

COMMUNITY

Dr. Ike Plans to Write About 1968 Vicksburg Car Accident



Vicksburg native, Dr. Robert Ike and his wife Dr. Kathryn Clark hold the volume of the Vicksburg Commercial with the pages open to the story that documented the tragic death of five Vicksburg teenagers. They have been researching this accident at the Vicksburg District Library. In the photo on the same page, coincidentally is a picture of Dr. Ike's father, Dick Ike, in the October 10, 1968 issue, handing a check to four other men. The amount was for \$15,000, money that was raised at the Fisher Body plant to contribute to the building fund for the new hospital in Vicksburg. A touching find for Dr. Ike, to say the least.

By Sue Moore

A long-ago tragedy, a car-train accident in Vicksburg, has brought Dr. Robert Ike home to Vicksburg. He's researching the accident for an article about five of his high school friends who were killed early on a Saturday morning after a high school football game and dance.

"A pale came over the village in the early hours of Saturday, October 5, 1968," Ike related. "It was the first time death had crept into the survivors' world of high school juniors and seniors."

"I hadn't thought about it in years until I opened a folder labeled 'Vicksburg Box' after my recent retirement," Ike said. "This piece I'm working on is about 'The Accident'. It started as just something for me to put on my blog. Now I wonder if it might turn out to be something worthy of perhaps a little higher level of publication. As an academic physician, I published a lot of manuscripts in scientific journals and wrote my share of book chapters, so I know the ropes in that game. However, this notion of publishing for the public is totally new to me."

Ike wrote to his Vicksburg friends recently about his writing endeavor:

"It happened in the wee hours of Saturday morning. Following the dance after the big Plainwell game (which we lost when my classmate Jim Sillaman threw four interceptions), five boys gathered to pursue the usual Friday night mischief. Ike Erkilli was my friend, classmate, teammate (cross country) and namesake. He had his parents' station wagon which all the boys piled into. They headed to Pat Pinkerton's older brother's house on XY Avenue. Pat was also a classmate and teammate. The others were older: Owen Greene, whose sister, Janet, was in my class, had been a star running back for the '67 team but had graduated. Ed Turk and Keith Thomas were his mates in the legendary class of '68, which had won titles in football and basketball. Their motto as they grew up, knowing the abundant talent in the class was "State in '68", but alas no.

"The two sets of boys weren't friends, and the Gazette printed a story the day after the accident wondering why

they got together, coming to no conclusions. Nobody knows to this day. I think it is something mundane, like one of the older boys having best access to a buyer, Ike having the car, and Pat having the destination. Pat's brother wasn't home, so Ike continued to drive east on XY. The crossing wasn't very far down the road. A freight was coming from the east at 60 mph. The engineer later said that by the time he saw the car approaching the track, it was too late for his brakes to do anything. Ike likely thought he could beat the train. He didn't.

"The impact crumpled the station wagon like tinfoil, killing all five instantly and tossing the new piece of junk 100 feet in the air down the track. Authorities knew about the crash right away, as the engineer had radioed it in. Even Sheldon Durham, local funeral director, was quickly on the scene, which means he handled the remains of all five boys. His daughter Becky told me it was one of the only times her dad – who knew all 5 families – came to tears.

"The Gazette reporters must have

worked fast, as the story filled the front page and more of Saturday's paper.

"Folks in the village knew the story, if not all the details, that morning and to this day no one – certainly no one my age – has ever forgotten it. The days after were gruesome and painfully sad, with an overwhelming grief and unbelievable sense of loss. Someone thought it would be a good idea to put the wreck on public display, maybe scaring us whipper-snappers from trying the same thing. It drew a crowd at the car dealership in Schoolcraft that lent its lot to the spectacle. There were bits and pieces of flesh in the nooks and crannies of the wreck everywhere. Only one body was displayed: Ike's. His mother had insisted on an open casket so Sheldon Durham put his best Mme Tussaud skills to work and produced a facsimile of the boy we'd known, loved, and just lost. His waxed unnatural appearance was still unsettling, not the Ike I knew.

"Classes were dismissed at the High School Monday and Tuesday for the

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four funerals (Keith's was in Athens), churches were packed, and large crowds came to the burials. I don't recall any wakes. I doubt anyone had much of an appetite yet. Meredith Clark had to wait till Thursday to print his version, which filled 3/4ths of the October 10 front page with an accounting of the accident and of the lives of each of the boys. Individual obits were alongside, accompanied by pictures of each, Ike smiling in his track suit. There weren't any 'grief counselors' around in those days. Parents, teachers and friends did their best to help while feeling the grief themselves. I don't remember how long it took for things to get back to 'normal'.

"The Bulldogs travelled to Otsego the week following and won handily, keeping the ball on the ground so there would be no Sillaman interceptions. "The Harriers continued on to an undefeated season, claiming their 7<sup>th</sup> straight League Championship. The football team split their final four contests, defeating Otsego and blanking Three Rivers, while falling to Allegan and South Haven in a squeaker. It wasn't the season anyone expected, and Plainwell went on to go

6-1-1 and won the conference. I guess the "Battle of Vicksburg" was decisive. The '69 Barker that came out in the spring featured right inside the front cover a full-page memorial to the five boys."

In writing the book, Dr. Ike said the hardest part was going to be the ending. His draft of the events, ends with a folk song about what people gain when their loved ones die. He cites the Massachusetts folk singer Don White, who sings about how those who endure death of a loved one can themselves emerge stronger for the experience: "There are so many sad goodbyes in a long and well-lived life, if they don't break you, they can make you more alive." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_lZqQAUMxs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lZqQAUMxs). "For the kids in Vicksburg then, for most this was their first step. Heck of a way to start. I hope they are. More alive, that is."

Dr. Ike himself, has had a storied career since leaving his hometown of Vicksburg in 1970, in his words: "I screwed around for two and a half years at the University of Michigan with not much of an idea about the future. I got my family off my back by declaring for pre-med so I had to get

serious about it. I was adopted by a dad who was short, about 5' 6" and I grew up to be 6' 8". My mom died when I was nine and my dad in 2003. Shortly before that, he gave me my adoption records. Turns out, I had two living parents (my birth dad died in 2015) with 10 half brothers and sisters. The tall ones were on my mom's side, of Norwegian descent. My birth dad played football at Michigan State under Biggie Munn.

Dr. Ike was named an associate professor emeritus of internal medicine at the University last June 30. A description notes: "As an accomplished rheumatologist and teacher at the University of Michigan, Dr. Ike has authored over 40 peer-reviewed publications, 13 book chapters, and 50 scientific abstracts and was a frequent presenter at national meetings. In addition to his scholarly achievements, Dr. Ike was a committed educator who provided outstanding training and teaching to medical students, residents, and fellows." He received his medical degree from the University of Chicago and advanced medical training at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis.

His wife, Kathryn Clark, has a Ph.D. in

kinesiology and also teaches at the University. She was named teacher of the year for the School of Kinesiology in 2019. For two years she was the senior scientist for the space station and traveled weekly to NASA headquarters in Washington D.C. and all over the world. After that for another two years she served as senior scientist for human space flight. While waiting for her to come home one weekend, Dr. Ike was hard at work with his home brewing system when he burned up the kitchen in a fire that caused \$25,000 worth of damages and melting the Corian countertops in the process. He also acknowledged that he first learned of his taste for beer on a high school exchange trip to Alexandria, Virginia.

He believes that his wife Kathy is the much more interesting person and more accomplished teacher of the two. She teaches scientific writing to sophomores, correcting over 500 papers per semester. These days she is Face-timing her students as the University, which has sent the students packing in an abundance of caution with the coronavirus.

Vicksburg VFW Donates to Generous Hands



Shown, from left, are Butch Wesoloski, commander of the VFW Charles Osborne Post 5189 in Vicksburg, handing a check for \$500 to Sheri Louis, executive director of Generous Hands, with Melvin Kuis, post chaplain. The donation was especially timely, Louis said, as the need has become even greater with the coronavirus wreaking havoc on many of their families. "We were surprised to know that we have such a large need in Vicksburg. We are sure some of the families have veterans," Wesoloski said.

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