

Lives Lived

WILLIAM (BILL) MELOFF

Educator, cowboy, camp director, auctioneer, rodeo announcer. Born in Winnipeg April 3, 1940; died of cancer in Edmonton June 17, 1997, aged 57.

BILL Meloff was a big man — 6 foot 1 and weighing between svelte and well over 240 pounds (depending on the year and the season). The big size came with an equally large persona. He could dominate a room with both mass and demeanour.

He was a fabulous educator as well as an auctioneer, and the only Jewish cowboy — a kind of oxymoron — we ever knew.

Bill was educated at Ross Sheppard High School in Edmonton, the University of Alberta and the University of Colorado, where he obtained a PhD in sociology specializing in social psychology. He turned down a bunch of offers from U.S. universities to return to teach at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

He was a brilliant teacher. In his 30 years at U of A, he taught more than 10,000 students and was so popular that students were consistently turned away from his “collective behaviour,” “sociology of youth” and “communications” courses because they were oversubscribed. Most of his classes contained more than 200 students at a time.

Bill organized a departmental project with one of his colleagues that resulted in a unique introductory sociology text which introduced students to the subject while using Western Canadian examples. It was adopted by the entire department of sociology, and royalties went to support students and the program rather than the individual contributors.

Outside the university, his interests were diverse. It seems he could fix anything and was particularly fond of electronic “toys.” At any time, state-of-the-art stereo, video and recording equipment could be found at his place. He bought, he sold, he fixed, he played.

For all his adult life he supported both the Edmonton and larger Jewish communities in ways that are tangible and lasting. For a few years he was director of the Jewish Community Centre and eventually became northwestern Canada regional director for B'nai Brith Youth Organization. Later he took a two-year leave from the university to become an area director in Los Angeles.

For about 14 years, with his former wife and lifelong friend Rivvy, he was director at Camp B'nai Brith in Pine Lake, Alta. The thousands of youth who attended “Camp Meloff” experienced a combination of Jewish programs, canoe and horseback-riding trips, and an enormous amount of plain fun. The one major complaint heard from them was that they were awakened almost every morning to the sounds of Hank Williams, Willie Nelson or, the ultimate insult to their citified ears, a yodelling Slim Whitman through the massive PA speakers.

Bill's interest in cowboys and horses began early. He worked at a stable as a child, took riding lessons and continued to

have a passion for horses and western wear throughout his life. He had cowboy boots and hats for every occasion. He even had a fancy black hat and special boots to go with the tuxedo he wore when calling the Canadian Finals Rodeo. He also volunteered his time to the Canadian Intercollegiate Rodeo.



Bill Meloff in the mid-1970s

His booming voice could be heard at both rodeos and auctions. It is unclear where his interest in auctioneering came from, but he spent many years calling auctions for charity. A few years ago he got serious and went to auctioneering school in Missouri, where he obtained both his licence and the title “Colonel.” He continued the charity gigs even when he was a “pro.”

Bill loved watching his three kids (Lauren, Rob, Liann) grow up and achieve success in their own lives. Given his role as an educator, it is not surprising that he stimulated them all to get advanced university degrees. His first grandchild was born just before his illness was diagnosed about a year ago. Throughout this very tough year, the presence of Michael always made him smile.

He was a dream friend, and his loyalty was fierce. If you needed help, he would be there no matter how inconvenient for him.

A word portrait of Bill would have to include a gruff demeanor, machismo, cowboy boots and a liberal sprinkling of politically incorrect foul language. In fact, he was a pussycat — a gentle, sensitive person with a terrific sense of humour — one of the kindest, most generous people we have ever known.

Lauren Sky, Robert Meloff, Liann Meloff, Earle Snider, Bob Silverman

Lauren Sky, an Edmonton accountant, Liann Meloff, a teacher in Kelowna, B.C., and Robert Meloff, a Calgary dentist, are Bill's children; Earle Snider, a University of Alberta sociologist, and Bob Silverman, dean of arts and science at Queen's University and a former U of A colleague, were close friends.

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