

In memory of "The Decatur Showman"

By Jim Parker

What a local Decatur newspaper tells us about Mr. William Hawkins is this: "William E. "Bill" Hawkins was born in Decatur Illinois on April 7, 1925 and died in Decatur Illinois November 8, 2002. Bill was a member of the First Baptist Church, graduate of Millikin University and was a World War II Navy veteran. He retired from Williams-Hawkins & Associates, which were pool cue makers. He was in the Guinness Book of World Records for three-cushion billiards, with a high run of nineteen."

What the Decatur newspaper does not tell us about Mr. Hawkins is this. ...During the beginning of the 1950's, and near the end of American three-cushion billiards seventy-five year reign as a popular professional sport, our nations champions of the red and white billiard balls that ruled the first half of the 20th century were retiring and stepping down from competition. ...While at the same time, pocket billiards, that had some thirty years earlier begun luring billiard recruits into shooting balls into pockets instead of rails, was moving in for the final take-over of billiards in America.

If one city in the nation was considered synonymous with the game of three-cushion billiards it was Chicago Illinois. The Chicago billiard room was born the son, and as the result of America's industrial revolution. Its birth was during a time that we as a nation saw small frontier clans evolve into growing urban civilizations. In its teens, it provided competitive and social activity to soldiers of the civil war, and as an adult, to soldiers of civil rights. In the summer of its career, it witnessed the birth of aviation, and in the winter of its life, watched, as humankind soared into the heavens in search of the extraterrestrial.

The last of Chicago's three-generation hallmark billiard rooms was Randolph Recreation, known to its clientele as simply, Bensingers ...the name of the family that built a dynasty of collectively some 200-billiard tables actively in use at the same time within four of Chicago's downtown billiard halls. It was here at Randolph Recreation that the young thirty-year old

Hawkins began his professional training that eventually some twenty years later led to his 1977 World Book recognition.

Bill Hawkins was quick witted and a man full of vitality. When he walked into a room his jovial personality, warm smile and welcoming handshake flashed more brilliance than a fire-cracker on the 4th of July. Bill moved around a billiard table with the speed of a thoroughbred, and snapped his cue with the accuracy of an Apache Bowman. Both-on, or-off the billiard table he was fun to watch and be with. Bill Hawkins was a 20th century Phineas T. Barnum that didn't need "Jumbo the Elephant" or "Tiny Tim" to entertain his gallery of hopefully new three-cushion recruits.

Magic, jokes, card tricks, slight of hand and games of checkers were only a few of the tools of his unique trade. He carried with him, from tournament to tournament, his own motorized buffing wheel he'd use to help keep the billiard balls polished, and rolling to their last thousandth of an inch. To earn a few dollars that he'd later use to get him to the next tournament, Bill sold a small line of billiard supplies, ranging from billiard balls to cue sticks, and any other billiard device that might fit into the trunk of his car. Most every one that ever came to a three-cushion tournament in the United States that was fortunate enough to include "The Hawk," felt left out if they didn't buy at least one of his slip-on cue grips.

Watching a three-cushion billiard tournament could be considered a dull affair to those not understanding the game. But when the "Decatur Showman" came to town, and giggled his way around a billiard table as he made plastic billiard balls dance and seemingly come alive ... there's never been a father's son that after watching Hawkins performance didn't want to try their hand at the noble game of three-cushion billiards.

"The Hawk" is gone now, and flown his magic and wit to another place. A place where billiard balls and billiard halls are on exhibit every day for all to see. A place in the heavens where angles go, who now will enjoy forever more, the "Hawkins Billiard Show."



William E. "Bill" Hawkins April 7, 1925 – November 8, 2002



The top 1977 United States three-cushion champions and finalists from the "Gale Johnson Open," hosted at The Illinois Billiard Club, Chicago IL. A time when \$3,500 was the total cost of a new full size car ... not simply today's down payment on one! Left to right: Allen Gilbert, Frank Torres, George Ashby, Louis Campos, Carlos Hallon and the "Decatur Showman," Bill Hawkins.



Bill Hawkins as seen in his formative years as a contender in the 1958 Interstate Three-Cushion Billiard Tournament hosted at Randolph Recreation (Bensingers) 29 W. Randolph St., Chicago IL. A first of its kind event for three-cushion billiards in America ... when IBC member Mr. Richard (Baby Brother) Powell, the first Afro-American, often referred to as three-cushion billiards "Jackie Robinson," won the coveted Interstate Three-Cushion Championships. ...Thus dethroning defending champion Mr. George Pentaris.

Left to right, front row: Harry Birdsell, Bill Hawkins, Marvin Wells, George Pentaris (defending champion), Virgil Healy, Norman Ross, Edward Winski, and George Andrews. Back row, left to right: Richard Trevett, Richard Powell (city champion), Don Tozar, Joe Sorger, Ernie Presto, John Brato and Gorden Green.