



Harry C. Hamm - *Public Service*

Harry Hamm had a way with words.

The words of his editorials and columns championed causes as diverse as quality education and health care, flood protection, crime control, bridge construction, public housing, public swimming pools, air pollution control, historic preservation, good government and family values. Yet his words – and actions – as an individual advocate for Wheeling most dramatically demonstrate his public service. He used his clout not to advance his own fortunes but to secure millions in federal, state and foundation funding for local parks, colleges, hospitals, cultural institutions and public improvements. No less than Sen. Robert C. Byrd has said of him, “In the greatest tradition of journalism, Harry Hamm unselfishly treated his newspaper post as a tool for the betterment of West Virginia and the Northern Panhandle area.”

Hamm’s support of the Wheeling Park Commission was legendary, and he is credited with generating nearly \$20 million in funding for Oglebay and Wheeling Park projects. In 1981, the park commission recognized his support by naming the new Harry C. Hamm Clubhouse at the Speidel Golf Course in his honor, one of the rare times the commission dedicated a facility to an individual for his personal service.

As a member of the board of Wheeling College/Wheeling Jesuit University, he opened channels of communication with federal officials that led to millions in funding for the school. Wheeling Jesuit presented him with its highest award, the Ignatian Award, in May 1990 in recognition of his many years of public service to the community, and particularly for the WHEELING 2000 economic revitalization plan he had written. In 1987, as he neared the traditional retirement age, authoring the ambitious, original concept plan he called WHEELING 2000 was truly a labor of love undertaken by Hamm. His plan for preserving and showcasing the community’s traditions and treasures was his vision for Wheeling’s future.

Hamm helped direct funds to area projects as a member of the boards of the West Virginia Economic Development Authority and Benedum Foundation of Pittsburgh. He assisted with preparation of the state’s first urban renewal project and served as chairman of the Wheeling Urban Renewal Authority.

Throughout the years, Hamm sat on the boards of directors of a wide array of Wheeling organizations, including Oglebay Institute, Security National Bank & Trust, Wheeling Hospital, the Good Zoo, the West Virginia Independence Hall Foundation and his alma mater, Wheeling Central Catholic High School. He served on the West Virginia advisory boards for United Press International and the Associated Press and was president of the board of the West Virginia Press Association. In 1999, he was enshrined posthumously in that organization’s Journalism Hall of Fame on campus at West Virginia University.

Hamm was born May 26, 1923, in Wheeling, a son of the late Harry Lee and Anna Kirchner Hamm. A graduate of the “Dutch Prison” of St. Alphonsus Grade School in Center Wheeling where he grew up, he and his wife of 44 years, Mary Haddox Hamm, had a “House of Children” populated by five daughters and seven sons. Their grandchildren today number 24. Hamm lived in Wheeling almost all of his life. During World War II, he served in the U.S. Army three years, two of them in the European Theater of Operations, and was awarded the Oak Leaf Cluster and Purple Heart. He died on Oct. 25, 1991, a retired 50-year employee of The Ogden Newspapers Inc. He became Wheeling News-Register city editor in 1948, managing editor in 1951 and editor in January 1957.

For the half of the 20th century when he worked as a newspaperman, Harry Hamm’s story was the story of Wheeling and his words were the day-to-day history of his hometown. Whether they were words to battle against organized crime or to persuade someone to fund a worthy public improvement project or support a local charity, his words created his legacy of public service. Virtually everyone from the man on Capitol Hill to the man on the street looked to him and the newspaper he guided for the definitive word about Wheeling’s people, issues, concerns and hopes.