

Shirley and Bill Mulligan on either side of librarian Sarah Chapman in 1984

Arabian Nights – Bill and Shirley Mulligan

by Dan Rothman for the *New Boston Bulletin* (2002)

Anyone who visited the Whipple Free Library on a Saturday morning in the 1980s knew the Mulligans. Shirley Mulligan worked behind the desk, welcoming library patrons and checking out their books. Her husband Bill's place of honor was the reading corner, where his big booming voice indicated that Story Time was in session. Two children occupied each of the comfortable leatherette armchairs surrounding Bill and more children sprawled on the floor as he read aloud their favorite books.

Shirley and Bill had many interesting stories of their own, including tales of three decades spent in Saudi Arabia before they moved to New Boston. I recently spoke with Shirley, to learn more about this couple who played an important part in the history of our library.

During the Depression, high school student Bill Mulligan worked in his aunt's bookstore in Spokane, Washington. It was a popular bookstore and every author on tour in that part of the country would stop by, so Bill met a lot of interesting literary people. Eventually, Bill went to Gonzaga University in Spokane, where he earned a degree in philosophy. As a college student, Bill worked at a nearby amusement park as a barker and ride operator. He further honed his vocal skills as a member of the University Glee Club and in 1940 he won the best actor award at the Spokane Drama Festival. Bill edited the college newspaper, and after graduation worked for a radio station as a news director and then for United Press.

Bill first became acquainted with the Middle East during World War II when he was an aircraft mechanic stationed in Aden with the U.S. Army-Air Corps. An article about Bill in *The Arab News* says that after the war, Bill could have gone to graduate school at Princeton University, but instead went to work for the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), sailing to Alexandria on a rusty cargo ship. "The lure of adventure is always stronger than that of textbooks to a young

man of 25,” Bill told The News. Bill started work for Aramco in the mailroom, Shirley says, but soon became the company historian and government affairs expert. Bill’s collection of papers from his 34-year career at Aramco provides unique insights into Saudi and Aramco history after the Second World War. This collection was donated to Georgetown University after Bill died in 1992. But I am getting ahead of the story...

Around the time Bill was sailing towards Saudi Arabia, Shirley Hanaway was a young secretary working for the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Albuquerque and later Los Angeles. One day in 1951, she saw a newspaper advertisement that had been placed by Aramco. “I always wanted to travel to these exotic places you heard about during the war,” Shirley told me. She applied for the job, although she admits she wasn’t quite sure at that time where Saudi Arabia was. She didn’t tell anyone about her plans until the last minute – not even her parents – because she didn’t want to be talked out of her adventure. Until Aramco hired her and sent her on the long journey to Saudi Arabia, Shirley had never been east of the Rockies nor stayed in a hotel. En route, she stayed in an Aramco suite in a Park Avenue hotel in New York City, where Shirley remembers meeting Eleanor Roosevelt in the elevator. However, her next meeting was more significant...

Shirley first met Bill Mulligan on the company plane from New York to Rome, as she was going to start her new job and Bill was returning from a semester of studying classical Arabic. Shirley remembers that she was one of two young women on the DC-4, and that Bill sat next to the other girl. Later, Bill liked to tell the story that during that long flight Shirley was heard to say about Bill, “doesn’t that man ever shut up?” They became better acquainted during the stopover in Rome and on the continuing voyage to Saudi Arabia. Shirley soon became the secretary to the new Aramco president. That individual was eager to learn Arabic and Bill was one of the few Americans with any fluency so Shirley saw a lot of Bill. Two months after the young lady from Albuquerque arrived in Saudi Arabia she was engaged, and eight months later Bill and Shirley were married in the nearest Catholic church, on Bahrain Island.

I will retell only one of Shirley’s many stories of their years in Saudi Arabia. Alcohol could not be sold in that country, and the Americans worked hard and were thirsty. The Aramco workers experimented with homemade stills in their garages. “It tasted just awful”, Shirley said. After a few fires were accidentally started, the company quietly made available a booklet called “The Blue Flame” with instructions about how to distill spirits safely, and the machine shop produced a few critical parts. Shirley remembers the coiled tubing and pressure-cooker in her garage, and says that after a while “people were making some really good stuff.”

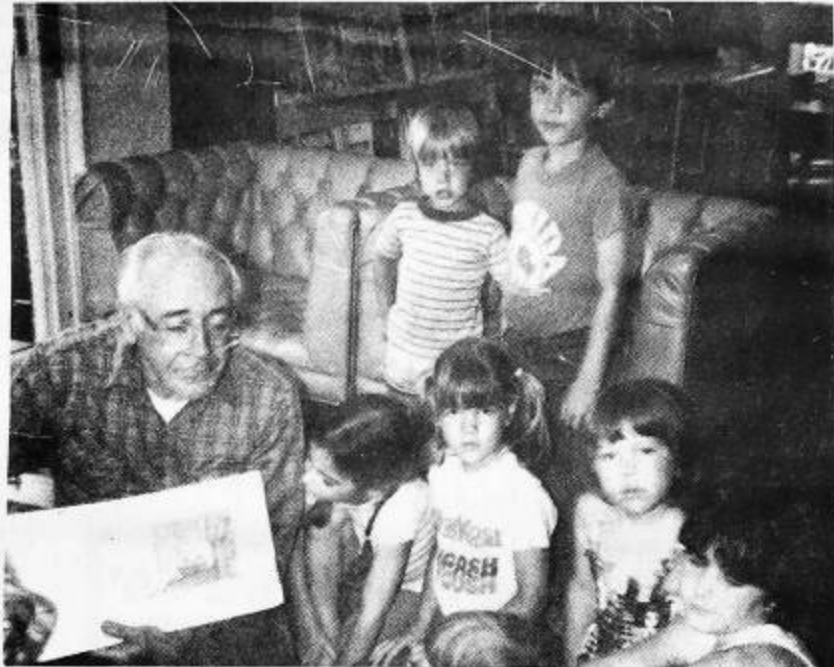
Shirley and Bill adopted two sons, Hugh and Brendan, whom they brought up in Saudi Arabia. The Aramco school went only as far as the ninth grade, so the boys attended boarding schools in the U.S., in New Hampshire and Connecticut. When Bill started thinking about retiring, he and Shirley decided “after our years in the desert, we wanted to live where there are streams and green trees.” They considered Carmel, California and the Rocky Mountains, but eventually decided to look for an old house in New England. By the mid-1970s, Shirley was spending summers in the U.S. to be with the boys, so she conducted the house search. She saw an 18th century farmhouse on Butterfield Mill Road in New Boston with 35 wooded acres and a river with a mill site. Shirley “liked it right away”, bought it, and then cabled Bill to tell him what she had done. Bill joined Shirley in New Boston in 1979, although Bill never considered himself retired.

The Mulligans were very active in community affairs. Bill was president of the New Boston Historical Society, worked for Catholic charities, and helped start the New Hampshire Chapter of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. Bill and Shirley were proud of the Community Citizen Award they received from the Joe English Grange in 1992. Bill worked with Roland Sallada to obtain a significant contribution from a Saudi prince for the Christa McAuliffe Planetarium. Inspired by Dr. Sam and Martha Brooks' example, Bill and Shirley signed a conservation easement for their property with the Piscataquog Watershed Association.

Bill and school librarian Mary Statt started a Young Author's Program at the Central School, which continues today. Bill and Shirley read every story the children wrote, and awarded prizes that were books purchased by the Friends of the Library. My daughters remember Bill wearing pajamas to school to read the children's classic "The Polar Express".

Bill was a trustee of the Whipple Free Library, and he worked to make the 1981 addition possible. He encouraged votes in support of the library addition because "it will never have potholes". Shirley and Bill then volunteered to work at the library for many years so that it could be open on Saturdays. Bill was the auctioneer at the Library fundraisers, making good use of his barker's voice. "Another soul made happy", he would say after each sale.

To refresh my memory of Bill's voice, I went to the library to borrow a copy of the videotape which Bill made with Wayne Jennings, "New Boston in 1988". However, a new resident of New Boston had just checked it out.



IT'S SATURDAY MORNING story time at the Whipple Free Library, and Bill Mulligan keeps local youngsters entranced. Standing are Dustin Szopa, left, and Sam Perron. Seated, clockwise, Sarah Huett, Susan Voorhees, Jane Ruggles, Carver Woodbury, Jennifer Cawley, and Abigail Green. (GP Photo)

Bill Mulligan's eulogy, given by Roland Sallada, was reprinted in the 1992 New Boston Town Report.



EULOGY FOR BILL

It was a great honor for me when Shirley asked me to speak regarding Bill's activities in New Boston.

Some people feel that God created the Universe with a big bang. However, there is no doubt at all that he created Bill with a big booming voice. That booming voice he brought with him when he and Shirley came to our Town in 1979, and with his voice Bill created a big bang in New Boston. "Bill was the epitome of volunteerism." He started almost immediately giving of himself.

Bill's presence in New Boston was first felt in the Whipple Free Library. Here he did Yeoman duty. Every Saturday morning he would be there sitting on the floor surrounded by kids just waiting for him to start reading to them. To see and hear "Mr. Bill" and the wide-eyed kids and, by the way, quite a few parents just a few steps back, was a real thing of beauty.

"Mr. Bill" also read for the school children and worked with them at the school library. Everybody loved the time he came, dressed in his bathrobe and slippers, and read "Ira Sleeps Over."

Because of Bill's help, the local phone book was the library's biggest fundraiser followed by the annual library auction, and who can ever forget many times during an auction when he had consummated a sale by the statement, "and another soul made happy."

Bill was not only a long time Trustee and Friend of the Library, but he had many other activities.

Ever since he arrived in New Boston, he showed keen interest in our town and its history.

Just to visit with Bill and Shirley at their home, you would absorb New Boston history. Adjacent to their home is the site of Butterfield Mill and to research it, Bill went to the New Boston Historical Society and discussed it with the members. It wasn't long until Bill accepted an office and quickly rose to its Presidency. His tenure was that of service to the Society and the community.

One of his loves in New Boston was compiling "Oral Histories" and he accomplished this with many of our elderly citizens, one of whom was me. He worked tirelessly preparing a lengthy videotape of all facts of contemporary life in our town.

He always attended Town Meeting and School Meeting and lent his voice to the problems at hand.

He was always to be found manning the booth selling historical and commemorative items for the benefit of the Fire Department, Artillery Company, Library, and Historical Society. The Piscataquog River was always dear to Bill's heart, not only because it flowed right through his and Shirley's property but because his thoughts always encompassed conservation, wildlife, and the beauty of nature. He and Shirley thought alike on these subjects and followed through by giving easements in perpetuity on all of their property to the Piscataquog Watershed Association to insure that their property will always be green.

Bill's latest project was working with the Christa McAuliffe Planetarium Foundation in an effort to obtain support for children's programs at the Planetarium from the Saudi Arabian government in collaboration with the Christa McAuliffe Planetarium. It would be nice to see this come to fruition in Bill's name.

One of Bill's many honors was because of his and Shirley's willingness to volunteer. They were awarded the Governor's Volunteer Recognition Award for Volunteer Work in New Hampshire.

In closing, Bill will be sorely missed in New Boston because Bill made "every soul in New Boston happy." He was a beautiful man.

Given By
Representative Roland Sallada
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