervisors announced a resolution to name that date as "Earl Hamner Jr. and Jimmy Fortune Day."

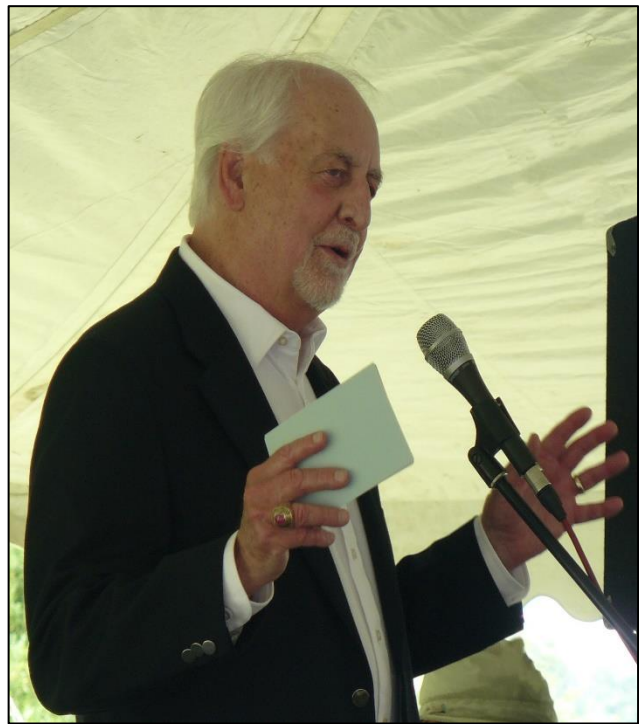
Everyone owes a debt of appreciation to Woody Greenberg, a long time Nelson County Historical Society board member along with other members of the Society for planning and preparing the celebration. Well over a hundred people came out to honor the two men who have added much recognition to one of Virginia's smaller counties. The weather that Saturday was July warm and sultry but did nothing to detract from the celebration itself as many speakers lauded the accomplishments of these talented and humble gentlemen whose work is known around the globe.



Woody Greenberg

Don Reid, former Statler Brothers member, talked at great length of the years Jimmy sang with the renown quartet whose music was loved around the world. Jimmy himself stated it was by a chance meeting that he became one of the Statler's.

In 1981, at 26 years of age, he was playing six nights a week at various venues while holding down two jobs. One evening he was playing with friends at Wintergreen when Lou DeWitt of the Statler Brothers heard him sing and recommended Jimmy to his bandmates as his replacement during the time he was to have surgery. Jimmy auditioned in Nashville and was offered a six-month gig to fill in for DeWitt. When Lou decided to retire, Jimmy went on to spend the next 21 years with the Statler's, writing number one hits like "Elizabeth", "My Only Love" and "Too Much On My Heart." Jimmy, a committed Christian, said it was a "God-thing" and no coincidence that he happened to be jamming



Don Reid, former Statler Brother

with friends at Wintergreen the night Lou DeWitt heard him sing. The day of the celebration, Fortune, in his memorable high tenor voice, wowed the crowd with his rendition of "Virginia Dreams", "Elizabeth" whom he dedicated to Kami Cotler, and "How Great Thou Art" which brought everyone to their feet in a standing ovation. When the Statler Brothers retired in October of 2002, Jimmy went on to a successful solo career, ultimately becoming a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Gospel Hall of

Jimmy Fortune and members of his family were present for the unveiling as well as Kami Cotler and Michael McGreevey who represented Earl Hamner at the event. Kami Cotler, from age six, played Elizabeth, the youngest child in "The Homecoming" and long-running TV series "The Waltons." Cotler eventually lived in Nelson and taught in the school system and arranged a video of her and five other Walton cast members talking about their associations with Earl which was shown at the unveiling. Mike McGreevey was an actor and writer on the show as well as a co-producer of a 2015 documentary called "Earl Hamner Storyteller." Both spoke of their friendship with Earl and how he had impacted their lives.

Fame and the Virginia Music Hall of Fame. Musician Eddie Witt, a former coach, and teacher in the Nelson County Public Schools, also spoke about Fortune's place in the history of music in the United States. Oakland Museum will premiere exhibits on Earl Hamner and "Rhythms Past and Present," honoring Fortune and other prominent local



Eddie Witt, longtime friend of Fortune

musicians with photos, biographies, and videos of interviews and performances. The lifelike statues were commissioned by Lyndon Cook, a longtime fan of Jimmy Fortune who asked if he would agree to meet with sculptor Stan Watts for a bronze likeness of himself to be permanently displayed at Oakland Museum, home to the Nelson County Historical Society. Ever the humble man he is, Fortune said yes only if Cook could get funding for a second statue of Earl Hamner, Jr., a close personal friend and another famous Nelson County native. The rest, as they say, is history. The weekend of July 8th was selected because the following Monday, July 10th, would have been Hamner's 100th birthday. Earl passed away in 2016 and on the day of his death the world lost one of the most talented, gentlest and most humble of men.



Mike McGreevey, actor and writer

Also, in attendance on July 8th were both Lyndon Cook who commissioned the statues and sculptor Stan Watts, who captured the essence of both men perfectly. The bronze likenesses show Hamner seated on a bench with a book in his hand and a pencil behind his ear, and Fortune standing, picking a guitar. The likenesses of both men are uncanny. Funding for the statue of Hamner was donated by the Chris and Andrea Lee family. Steve and Annie Zolman donated the statue of Fortune. My own association with Jimmy Fortune came when Jimmy's father and mother-in-law, Dale and Sandra Shumate, were attending Mt. Paran Church in Montebello. The Shumates were the first couple my husband Billy married and Jimmy sang at their wedding. Over the years, Jimmy and his wife Nina visited other area churches Billy pastored and many times Jimmy blessed the congregations with several traditional gospel songs. When Nina's father, Dale, passed away in 2020, he sang "Believe" at his funeral. This poignant song, written by Jimmy, is one of the most heart touching melodies of his career that offers peace



The Hamner/Fortune statues covered before the celebration



Unveiling the two statues before a large crowd



The Jimmy Fortune statue

and again he graciously agreed. I told him I had interviewed his mother in 1982 and I would make her the first chapter in the new book but I only had two pictures; one of her and another of their famous house in Schuyler. Within three days, I received a package from Earl with more family photos he said I could use in the book, along with a touching poem he had written called “Nightfall on Walton’s Mountain.” He was the gentlest of men with a big heart and respect for every person he came in contact with. He looked for the best in everyone and his unforgettable liquid voice of melted butter came over the airways each week with a timely moral at the end of each Walton’s episode, leaving us viewers better for watching the wholesome family series, looking forward to the next episode.

and comfort at a sad time in life. We have noticed over the years of our friendship, that Jimmy and Nina are two of the most giving and humble people we’ve ever met, and are certainly deserving of whatever praises the world offers.

I came to know Earl Hamner when my first Backroads book was published and he graciously wrote the front-cover endorsement on it. Here he was, a famous writer, producer and creator of “The Homecoming” movie and “The Waltons” TV series, among other well-known television shows, taking the time to write a beautiful sentiment on the first book of a virtually unknown Virginia author from the little mountain community of Love. I came home one day and couldn’t believe he left a thank you message on our answering machine after I sent him a copy of the book! A few days later he called back and I boldly asked if he would consider another

endorsement for a second book I was working



The Earl Hamner, Jr. statue



Stan Watts; sculptor, Lyndon Cook, Jimmy & Nina Fortune, granddaughter Sophie

More photos of the special day



The large tent at the Nelson Co. Historical Society event



The large crowd finding seats before the program began



Woody Greenberg introducing the speakers



The audience listening with rapt attention



Jimmy singing his hit song, "Elizabeth"



Kami Cotler speaking about Earl Hamner



The Hamner/Fortune statues at Oakland Museum

Earl Henry Hamner Jr.

July 10, 1923 – March 24, 2016

Nelson County's most famous contributor to American popular culture, Earl Hamner, Jr., was a television writer and producer best known for his work in the 1970s and 1980s as the creator of two long-running series, *The Waltons* and *Falcon Crest*. As a novelist, he is best known for *Spencer's Mountain*, which was inspired by his own childhood and formed the basis for both the film of the same name and the television series *The Waltons*.



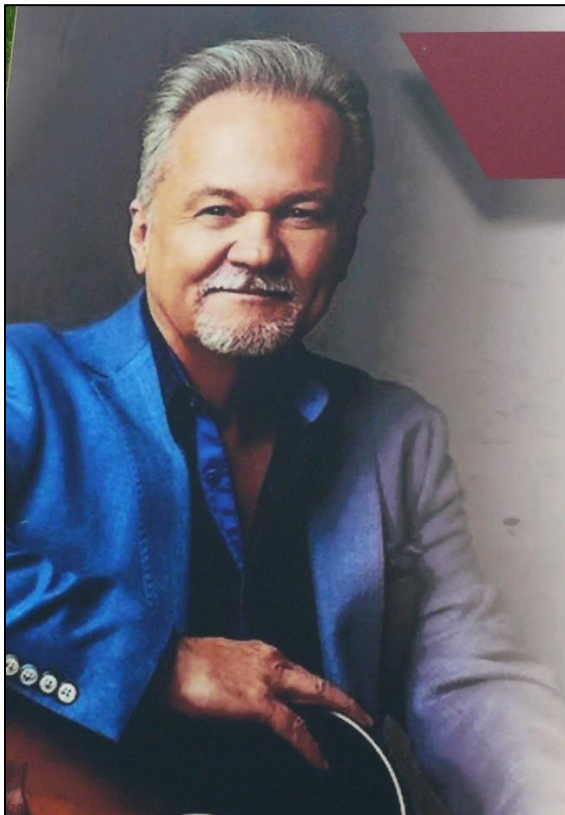
A brief biography of Earl Hamner Jr.

Jimmy Fortune

March 11, 1955 –

Nelson County's most famous musician, Jimmy Fortune, was inducted into the Virginia Music Hall of Fame in 2018. He toured with the legendary Statler Brothers for 21 years, during which time he wrote several songs for the group including three country music number one hits. *Elizabeth* won him "Songwriter of the Year" and "Song of the Year" in 1985.

He has continued to maintain a solo career since the Statler Brothers' retirement, with recent accomplishments that include a 2016 Dove Award for "Bluegrass Recorded Song of the Year," *Life's Railway to Heaven* (with the Oak Ridge Boys).



A brief biography of Jimmy Fortune



Historic Oakland Museum where the Hamner/Fortune statues reside

As the special day ended, everyone in attendance agreed it was the perfect tribute to two of Nelson County's most talented and revered men known around the world. I, for one, enjoyed every aspect of the celebration and was honored to capture the day in writing for the Nelson County Historical Society. I will end with Earl Hamner's words on the cover of my first book, *Backroads, Plain Folk and Simple Livin'*

"Lynn Coffey and I share a common heritage. I wrote about our southern highland people in "The Waltons." In "Backroads," Lynn celebrates in even richer detail the daily lives of these sturdy, proud, self-reliant folks. As she tells their stories, you come to know and to love Lynn, and if I ever meet her I'm going to haul off and kiss her!"

Sadly, I never got to collect on that kiss before Earl passed away but I never forgot his kindness and generosity toward a Nelson County girl who thought he hung the moon!

(All photos courtesy of Peyton Stafford, Norm Carter for the NCHS and Lynn Coffey)