



William Colvin Baker passed away early Tuesday, June 1<sup>st</sup> at his home in Belgrade. He was 96 years young at the time of his death. His health had gradually declined the last few years, and he had been receiving hospice care for the past six months.

“Bill Sr.” as he was affectionately known by family and friends, was born in Grangeville, Idaho, on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1913. He was preceded in death by his father, Bert B. Baker; his mother, Jesse Colvin Baker; and a younger brother, Richard T. Baker.

Bill came from a small modest family. He was the oldest of two sons six years apart and lived part of his childhood on a small farm outside of Grangeville, sometimes riding horseback to school. He worked in his father’s grocery store/bakery during his school years. When he was approximately 7 or 8 years old he developed a passion for music and took lessons on the clarinet. This love of music accompanied him the rest of his life. He was not a scholar and developed a reputation for being spirited and fun-loving. He was involved in various “pranks” throughout his school years. In high school he played football and basketball and was a member of the band. In the summers he worked for the U. S. Forest Service. After graduating, he

attended the University of Idaho. He became a member of Sigma Chi Fraternity, a legacy he would later pass on to his son and three grandsons. His passion for the clarinet and saxophone continued and he formed a small “swing music” group playing at various campus activities.

After attending college for one year, Bill Sr. moved on to work as a surveyor in the central Idaho area. In 1935 as a response to an advertisement he organized an orchestra, entertaining passengers shipboard on the cruise ship “President Jefferson” traveling between Seattle and the Orient. After this success he repeated the trip again in 1937.

While playing part time in a band in Grangeville, Bill was introduced by the band leader, Floyd Swanson, to his sister LaVerne C. Swanson. After a brief courtship they were married on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1937. They moved to Lewiston, Idaho, where he worked as an insurance salesperson and moonlighted as a professional musician. In May of 1939, their first child, Pamela, was born. He was transferred by his company to Aberdeen, Washington, within a few years. Shortly after the beginning of WWII he joined the war effort by working in the Tacoma shipyards and for Boeing Aircraft Co. He was rejected from the draft because of a childhood injury. During the war years, he started another “swing band” which became well known in Seattle-Tacoma, Portland, and Seaside, Oregon clubs as “John Q. Public,” “The Gold Room,” and “The Ballroom.” Meanwhile his father, Bert, had purchased a ranch outside Grangeville. The family moved back to “the ranch” in 1944. He and LaVerne opened a small restaurant shortly after their return in addition to working the ranch. This team of husband and wife endured all their lives.

Unannounced to his wife, he took flying lessons and received his pilot’s license. He and a group of friends started a flying club that owned various private aircraft over time. He used this newly learned skill to access remote air strips to hunt and fish. While music was his passion it became more of a hobby as he developed a zeal for business inspired by his father. He sold the ranch and restaurant business in the early fifties and partnered with his father to purchase a music store in Missoula, Montana, which operated under the name of “Baker’s Music Store” until it was sold in 1960.

Bill became very active in the community. He belonged to many fraternal and service organizations which included the Chamber of Commerce, Elks Club, Lions Club, The Shriners, and the Mendocino Club Men’s Choir. He also coached his son’s Little League and Babe Ruth teams. His community involvement culminated with his appointment as President of the Missoula-Hellgate Centennial in 1959.

After the business sold he took a brief timeout to pursue his dream of traveling to Mexico by travel trailer. After he returned, he was offered the sales manager position in an established piano and organ sales company in Seattle, Washington. Within a few years he purchased Balcom & Vaughan outright and expanded it to five stores within the Seattle area. Seattle was considered the “boating capitol of the world,” and Bill quickly developed an attachment to boating. He owned boats and cruised them in Puget Sound, San Juan Islands, and the coastal areas of British Columbia.

In the late sixties the Seattle economy experienced a huge downturn and he was forced to close the stores and liquid the assets. He did not allow this setback to stop him. He was subsequently offered the general manager position for a general mercantile company in Petersburg, Alaska, which at the time was struggling to survive. He turned the company into a profitable business and in the process acquired a majority of stock.

In 1976 he sold his interests in the business and retired. He moved back to the Seattle-Tacoma area and built a home. For approximately seventeen years, he and LaVerne spent summers at their home in Lakeland Village, Allyn, Washington, playing golf, gardening etc., and winters traveling extensively throughout Mexico and Guatemala. Bill Sr. could never completely retire. An opportunity to purchase a business and relocate to Montana was what he needed. He and son Bill bought Road & Ranch in 1993 and changed the name to NAPA Auto Parts-Belgrade. He continued to travel in the winter months to places such as Spain, Portugal, Belize, Mexico, and Arizona until recent years.

Bill Sr. was a dedicated, determined person. On a lighter side, he had a great sense of humor. He loved telling jokes and stories. He had the ability to meet and befriend almost anyone, a talent that even crossed language barriers. He loved his family and always was there to offer support, compassion, love, and guidance. He was a good husband, father, grandfather, and friend, and was respected and admired by most. He left a great legacy.

William C. Baker is survived by his wife of 72 years, Laverne; his daughter, Pamela C. Noel; son, William C. (Martha M.) Baker, Jr.; grandsons, Todd S. (Judy) Noel, Colin (Vi) Noel, Bert W. (Angela) Baker, Cory C. Baker; and great grandchildren, Tyler, Kylie, Alex, and Ashlyn.

Memorials should be sent to Hospice of Southwest Montana or Hope Lutheran Church.