In Memoriam: Edwin Murray Eakin

James Smallwood
Ed Eakin passed away on Wednesday, February 20, 2002, of a massive heart attack. I learned of his passing while I was attending the East Texas Historical Association’s meeting in Texarkana. I was shocked when Archie McDonald announced the bad news. At first, I could not even imagine a world without Ed Eakin. He was such a great role model for me, and I much regret his death. Our Texas history meetings will not be the same without him.

Over the last few years, Mr. Eakin and his family have become good friends of mine and therefore most important to me. I first worked with Mr. Eakin in the mid-1980s. I contributed a chapter to a book that he published on Texas history, one celebrating the Lone Star’s Sesquicentennial. In the early 1990s, we began a new project that resulted in Mr. Eakin’s publication of my Born in Dixie: The History of Smith County, Texas (2 vols.; Eakin Press, 1999). In 2002, he published another volume for me, Oklahoma and Its Heroes, a book designed for Oklahoma’s secondary students.

Over the years, I learned a few things about Mr. Eakin. I learned that he was an incredibly decent man, beloved by his family, by friends like me, and by people in the larger Texas community as well. A graduate of Baylor, he was a fine Christian man whose life’s work was devoted to the information revolution — first as a crusading newspaper editor and then as owner and executive editor of a publishing house that produced books of both fact and fiction. His tastes were eclectic. His interests ranged from “hard core” history to cookbooks, from black history to Indian history, from the Alamo to World War II and beyond.

I could never call him “Ed,” even though he asked me to do so. Once, when I called him “Mr. Eakin,” he tried to correct me. Humorously, he said that when I called him “Mr. Eakin,” he thought that I was talking to his father. I respect any number of people, most of whom I call by their first names. But there are exceptions. I never called my grandfathers or my father by their first names. I never called my grandmothers or my mother by their first names. And I never called “Ed” by his first name. He was too much a father figure for me to do that. He will always be “Mr. Eakin” to me, a man who commanded rather than demanded my respect.