



Raymond Weldon Ashley

August 27, 1942 - May 20, 2025

Raymond “Ray” Weldon Ashley of Saint Jo/ Illinois Bend, Texas, aged 82, passed into eternity on May 20, 2025 at his home in Illinois Bend. He was born in 1942 in Muenster, Texas, to Noble Preston Ashley and Velma Modine Reed Ashley, in the medical clinic that is currently Doc’s Bar and Grill. Noble was sent to Germany to serve as a Military Policeman with the Army at the Dachau concentration camp, necessitating leaving Velma to care for young Raymond back home for several years. They made their home in a small cottage in Corinth in Montague County that had neither electricity nor running water. Their mode of transportation was a horse; fortunately, Velma had a natural affinity with animals.

After the War, Noble returned home and built the family a small home in Saint Jo just beyond the “dip bridge” on the edge of town. Being the first grandson of the family and only child of Noble and Velma, Ray received considerable attention. A second son, Melvin, arrived when Raymond was six, which changed the family dynamics and perhaps threatened Ray’s inclination to play to being the apple of the family’s eye; acceptance of his younger brother was slow and at times conditional.

Growing up so near the head waters of the Elm Fork of the Trinity River, where springs flowed freely year-round, was a near paradise for a curious independent young lad. After chores of feeding chickens and pulling weeds in the garden, Raymond enjoyed a great deal of freedom to fish, swim in the creek, hunt squirrels or build tree houses on the stream near his backyard

with his cousin H.L. Talley. As Melvin grew, he naturally wanted to follow the example of his adventurous brother. Once, Melvin begged to go up a tree; Ray obliged by hoisting him onto a high limb then proceeded to wander away leaving Melvin stranded. When Noble returned from work, Melvin was recused and Ray found himself at the receiving end of some discipline. One particularly warm spring day, Raymond decided it was barefoot weather and went to school shoeless. Again, he found himself disciplined by Noble when his spirited actions became known to his father.

Ray's independent inclinations were also evident in school, where reading took a back seat to recess. Mumbletypeg and marbles were the games of choice. Spinning tops to knock marbles out of a ring drawn in the sand proved to be quite lucrative for Ray. For the rest of his life, he kept all those marbles he won on the playground.

Several teachers played a major role in forming Raymond's outlook on life and instilled much needed motivation that would eventually turn his laissez faire attitude towards academics into determination to succeed. Fourth grade teacher Jewel Ritchie helped tame his rebelliousness and taught him that obedience alleviated a lot of decision-making anxiety, a lesson he would heed throughout his life. Once on a field trip to Denton, sitting on the stairs of the historical building at what was then North Texas State College, Mrs. Ritchie said to him, "Raymond, this is where you'll go to college."

As Raymond matured his leisure interests changed from spinning tops for marbles and chunking clods of dirt at the girls to attending movies and seeking opportunities to earn a few bucks. He picked up pecans in the fall and mowed lawns in the summer, sold Grit magazine to steady customers. With some of the money he earned he treated himself to Saturday morning movies at the Saint Jo Theater where Roy Rogers or Gene Autry serials always ended in a cliff hanger, ensuring the crowd would return the following Saturday to see the resolution. Raymond loved the movie theater so much that he badgered the owner until he was hired to sell tickets, popcorn and sweep out the theater after the shows. It was a sad day for Raymond when

the owner had to close the doors in 1956, as television had captured the interest of the movie-going public and family entertainment moved from the big screen to the snowy black and white screens in a wooden box.

Cecil Smith's roller rink on the outskirts of town was another popular hang out, and Ray's next intense pursuit was to become a proficient skater. Again, he was able to wrangle a job from this interest, and at the rink he would help adjust patrons' skates for nickel and dime tips. Other job opportunities were taken as opportunities arose building fences, hauling hay. On each job Ray tried to follow his parents' advice to always "make a hand", as they said, meaning to do your best.

High School came around soon enough, which saw Raymond playing the sousaphone in the band, combing his hair into a duck tail like the cool guys, and spending time at the Dairy Spot consuming hamburgers and shakes while listening to rock and roll on the juke box. Repeated playing wore out those 45 rpm records which necessitated in periodic replacement. Raymond was able to procure a couple of the scratchy Elvis 45s on the Sun label by striking a deal with the representative who changed out juke box records by offering to buy them for 10 cents apiece. On school band trips he would take these Elvis records and a few other popular tunes and a wind-up phonograph and entertain classmates on the bus rides.

Work and leisure pursuits were still more valued than academics at this juncture of Ray's life and his grades reflected this. Math teacher Billy Phillips, who took time of his own to tutor Ray after hours at Ray's current job at the service station, finally tired of the lackadaisical results and said to him, "Raymond, why don't you just quit school and get a job? You're just wasting your time and mine." That admonishment from a caring and dedicated teacher, followed by a summer FFA trip to Yellowstone National Park spurred adolescent Ray to seriously ponder his future. His attitude turned from apathetic to serious. He began seeing education as a pathway to a more productive and satisfying life. He started "doing his best" as his parents had

long advised. English teachers Nellie Burchfiel and Janelle Homer taught him that grammar and logic could be fun to study, and Ray's interest was piqued. As he began applying himself in school, Principal and Social Studies teacher Bynum Smith awakened an abiding interest in history. Class sponsor Gloria Phillips regularly encouraged all his endeavors. Junior year, in addition to working at the Sinclair Station, he began studying seriously and achieving in other areas of his life; he was a cast member in the class play and his name was on the Honor Roll. Senior year he played lead in the one act play, The Bishops' Candlesticks which subsequently won a superior rating at State Competition. At the end of Senior Year, the school faculty honored him by naming him "Mr. Saint Jo High".

A few months later, Ray tossed meager belongings into his 1946 metallic green Chevy and headed south to enroll in college. Money was tight so he planned his course work to finish his degree in three years. In 1963 he graduated with a major in English from The University of North Texas, having fulfilled the prophecy of his fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Ritchie.

One of his college teachers was named Miss Angel. It was in this class that he met Cecilia, his future wife. He was fond of saying to her "an angel brought us together." Shortly after college graduation, Ray reported to San Antonio for Air Force Officers' Training School. He and Cecilia were married on December 19, 1964 and moved to South Dakota for his first duty assignment.

Ray's Air Force career would see him, Cecilia and children Greg, Audrey and Laura move frequently and live from one coast to the other. Moving between duty assignments was always an adventure as the family camped along the way to the new destination. One momentous journey from California to Michigan involved a circuitous 3000-mile route, visiting friends and family along the way, with bare essentials, a tent, camp stove and three preschool children (with their two more-or-less patient parents) in a Volkswagen Bug. The frequent moving brought with it a plethora of geography lessons, friends made and memories to treasure.

Raymond's U.S. duty stations included Ellsworth AFB in South Dakota;

Vandenburg AFB and Norton AFB in California; Carswell AFB in Texas; Omaha Nebraska as ROTC instructor; and Washington D.C. to work in the Pentagon. (By the way- remember those Sun label Elvis 45s young Ray bought for 10 cents? Thirty years after acquiring them he would sell them to an antique dealer in Washington D.C. for \$100 each. He occasionally would express regret at selling these). Fields that Raymond worked in included; communications, audio visual, resource management, instruction and logistics. Foreign duty assignments included Commander and combat cameraman in Thailand, and various duties in the Philippines, Panama, Vietnam, and Turkey. Decorations and honors received in the Air Force included the Bronze Star, Meritorious Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters, Air Force Achievement Award, Expert Marksmanship Ribbon, Outstanding Unit Award for Valor and National Defense Service Medal. From the Republic of Vietnam, he was decorated with a Gallantry Cross, Campaign Medal and Honors Medal First Class.

After 23 years of Service, Lieutenant Colonel Ashley retired from the Air Force and moved back to Montague County, the paradise he remembered from boyhood. He and Cecilia settled in Illinois Bend and built a home on acreage, planting pecan trees and starting a garden. He may have travelled the world, but he was most content in the rural area of his youth among former classmates and friends. He would speak fondly of the people of the town that raised him for his remaining days.

Ray had a strong sense of duty and desire to give back to the community and people who had taught him early life lessons and planted the seeds of possibility in his fertile young mind. He was quite active in retirement; he helped restore the local 1893 School House to serve as a Community Center and gathering place, he mowed the cemetery, trimmed trees, planted iris and daffodil in public places and even restored the old store/ gas station at Illinois Bend for his personal use, with the help of master carpenter John Gaston. Ray accepted invitations to give presentations, give speeches at local political rallies, club meetings, cemetery dedications and Veterans' Day observances.

Extensive reading and research led to writing about local, county and regional history. Biographical articles about local personalities were printed in several regional newspapers.

When Saint Jo needed a new schoolhouse and the old three story one was slated for demolition in 1993, Raymond saw a need to preserve the memory of both the current school and its predecessor, colloquially known as "Knowledge Knob". Extensive research resulted in documenting both the school histories and stories of old time Saint Jo citizens in a book he titled *Old School Scholastics: A History of Education in Saint Jo, Texas 1872-1922*, published in 1995.

Yearning to continue learning, Ray decided to go back to school. At Midwestern University he taught American History while completing Masters' degrees in both English and History. Major historical papers resulting from his coursework at Midwestern include: *North Texas Frontier Revisited: Two Men Named James Defending the Texas Frontier 1846-1865 Mixed Loyalties in North Central Texas During the Civil War (including an account of the great hanging in Cooke County) Settlement of Red River Boundary Dispute Between Texas and Oklahoma*

Ray was a serious man and accomplished much in retirement, but he did take the time to play. In the spring he enjoyed fishing in the Red River, and once had the thrill of catching a 70 lb catfish! He and Cecilia planned frequent road trips generally centering around historical sites and areas, and managed to travel through 47 of the contiguous states.

He and Cecilia enjoyed international trips to England, Scotland, Israel, Jordan and Russia. Ray would often have to purchase an additional suitcase and pay for extra luggage to get books home that he had procured on his travels.

The year his garden produced giant sized turnips, Ray was asked to be Santa for an elementary school Christmas party. After hearing that all the children had been good, he decided to seize the opportunity of already being in a Santa suit. He drove around town knocking on the doors of senior citizens he

knew. After hearing assurances of their goodness, he handed each one a prize turnip. No one recognized him, not even his own parents!

Raymond's movie and record collection provided him hours of entertainment. His preferred music and films were the old classics. The ideas depicted in them matched the values he was raised with that influenced the direction his life took. Truly an old soul from a bygone era, he completed modern tasks using old tools and technology. He tried his hand at using a computer but was more confident using his old Remington typewriter and Ever sharp pencils. He continued to enjoy vinyl records over more modern methods of listening to music for the duration of his life.

A lifelong learner, Raymond studied at University of North Texas (BA English), Black Hills State University, Michigan State University (MA in Radio and Television Production), University of Nebraska at Omaha, Midwestern State University (MA History, MA English), and Kings College in London. Striving to help others learn, (and perhaps somehow pay back those kind and patient teachers of his youth that saw his potential) he taught at Alan Hancock College, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Midwestern State University, and Wayland Baptist.

Raymond had memberships in many organizations, among them: Montague County Historical Commission, West Texas Historical Association, Retired Officers Association, Illinois Bend Community Club (Trustee), Illinois Bend Cemetery Association (Trustee), and several honorary organizations for history and English, Phi Alpha Theta and Sigma Tau Delta. Civilian honors came from the Montague County Historical Commission in 2008 for his dedication and contribution to Montague County, and more recently Saint Jo High Ex- Students Association who inducted Ray into the Hall of Fame posthumously in 2025.

Ray strove to retain and pass down the values of his pioneer ancestors. Perhaps he saw these same values in the historical figures he enjoyed studying and in the local citizens he wrote about. Ray shook hands with Generals and Presidents and wrote speeches for Senators. But in his heart,

he was always a country boy who treasured the simplicity of rural life and never forgot the contributions that blue collar workers make to keep the country running. When faced with a problem he never said, "I can't do this", rather he said "how can this be done?".

Raymond was preceded in death by a son, Gregory Wayne Ashley, a nephew, Joshua Simon Ashley, and parents Noble and Velma Ashley.

Survivors are his wife of 60 years, Cecilia Boyd Ashley, daughters Audrey Bolton and Laura Laing, grandchildren Crystal Forward and husband David Forward, Jamie Laing, Samuel Bolton and William Bolton, great grandchildren Ariel, Jesse and Lilah Forward, a brother Melvin Ashley, niece Jennifer Cox and nephews Justin "Gus" Ashley and Jason Ashley, several brothers-in-law and sisters-in law as well as numerous nieces and nephews on the Boyd side of family, and several cousins on the Reed side of family.

Memorial donations may be made to: Illinois Bend Cemetery (512 Dowd Road, Saint Jo Tx 76265), Illinois Bend Community Club (9991 FM 677N Saint Jo Tx 76265), Saint Jo Library (P.O. Box 517 Saint JO Tx 76265), or Easy Street Animal Shelter (P.O. ox 237 Saint Jo Tx 76265)

A Memorial for Raymond will be held November 15, 2025 at the Illinois Bend Schoolhouse at 2pm.

Previous Events

Memorial

NOV 15. 2:00 PM.

Illinois Bend Community Center

Tribute Wall

BF

“ *Brenda Flusche lit a candle in memory of Raymond Weldon Ashley*



Brenda Flusche - November 06, 2025 at 01:14 PM

BF

“ *So sorry for your loss.*

Brenda Flusche - November 06, 2025 at 01:12 PM