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SPORTS

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Billy Harrison (second from left) receives the key to the Gulf Coast gym in 1964 from Dr. Richard Morley, president of the college. Contributed Photo

GC's first assist

GROUND FLOOR: Panama City's Billy Harrison was honored for getting the ball rolling.

STEVE ZIMMERMAN
THE NEWS HERALD

Sometimes it is hard to judge the true measure of a man. We see a name on a building and we assume that person must have been important. And, in the case of athletics, we also assume that person excelled at the sport for which the facility is named.

Such is the case with Billy Harrison, a community leader and businessman for whom the gymnasium at Gulf Coast Community College is named. Many in the community, especially those new to the area, probably assume Harrison set many basketball records at the school in his early years or as a coach.

But nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, he never even played basketball.

Perhaps his sons Jerry and Franklin made the most telling statements about Harrison and the mark he left on this community.

"The only time I ever saw dad cry was when he had been overly nice to someone and then found out he had been betrayed," Jerry said. "He almost made himself vulnerable by loaning people money and being overly nice."

"He was a better person than he was a businessman,"



Harrison



The Billy Harrison Health Building on the Gulf Coast campus. News Herald Photo: Terry Barner

Franklin added. "He never made a lot of money selling cars because he would rather give people stuff and do whatever is right. It was never about money with him. It was about the people and how you dealt with them.

"Three things were important to daddy. His family came first and was extremely important. Then came his church and then came community. He wouldn't live anywhere else but Bay County and Panama City and neither would we."

So why was the gymnasium at Gulf Coast Community College named for Harrison upon its completion in 1964? Because he was instrumental in bringing the college to Panama City.

He was one of the community leaders who pushed the Florida Legislature and then Gov. Leroy Collins to establish the act that created more junior colleges in the state. Harrison also served on the Citizen School Construction Committee in 1957 and then

became chairman of the Gulf Coast Junior College Advisory Committee that oversaw the construction and opening of the college.

Billy Harrison came to Panama City from Dothan, Ala., when he was a child. From that time, he left Bay County only twice: once to go to the University of Florida and the second time to serve during World War II. He achieved much in his life, spending most of it as a businessman and in public service.

At Bay High School, he played football and ran track. But he also was class president for the freshman through senior class and was a member of the debate team and the drama club. He was also a member of the yearbook staff.

He played several positions on the football team, including end and sharing duties at quarterback with Tommy Oliver. Because of his red hair he had a special nickname, "Red Mange," a take off on the great

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running back Red Grange.

After graduating from Bay High School, Harrison went on to the University of Florida where he received a bachelor's degree in science education as well as his master's.

He returned to Bay County and taught one year before becoming principal at Panama Grammar School.

It was during this time that he met and later married Ruth Brown.

They met for the first time at Bay High School while Ruth was a student and Billy was in college. He was back at Bay High School to emcee the nomination of officers in the school's classes.

"When someone nominated Ruth Brown for some position, he said, 'who is Ruth Brown?'" Jerry said. "Daddy thought he knew everybody at the school but she had just moved to Panama City."

They met again while on a double date when each was with another person.

"I don't know who they were double dating with but one of them got in the front seat instead of the back seat," Jerry said. "Daddy ended up having a date with momma instead of the person he was supposed to have a date with."

After 10 years as a Bay County educator, Harrison decided to enlist in the Navy and was sent to the South Pacific in World War II. Jerry Harrison said it was a sobering experience.

"I was just 9 years old when he went into the Navy," he said. "He felt it was the right thing to do for him to choose to volunteer to go into the U.S. Navy. He went in as a lieutenant (junior grade) because he had a master's degree. I didn't get the full feeling of the war. It was exciting for me. We went to visit him in New York

and Boston."

When his father was sent to the Pacific Theater, Jerry began to understand just how serious the war was.

"He never really shared how bad it was but after reading his letters I could put it together," he said. "Mom and I were alone for over two years. I probably would have been better off if he had been there."

Harrison was the commander of one of the landing ships that ferried troops to the beaches, making landings at Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Iheya Shima and Aguni Shima. Many years after returning from the war, Harrison told his son about one of the real heart-breaks of war.

"He said while heading for the beach landings he would talk to some of the young men who would take part in the battles," Jerry said. "Then as he was leaving the beaches, he would look through his binoculars and see some of those same young men being killed."

When he returned from the service, Harrison felt he had to go to work at the family business, Harrison Padgett Motor Company, to take care of his family.

"He decided if he was ever going to have enough money to send me to college, he was going to have to do something else," Jerry said. "He enjoyed teaching and wanted to be a teacher. But they didn't pay teachers in the 30s; they gave them IOU's."

"He only made \$13 a week when I was born and worked in the paper mill when school was out."

Harrison was an elder at his church, the First Presbyterian Church, and was chairman of the first Gulf Coast Community College Advisory Committee in 1957-58. In the 1960s he was on the Board of Trustees at Bay County Public

Hospital (now Bay Medical Center) and was a Florida Hospital Trustee from 1971-73.

It was for his service to the community and to the college that Harrison was honored with the naming of the gymnasium.

"When they were planning the new building, Dr. Rick Morley, who was the president of the college, asked daddy if he felt it was OK to name the building after someone living," Jerry said. "Daddy said he didn't have a problem with that, not knowing that they were talking about naming it after him."

Harrison died in 1986 from lung cancer at the age of 77.

Both sons wish their father had lived long enough to experience one event.

"He was a big Florida football fan," Franklin said. "The one regret I have is that he didn't live long enough to experience their winning a national championship."

"When it happened, I was almost sad that I couldn't share the moment with him," Jerry said. "It was the one thing that would have made him so happy."