



Robert Hughes Willetts

July 15, 2024

Robert Hughes Willetts, 71, transitioned to eternal life on July 15, 2024, surrounded by loved ones. The son of the late John E. and Evelyn B. Willetts, Bob was born in Reading, PA. He graduated from Suffield Academy, received his bachelor's degree in Art from Coker College and master's degree in Fine Arts and Photography from University of South Carolina.

Bob divided his childhood between two worlds. Growing up in Camden, SC, he played in the woods and sailed on Wateree Lake. Summers were spent in Pennsylvania near his grandfather, who was a pivotal person in Bob's life. Living near the railroad tracks, he crawled into windowsills as a young child to watch the trains go by, beginning a lifelong passion.

As an adult, Bob combined his love for art and trains into a career. A gifted and talented artist in his own right, Bob taught art in various public schools, stressing both art techniques and critical thinking. His students loved him, dubbing him their "crazy art teacher." In his spare time, Bob purchased and restored the J. Pinckney Henderson private railcar. His meticulous craftsmanship caught the eye of longtime friend and mentor Elton Miller. With Elton's guidance, Bob turned his hobby into an expansive career. Combining his artistic sensibility and his mechanical aptitude, Bob spearheaded the private railcar restoration shop for the Lancaster & Chester Railroad before opening his own shop a decade ago in Spencer. Through the years, Bob and his crews transformed derelict railcars into showpieces with elegant interiors, functional layouts and precision mechanics. Some of his most notable work

includes restoration of the historic SunBeam, a 1903 wooden Pullman palace car on display at Hildene: The Lincoln Family Home; and the Belford/NS 99, a state-of-the-art track geometry car featuring stadium seating and an all-glass platform end. He was also very active at the NC Transportation Museum in Spencer, where he painted and restored many rail cars.

Bob lived in Spencer with his dogs. He was active in Spencer Presbyterian Church, where he served as an elder and property manager. Easily recognized by his handlebar mustache, Bob humbly served his community, being a judge for local elections and volunteering to help with the annual Christmas parade and clean-up days.

Bob is survived by sister, Lyn Wooten, and brother, Mac Willetts, both of Camden, SC; stepmother Susan Willetts and stepsisters Colette Slemp, Camden, SC, and Dede Hamlet, Richmond, VA; daughter Tammy Blume, Harrisburg, NC, grandchildren Grady and Claire Tate, Kannapolis and Harrisburg, NC, respectively, and many friends.

A celebration of life will be held at 1 pm on Monday, July 22, 2024, at Spencer Presbyterian Church. Family will receive friends immediately after the service.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to Spencer Presbyterian Church, PO Box 4, Spencer, NC 28159, or the charity of your choice.

Summersett Funeral Home is serving the Willett family. Online condolences may be made at www.summersettfunerahome.com.

Previous Events

Funeral Service

JUL **22**. 1:00 PM (ET)

Spencer Presbyterian Church
Spencer, NC 28159

Tribute Wall

CG

“ We will miss seeing Bob's smiling face. His creative talents were amazing, and he would go to the ends of the Earth to help an animal in need. I know he has found some happiness is seeing Flex and Dusty again. It was a beautiful life celebration.

Cheri George - July 23, 2024 at 08:40 AM

WS

“ When Bob approached me in 2001 to join his crew working on private rail cars at the L &C, I had no idea it would lead to a lifelong friendship and the best job I ever had. I consider myself fortunate to have worked for Bob as he taught me much about passenger car restoration. He was a true craftsman. I was lucky to have known him.

William Suttle - July 21, 2024 at 09:50 PM

DB

“ Got to work with Bob blasting several cars for him. He was a good Man and I will miss him! God speed Bob!!!!

David W Benton - July 21, 2024 at 06:18 PM

MA

“ To Bob’s Family,

I am deeply saddened to hear of Bob’s passing. I had the privilege of working with him for nearly two decades, during which he demonstrated unwavering honesty, knowledge, and helpfulness. Most recently, he played a crucial role in the successful restoration of Office Car Belford for Norfolk Southern Railroad. Bob was always ready to lend an ear, offer valuable advice, and share his deep expertise in the railroad industry. His positive attitude and swift response in times of need will be fondly remembered. My heartfelt condolences to you and your family.

*Sincerely,
Mike Allran*

Mike Allran - July 21, 2024 at 10:49 AM

BW

“ A "True", Master Craftsman, in the art of passenger rail car restoration. Great times we spent together running the Amtrak excursions out of Spencer. I'm grateful for the knowledge he passed on to me about private varnish. His loss will linger for a long time to come by all who knew him.

Barry Whitlow - July 19, 2024 at 04:24 PM

CS

“ I will always love you my dear brother. Words cannot express the sadness that I feel. I will cling to my precious memories that are flooding my mind and pray that someday I can smile when I relive them. I miss you already.

Colette Slemp - July 19, 2024 at 06:55 AM

BG

“ *The Private Railcar Community mourns the loss of our good friend and past President of the American Association of Private Railroad Car Owners. Bob was so talented and touched the lives of so many in our community. May he be fondly remembered for his exemplary craftsmanship and leadership.*

Bill Gray - July 18, 2024 at 10:46 AM

NM

“ *I am truly saddened with Bob's untimely passing. I first got to know Bob after my wife and I bought our PV Dearing. He spent the better part of 6 years to get the car certified to run on amtrak. I grew close to him during that process as I was able to sit at the knee of the master. I dare say that there are very few PVs that Bob had not touched along the way. As chair of the Chattanooga trip he was gracious enough to put my car as rearmost. Bob's passing is a significant loss to the PV community.*
Nelson and Borden McGahee

Nelson McGahee - July 17, 2024 at 09:30 PM

BS

“ *I brought my daughter with me to ride the private cars back to West Virginia for the annual New River Train it was her 13th birthday and Bob cooked her a dinner meant for Queen. I always stayed in contact with him and treasured him as close friend and mentor.*
Bradley Sparky Scott Charleston WV

bradley scott - July 17, 2024 at 06:08 PM

PB

“ Bob was a good man he allowed me to build his track at the new location . This was my first big job as we were a new business . Bob was tough but very friendly. You new how you stood with him because unlike most people he would show you your faults but then help you to improve them . I am great full for the many discussions we had over the years you will be missed . BRS Rail..

Philip Bundrick - July 17, 2024 at 04:37 PM

PD

We will truly miss you my friend. Sylvia and Patsy

Patsy Duncan - July 19, 2024 at 09:57 AM

AN

Alfred Nippert
Bob supported everyone who had an interest in Railroads or Railroadng. Whatever the request he was always willing and open to being part of a solution or project. A relative of mine once said, “when a senior person passes, it like a library burning,” We have lost a priceless trove of knowledge.”
I am not alone in recognizing our loss. Friend, mentor, example, leader and a good man.
May we meet again.

Alfred Nippert - July 20, 2024 at 11:50 PM

MS

Bob had a smile that stretched from ear to ear and reflected his innate kindness. He lived the “do unto others” life, stepping in to help people in many ways, but always with thoughtful dignity. The community of Spencer and his extended community of colleagues, customers, and friends have lost a wonderfully courteous and giving man. May we remember him by carrying forward the example he set for us.

Margaret Spell - July 22, 2024 at 11:58 AM

RT

*I knew Bob at Suffield Academy in Ct. when we were teenagers. A friend and I drove down to S.C. during a a spring vacation to visit him and stay with his family. I haven't seen or heard of him since those days but I have the fondest memories of him as a kind and sensitive classmate and friend. I can still see his teenage face creeping out from behind that mustache. I am happy he was so loved.
Robert Thomson Townshend Vt.*

Robert Thomson - December 20, 2024 at 07:20 PM