**Gentleman Hero:**
*The Life of Oliver Kermit Hobbs, Sr.*

by
Oliver Kermit Hobbs, Jr.
Preface

For a number of years I have had the pleasure of working with the fine people at Paul D. Camp Community College, through my involvement with the Workforce Development Council, through my speaking at various events, and most recently through my position on the College’s Board of Directors.

Recently the College’s president, Dr. Paul Conco, approached me with an exciting idea. He proposed that memorials be built at the Suffolk and Franklin campuses, each portraying the life of the person for whom each campus was named. The purpose would be that people at each campus could “get to know” the man behind the name. In so doing, the values and qualities that each man represents might make a positive reflection upon the culture of the college.

Two decades ago my father, Oliver Kermit Hobbs, Sr., recognized the need for Paul D. Camp Community College to expand its services to the city of Suffolk, Virginia. The need was great; funding was available for the building construction; all that was needed was an appropriate site. In light of these facts, my Dad presented a parcel of twenty-four acres of land in Suffolk, Virginia, to the Virginia Community College System. This land would become the site of the Oliver Kermit Hobbs Campus of Paul D. Camp Community College in Suffolk.

The first step in implementing Dr. Conco’s idea at the Oliver Kermit Hobbs campus in Suffolk would be for someone to write a biography of Mr. Hobbs. I was the most likely candidate, and I enthusiastically accepted the task.

This task was great fun. I reminisced with my mother, my sister, and other close family members; I talked with numerous people who had had dealings with my father; I dug through old newspaper clippings and documents. To my surprise, I found many retrospective articles that my father had written during the last decade of his life, some of which I had never before seen. Writing my dad’s story was a labor of love, and I am now excited to present it to the community.

My father always considered the Oliver Kermit Hobbs campus of Paul D. Camp Community College to be one of the proudest reflections of his legacy. He would be even more proud to know that his life would be remembered in this way.

O. Kermit Hobbs, Jr.
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Gentleman Hero: 

The Life of Oliver Kermit Hobbs, Sr.

In the mid-seventeenth century, Abraham Hobbs and his family emigrated from their ancestral home of Kemble, Gloucestershire, England, to the Carolina colony of the New World. There, in what would become northeastern North Carolina, they and their many generations of descendants made their homes and flourished.

In the late 1800s, near the town of Hobbsville in Gates County, North Carolina, lived Ephriam Jackson Hobbs, a spirited young man who was the sixth-great grandson of Abraham Hobbs. Jackson, as he was called, was an expert mechanic and had a reputation for being able to “fix anything.”

Young Jackson set his eye upon Miss Sarah Frances Brown, regarded by many as the Belle of Gates County. Sarah, or Sallie as she was called, came from a prominent family that included many successful businessmen and farmers.

In 1902 Jackson and Sallie were married, and they soon made their home on a farm about a mile from Hobbsville. The couple eventually had nine children, the first six of them being daughters. But their seventh child, born September 21, 1918, was a son whom the couple named Oliver Kermit Hobbs. Oliver was the name of Sallie’s father; the name Kermit came from Theodore Roosevelt’s son. The story was told afterward that Jackson was so excited about the birth of his son that he stood on the roof of his house and crowed like a rooster. Little Oliver’s older sisters were also excited about their new brother, whom they nicknamed “Buddy”, and they doted upon him almost as if he were a pet.

As Oliver grew, it became apparent that he had inherited his father’s ingenuity and his mother’s grace and dignity. Oliver attended the public school in Hobbsville, and even outside of school he was an avid reader. He particularly admired Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin for their combination of wisdom, idealism, and practical creativity.

Oliver was constantly tinkering with whatever junk he could lay his hands upon, whether it be a broken clock, an old telephone, or castoff auto parts from his father’s repair shop. He enjoyed experimenting with new ideas, and he was particularly fascinated by new technology. As a lad he built a radio set, and each evening he would take the battery out of the family’s automobile and hook it up to his radio. Members of his family would take turns listening to radio broadcasts through the headphones.

Like any typical child, Oliver occasionally engaged in mischief, and sometimes his antics reflected his ingenuity. Oliver’s mother often reminisced and told stories about Oliver’s childhood. One of her favorites was an incident where two strange men, without permission, made a habit of parking their Model T Ford in the Hobbs family’s front yard while they worked
at a job down the road. After a few days, young Oliver saw an opportunity for some good
natured fun, so he disconnected and grounded the car’s spark plug wires.

That afternoon the entire Hobbs clan sat on the front porch of their home to watch
what would happen when the men returned for their car. The driver grabbed the hand crank
on the front of the car and gave it a hard spin. When he did, he gave out a yelp as a powerful
jolt of electricity shocked him from his hand to his feet. He turned and cursed the family, who
by this time were bellowing with laughter. The man finally diagnosed the problem and got his
car going, and he was never seen again.

The Hobbs family was a typical Gates County farm family in that they were not
particularly wealthy, nor were they poor. In the early twentieth century all the children had
specific chores, and at certain times of the year they spent long hours in the fields tending the
crops. When the Great Depression came upon them they already knew how to make do with
the things they had and how to find joy and happiness even in the face of difficult situations.
The Hobbses were a close knit family, both supporting each other and depending upon each
other. They were held together by a strong bond of love.

Oliver graduated from Hobbsville High School in 1936 and was voted “Most Likely to
Succeed” by his fellow graduates. Several of his older sisters had been fortunate enough to
attend college, but by the mid-‘thirties the Great Depression had closed the doors of higher
education to many people, including Oliver Hobbs. Rather, he continued doing as he had
always done, reading and studying whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself.

A year or two after his high school graduation, Oliver moved to Suffolk to search for a
job and begin supporting himself. He was fortunate in finding employment at A. E. Sadler
Novelty Company on East Pinner Street in Suffolk. There, Oliver was able to exercise his
mechanical and electrical talents repairing and servicing coin operated phonographs
(jukeboxes) and pinball machines. Some of these machines were remarkably sophisticated,
using complex relay logic control systems. The experience he gained servicing them would
prove valuable in his future career.

Oliver thought very highly of Mr. Sadler, and the feelings were apparently mutual. Mr.
Sadler often offered fatherly advice to his young associate, and Oliver frequently helped out in
Mr. Sadler’s restaurant, Little City Lunch, next door to the phonograph shop.

At this time in Oliver’s life, he became more serious in looking for a bride, and one of his
friends told him that he “should marry Frances Piland”, the pretty daughter of a local print shop
operator. A proper introduction was arranged, and Frances and Oliver formally met at Little
City where he was working.

Frances and Oliver hit it off well and began to date. On one of their first dates Oliver
took Frances to Hobbsville, to the high school graduation of his younger sister, Maryvonne.
Frances was overwhelmed when Oliver introduced her, one by one, to his sisters – all seven of them - and his one younger brother.

In time Oliver proposed to Frances and she accepted his proposal. They were married in First Baptist Church in Suffolk on June 14, 1941.

Oliver, as fascinated as he was with new technology, had bought an 8 millimeter movie camera and projector, still something of a novelty at the time. With their camera the young couple made a video record of their wedding and their honeymoon at Niagara Falls.

Oliver’s marriage to Frances Piland Hobbs was the best thing that ever happened to him, and he often said so. Their children always felt that their marriage was exactly what God had envisioned when He created the institution of marriage. Although Frances was usually the silent supporter of her beloved husband, he credited her with being the guiding force that inspired him to all the success that he would ultimately achieve. The two of them could often be seen embracing, saying, “I love you” or responding, “I love you more.”

The young couple made their home at 143 Charles Street in Suffolk, across the street from Frances’ childhood home.

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The Japanese attack on the American navy and army bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, changed everything for America. People’s plans were put on hold, and for the foreseeable future, little else mattered except the war with Japan and Germany. This was also true for Oliver and Frances Hobbs.

On July 1, 1942, Oliver entered the welding school at Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company, where he passed his qualifying test in just eight days. His first welding assignment was on the aircraft carrier USS Yorktown, and he worked seven days a week until November 29, 1942. The following day, November 30, was the last day that First Class Electrician’s Mate exams were offered at Norfolk Naval Base, and Oliver took and passed the exam. The next day, December 1, was the last day that a civilian with trade experience could join the US Navy with a rating above a seaman recruit. Oliver enlisted as an Electrician’s Mate, third class (EM/3C), for the war’s duration.

Because of his enlistment rank, Oliver was able to skip basic training and report immediately to his duty assignment at Little Creek Naval Station in Norfolk. Within a year, Oliver had risen to Electrician’s Mate, first class, the highest rank he could attain without enlisting for a much longer period.

Just like his earlier work on coin machines, Oliver’s service in the navy proved to be a very rewarding experience. This was a time of rapid advances in electrical technology, and new devices such as ship steering systems, gyro compasses, mine sweep timing control devices, and
radar antennae became commonplace. On many occasions he was called upon to go out with ships to troubleshoot their electrical problems. During this time, Oliver had access to the finest tools and instruments available. He mastered them all.

In 1945, Oliver was transferred to a US naval base in Port of Spain, Trinidad, where he served as Chief Electrician, even though his rank was only Electrician’s Mate, first class. During his time of service in the Caribbean, he even helped to rehabilitate a captured German submarine.

About a month after the Japanese surrender in September 1945, Oliver received his discharge from the naval service and made his way back to his Suffolk home. When Oliver drove up to 143 Charles Street, his beloved Frances and his two year old son, Oliver Kermit Hobbs, Jr., were waiting patiently on the front porch to meet him. Alongside the family stood Mr. A. E. Sadler, welcoming Oliver back to his old job.

Actually, Mr. Sadler had sold the coin machine business soon after Oliver had left for his naval service. The day after Oliver’s return home, Mr. Sadler bought back his old business.

During the war, Mr. Sadler had become the Ford Tractor and Equipment dealer in Suffolk. Oliver’s new job included managing both of the two businesses. The coin machine business did not grow as rapidly as did the tractor dealership, so Mr. Sadler eventually sold that business once again.

The farm equipment business was a natural for Oliver Hobbs. He had grown up on a farm and understood the farming business and the farm culture, and he had the expertise to deal with the technical aspects of farm equipment. The company’s customers soon came to appreciate Oliver’s knowledge and his fairness and honesty. The company did well under his management.

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Oliver made himself part of the local community and joined with many of his customers and associates in organizing Kings Fork Ruritan Club in 1949. He served in every elected position in the club and remained an active member for decades.

Also in 1949, Oliver and Frances celebrated the birth of their second child, Cynthia Russell Hobbs, or Cindy, as they called her.

Oliver and Frances loved their children immensely and sought to give them all possible educational opportunities and personal guidance as well. Oliver particularly emphasized to each the importance of being a “lady” or a “gentleman”. This involved respecting others, particularly their elders, whom they were to address as “sir” or “ma’am”. For gentlemen, it meant always deferring to the ladies. It meant absolute honesty; it meant commitment to hard work. It meant being a servant to others in whatever capacity they found themselves.
The values Oliver shared with his children were nothing less than the centuries-old ideas of chivalry that had been handed down from the times and places from whence the Hobbs name had sprung.

Frances was a very spiritual woman and had a great influence upon her husband and her children. She could often be seen sitting or standing silently, her lips faintly moving as she offered up a prayer during her daily life. She saw to it that everyone in her family understood that the good life and the salvation they enjoyed were the blessings of a great and merciful God. The family faithfully attended church every Sunday.

Oliver always enjoyed playing with children, and he sometimes took a creative approach to his playfulness.

In the early ‘50s Oliver built a primitive “riding” lawn mower that attracted the interest of the neighborhood children. Most of the vehicles they were accustomed to seeing had to be pedaled or pushed. He then built a trailer to pull behind and equipped it with two old school bus seats. The kids could take turns driving each other back and forth along the dirt street in front of the Hobbs home. They dubbed the vehicle “Skyrocket”. The arrangement was almost too successful: there were still more waiting passengers than there were seats.

Next Oliver built a jeep-like vehicle with school bus seats that would run at exactly the same speed as Skyrocket. The kids named this one “Nellybelle” after the jeep driven by Roy Rogers’ sidekick, Pat Brady. With both vehicles loaded to capacity they “raced” to the end of the street and back. The only way to win was to drive perfectly straight and avoid any unnecessary distance. During that summer, the races went on for days at a time.

One Halloween, Oliver made a “ghost” out of an old sheet. He strung it up by cords so he could make it appear out of the trees and swoop down on trick-or-treaters at the front door. The kids were suitably scared, and they loved it. From that point on, the neighborhood children would always save the Hobbs home as the last one they would visit on Halloween night. They knew the Mr. Hobbs would have something scary for them, and groups of them could sometimes be seen standing at the edge of the street, daring each other to “go first”. Somehow, Mr. Hobbs came up with a new idea every year.

Oliver always enjoyed dancing. Even when his children were young, he organized square dances for neighborhood children. He would move the furniture out of the dining room and roll back the rugs. He would put the 78 rpm records on the player, and he would be the caller. The kids learned to seamlessly perform the “do-si-dos” and other moves that he called out as the music played.
Mr. Sadler sold the tractor business in 1949, and it became Shotton’s Farm Service. Oliver continued managing the business, and as he did, he learned a great deal about the science of peanut harvesting.

One of the most tedious tasks of raising peanuts at the time was that of “chopping” the peanuts – manually clearing weeds away from the peanut plants with a hoe. At that time there were no herbicides that could prepare the land or prevent the weeds from appearing. Oliver believed that there must be a better way.

Oliver’s children remember often seeing him in the evening after work, sitting back in his easy chair with the newspaper in front of him. But instead of reading the paper, he would be sketching designs in the margins by the newsprint. One of the designs he created was a device he called a Microvator, designed to mount to the back of a cultivator. It had two spiderlike wheels with spring fingers that rolled along the peanut row and swept away the weeds from the stalk of the peanut plant. It substantially reduced the need for chopping the peanuts. Next, he needed a way take his new idea to the marketplace.

Oliver outfitted the family’s garage with two lathes, two drill presses, a power hack saw, a grinder, and a welding machine. Tractor trailer trucks would back into the driveway and unload angle iron and steel flat bar into the garage where the car used to park. Oliver, Frances, Kermit, and Cindy all had their assigned tasks: the Hobbs family went into the business of manufacturing Microvators. Sometimes Kermit and Cindy would sit in the dining room within view of the television; seven-year-old Cindy would put the spring fingers into the jigs while Kermit would solder them in place.

Microvators were sold through tractor dealers in peanut-producing areas, and they were immensely successful. The Microvator was just one of many patents that Oliver Hobbs would ultimately hold. From that time on, Oliver would be known as “an inventor”.

In 1958 Oliver was offered another great opportunity. Benthall Machine Company in Suffolk had been started by J. T. Benthall, co-inventor of the Peanut Picker, in 1906. In the mid-twentieth century it was still one of the leading manufacturers of such machines. Oliver Hobbs was offered the job as Director of Research and Engineering, developing new products for Benthall.

One of the new ideas Oliver instituted was the “Green Room.” It was actually an engineering design shop outfitted with its own machine tools where new prototype machines could be designed and built. This facility greatly improved the company’s ability to make rapid improvements and to bring new “secret” products to the market quickly. Around the time this room was built there was a popular song entitled *The Green Door* with lyrics, “What goes on behind the green door?” Employees in the regular shop jokingly referred to the engineering shop as the Green Room, and the name stuck.
While he was working at Benthall, Oliver had opportunities to work in peanut producing areas in Georgia, Alabama, and Texas, where growing and harvesting conditions differed from those in Virginia and North Carolina. There he broadened his knowledge of peanut harvesting technology even further. He brought what he had learned through his field experience back to the Green Room, where he developed the new Benthall Model 410 Combine. This proved to be the most successful combine that the company had ever built.

At some point, perhaps with the success of the Microvator venture, Oliver began to consider the possibility of forming his own business, designing and manufacturing agricultural equipment. He had many ideas for products, but he lacked the financial resources to support such a venture.

One of the people with whom Oliver shared his thoughts was his brother-in-law, Carlie Adams of Willow Springs, North Carolina. Mr. Adams was a successful businessman and had an eye for good business opportunities. Like Oliver, he had experience in agriculture, and he agreed to participate in the initiative.

The business partnership became a reality in March, 1963. The company was named Hobbs Engineering Company and was headquartered in Mr. Sadler’s old tractor dealership building on Windsor Road in Suffolk.

The company name, Hobbs Engineering Company, was a statement of the company’s purpose, and it would define the business for its entire existence. The company’s focus would be on *engineering* - on designing and building products of cutting edge technology, incorporating features that were not offered in competitive products. This meant that research and development would always be an essential element in the business’s operations, and it would be a key factor in the company’s ongoing success.

The company began with Oliver as President, Frances as bookkeeper, and one shop worker, Ervin Wilkins. Mr. Adams was a silent partner in the business operation, but a couple of months later, his son, James Carlie (“Jim”) Adams II, completed his education at NC State University and joined the firm in the capacity of sales and marketing.

The business, as it began, was clearly a family business. It was only natural that the values that the Hobbs family brought would define the business culture. There was an unwritten but true statement that a person who went to work for the company was essentially a member of the family. They, as well as suppliers and customers, were always treated with respect, fairness, and dignity. Those values proved to be an important element of the company’s success and longevity.

The first product built by Hobbs Engineering Company was the Model 660 Peanut Digger. It was a masterpiece of design: it had many unique features that Oliver patented. The machine was built of high-strength steel tubing that made it lighter in weight than conventional diggers; it was therefore easier to handle by the small tractors that were used at the time. Its
plows could be removed and readjusted by removing and replacing a single bolt. Its conveyor bars slowed down as they gently deposited the peanut vines on the ground, reducing the loss of the nuts from the vine.

Not only did the machine perform exceptionally well, it was relatively easy to manufacture. The company had a number of basic machine tools, and there was a shear and a press brake for making sheet metal parts. Most interesting were several machine tools that Mr. Hobbs had built or modified for specific purposes in the manufacture of the new digger. Some of those were automated using controls and relays scavenged from old pinball machines.

Jim Adams had a new 1963 Corvette when he joined the company, and a hitch was adapted to it so it could pull a trailer carrying one of the new diggers. Jim traveled thousands of miles, from Virginia to Texas, showing off the machine to prospective dealers and customers. Jim was a natural-born salesman.

The 660 Peanut Diggers was a huge success in the market. The company built one hundred 660s in time for the 1963 harvest season, and every one of them was sold, at a price of $695 each. The profit from those sales was enough to cover the company’s expenses and to make the fledgling business profitable, even in its first year. In the years to come, the company would build and sell hundreds more of the Model 660s and its variants.

Oliver’s next design project was to build a machine for removing sticks, vines, and other impurities from farmers’ stock peanuts. These would be used primarily in peanut mills but would also be useful for farmers desiring to improve the grade of their peanut crops before they went to market. The result of this project was the Model 403 Peanut Cleaner, a machine that employed a wide belt which dragged the uncleaned peanuts over a drilled wooden screen. This machine, introduced in 1964, was also a success, and it became an important part of the Hobbs Engineering product line.

The key to manufacturing Model 403 was a rather complex drilling device that used a complicated series of cams, chains, and air cylinders to make the wooden screens. This machine was yet another of Oliver’s inventions.

One of Oliver’s most ambitious plans was to design a new peanut combine from the ground up. By this time he knew as much about peanut harvesting as any person, and he had a number of new ideas he wanted to try out. But building such a machine was an ambitious undertaking. There were at least two major obstacles to its production.

One of the difficulties in designing machinery for peanut harvesting was that the time available for testing new ideas was limited to a few months in the autumn when the work was actually being done. Some systems could be simulated in the lab and tested, but the only effective way to prove a system was to try it in the field under real life conditions. In fact, one season’s testing alone was found to be inadequate. Every season is different, and what works
one year might not work in the next. It would take several years to develop a marketable peanut combine.

There was yet another obstacle to overcome before a peanut combine could be put into production. This problem was the space required for fabricating the machine components, setting up an assembly line, painting the machines, and “finishing off” the machines. The building on Windsor Road was simply inadequate for such a massive production effort.

The company needed a larger building, and so a five-acre wooded lot on Holland Road was purchased in 1966. Construction began in July on a new 35,000 square foot facility, with Mr. Carlie Adams, Oliver’s business partner, serving as the general contractor on the construction. Finally, in April 1967, the company officially moved into its new quarters at 1100 Holland Road, Suffolk. At that time the company’s name was changed to Hobbs-Adams Engineering Company, and it boasted a workforce of twenty employees.

With the elimination of the space problem, the production of the Hobbs Model 520 Peanut Combine could commence: the combine made its debut in November, 1967. This machine was well received in the marketplace and strengthened both the company’s product line and its reputation as a strong player in the peanut harvesting equipment business.

The next problem that the company faced was the need for diversification in the company’s product lines. It was not enough to build products to sell only for one brief period of the year; the company needed product lines that could be sold year round, or at least, at different times of year.

There were many sawmills in the local area, and one troublesome byproduct was the bark that was stripped away from the logs before they were cut into boards. The bark was typically burned in large steel tepee-shaped enclosures. Oliver and Jim recognized an opportunity here: if the bark could be fashioned into consistent sized and shaped pieces, it could be used as horticultural mulch. This would eliminate the cost of disposing of the byproduct; instead it would turn it into a saleable product.

Oliver set to work designing the required equipment and developed a series of machines for processing the bark, separating it into grades, conveying it, and even bagging it and loading it onto pallets. Hobbs-Adams Engineering even gave names to the different product grades that became standard in the industry. The company had, in fact, created a whole new industry.

The bark processing machinery line opened up a whole new avenue for Hobbs-Adams Engineering Company business. In also helped level the demand for the company’s products throughout the year. The “industrial” line of equipment, as it was called, eventually grew to include huge trommels and bulk feeders used in processing municipal waste.
With the success of the bark equipment line, the Hobbs and Adams families began another venture, Pioneer Processors, for processing horticultural mulches using Hobbs trade-named equipment. This company also gave Oliver a good location for testing new product ideas. Pioneer Processors prospered and was sold some years later, to become a part of Pioneer Southern, Inc.

By the late 1960s, the fame of Hobbs-Adams Engineering Company had reached to other peanut producing nations around the world. They began receiving orders from other peanut producing parts of the world such as Egypt, South Africa, Sudan, Senegal, Argentina, Venezuela, and Australia. Within a few years, the company’s export sales were becoming an important part of the company’s business. By the ‘eighties Hobbs products had been shipped to more than fifty nations around the world.

Oliver and Jim were always on the lookout for other business ventures that would help diversify the company’s product line, and in the early 1980s another promising opportunity caught their eyes. There was a need for irrigation in agriculture to eliminate some of the risk of droughts and to ensure the best crop yields. In the wide open spaces of the Midwest, center pivot irrigation had proven successful, but this method was not always practical for the smaller, irregularly shaped fields of the eastern and southeastern states.

Polyethylene plastic technology had advanced such that large plastic hoses could be made that did not collapse when they were rolled up. This made it possible to build large irrigation machines, somewhat similar to lawn sprinklers that could spray large volumes of water over wide areas. Some relatively small agricultural irrigation machines had been built in Europe using this concept, but there were few such machines suitable for the American market. To fill that need Oliver and his design staff went about developing such a machine. The finished product was called the Hobbs “Reel Rain” and was built with the typical quality and durability of all Hobbs products. The first machine caught on in the marketplace, and it was followed up by a wide array of Reel Rain models of all sizes and hose lengths.

With the success of the Reel Rain irrigation system, Hobbs-Adams Engineering ventured into the manufacture of center-pivot irrigation systems. As it turned out, the market for such equipment was a maturing market, and there were already many domestic builders of center-pivot systems. The technology for these systems had been pretty well refined, and they were usually sold on price, not because of their technological features. It turned out that center-pivot irrigation was not a very good “fit” for Hobbs-Adams’ design and manufacturing expertise.

The center-pivot venture was far from a failure, however. At this time there was a great demand for such systems in the Middle East. Through the efforts of Oliver, Jim, and the sales team, a large number of systems were sold into Saudi Arabia in 1984. In fact, the sale of those machines earned Hobbs-Adams Engineering Company the US Department of Commerce E-Star Award for excellence in exporting for the year 1984. In that year, Hobbs-Adams led the entire state of Virginia in export sales.
On the strength of the company’s success and respected position as a leader in its fields, Hobbs-Adams Engineering was named the Hampton Roads Small Business of The Year for 1984.

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When Kermit and Cindy had grown and left home, Oliver and Frances found more time to enjoy activities with each other and with their circle of friends. They enrolled in a ballroom dancing class and improved their already considerable dancing skills. In fact, they continued their lessons for many years thereafter. They and their friends particularly enjoyed attending formal dances together. For Oliver and Frances, dancing became more than just social recreation: they went at it with such enthusiasm that it was a means of staying physically fit.

In the ‘70s and ‘80s Oliver and Frances, along with several other couples, began making trips to other nations around the world. Among those were several People-to-People tours, intended to increase educational, cultural, and humanitarian understanding with other countries. Among the countries they visited were Israel, Russia, and mainland China.

Their visit to China was one of the first visits allowed to Americans after that nation had “opened” in the 1970s. Oliver’s visit there made a great impression upon him. He was somewhat surprised that people treated him and his fellow travelers with great respect and even admiration. To Oliver, seeing the Chinese people and the primitive conditions of their lives reminded him of his own years of growing up during the Great Depression. He identified with their humility and their commitment to hard work, and he genuinely desired to help them improve their lot.

The nation of China, like the United States, was a large producer of peanuts, and Oliver knew that he had technical knowledge that would be useful to the people of China. He recognized that there was also a strong possibility of an ongoing business relationship between his own company and those people. With these thoughts in mind, he invited the Chinese to send a delegation of four people to come to the United States, at his own expense, to see peanut harvesting technology as it was applied here. The Chinese accepted his offer, and a year later they reciprocated by inviting Oliver to bring his own delegation to observe the harvesting operations in their country.

These visits were the beginning of many such visits over several years as Oliver worked with the Chinese. Over time, he developed peanut harvesting machinery designed specifically to meet needs unique to their numerous tiny farm plots. Interestingly, at least one machine was based on stationary harvesting technology that had long since become obsolete in the United States.

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In 1988, Oliver and Frances decided that it was time to retire from the business that they had co-founded. Neither of the two of them cared to spend their retirement years in
idleness, so after some consideration, Oliver and Frances started two new businesses, Hobbs Engineering Company and Hobbs International Limited. It was no surprise that the mission of Hobbs Engineering was to design and develop new products. Hobbs International Limited was to be the vehicle through which he could develop trade relations with foreign countries. The new businesses shared building space with the original company, now renamed Amadas Industries. Many of Oliver’s new ideas would be adapted into products manufactured by Amadas Industries. Through Hobbs International Limited, one of his projects was to help convert an old munitions factory in China for use in manufacturing hydraulic cylinders for use in other Chinese-made products.

Amadas Industries continued to operate with the exact same commitment to innovation and quality as Hobbs-Adams Engineering had always done. Indeed, Jim Adams became president; Kermit Hobbs, Jr., became Executive Vice President, and Cindy Hobbs Baker took a leadership position in the drafting department. As the years passed, Oliver could take pride in the ongoing success of the company he had founded.

At the new Hobbs Engineering Company, Oliver had a well-equipped new design lab, a couple of lab assistants and, as always, his wife Frances by his side. In his office he had the latest computer technology available, including the same computer aided design software as was used at Amadas.

In 1989, soon after the creation of the two new Hobbs companies, Oliver received a pleasant but unexpected surprise. He learned that he had been chosen Suffolk’s First Citizen by the Suffolk Cosmopolitan Club. Being a humble man, Oliver had never been particularly fond of being in the spotlight, but he was overwhelmed at the respect and admiration the people of Suffolk showered upon him. He once said that this honor was “the greatest thing that could come to a Gates County farm boy.”

In his new office Oliver enjoyed visits with friends who came by to talk about current events, business opportunities, or occasionally to reminisce about old times. By this point in Oliver’s career, he had become widely known, and many people who knew of him and his work came to visit him. The pleasant and scholarly conversations he enjoyed in his office further fulfilled his appetite for knowledge and wisdom. He had become something of an elder statesman.

During the 1990s, probably for the first time in his life, Oliver began to enjoy the luxury of studying to his heart’s content. He became an avid reader of such publications as National Geographic, Scientific American, The Economist, and Wilson Quarterly. He took advantage of the opportunity to study the works of such men as Adam Smith, John Locke, Montesquieu, and many others. He had always been interested in local archaeology and he spent time searching fields around Suffolk for Indian artifacts. He developed an interest in genealogy, and he purchased the latest computer software to catalog the more than six thousand Hobbs-related names he researched. It was a wonderful period of Oliver’s life.
This was not to say that Oliver abandoned his work in creating new designs. In fact, in the late 1990s he developed one of the most ingenious devices of his career. Cotton growing had become popular in the local area, and there was a need for a means of removing bare cotton stalks from the ground after the cotton had been harvested from them. His machine utilized pairs of rotating wheels to snatch the vines from the ground and drop them in front of a rolling blade, which then cut the vines into pieces. Amazingly, the machine did not require any outside source of power. The tractor simply pulled it along the rows, and the blade rolling along the ground powered the pairs of wheels. The machine actually did its best job when it was being pulled fast. It was a work of genius.

The Cotton Stalk Puller/Chopper was the last invention that Oliver patented. Amadas Industries bought the patent and put the machine into production.

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For many years Paul D. Camp Community College, based in Franklin, had been serving the city of Suffolk, offering classes at various facilities in Suffolk. But by the late 1980s, the existing East Pinner Street facility had become sadly inadequate to meet the needs of Suffolk students. Several prospective sites were studied, but there was no available property for the size of campus required to answer the need.

Oliver had followed the news of the college’s search for land with interest. One of his business associates happened to be a member of the college’s board of directors and kept him informed of the developing situation. Through one of their discussions, the obvious solution came to Oliver. There was a parcel of land available to him that probably would be suitable, and he would donate it to the college! The more he thought about it, the more excited he got. Here was a way that he could share his own prosperity with other people so that they might have the educational opportunities that he himself had been denied. The necessary papers were filed, and in the fall of 1989 Oliver’s gift to Paul D. Camp Community College became a reality.

Because of Oliver’s philanthropy, Paul D. Camp Community College awarded him an Associate Degree in Humane Letters on May 15, 1992. It was one of the proudest moments of Oliver’s life.

Ground was broken for the new building June 3, 1993, and the first classes were offered in January 1995. The college was named the Oliver Kermit Hobbs Campus of Paul D. Camp Community College. Oliver always considered this campus and his relationship with the college to be one of the greatest parts of his legacy.

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Back in Oliver’s younger years, he picked up the habit of smoking cigarettes. Smoking was considered a “normal” behavior for men in the 1940s, and he continued the smoking habit
for most of his life. Even when the dangers of smoking became apparent and society began to condemn smoking, Oliver resented any efforts to convince him to give it up. Even so, he did reluctantly quit in the 1980s. After he quit though, he could never satisfy himself that he had done the right thing; in fact, he believed that not smoking impaired his creativity. So after two years, he made a deliberate decision to resume smoking, and so he did.

Oliver was usually careful about his health, and he knew well the warning signs of cancer. In early 1998, Oliver began to notice those signs in his own body. He had a medical examination, and a biopsy indicated that he did, indeed, have lung cancer. Shortly thereafter, he had part of one lung removed in hopes that it had not metastasized. But within a month or so, cancer was observed in other parts of his body. He had only months to live.

Oliver had faced many forms of adversity in his life, but this new threat was one he knew he would not defeat. This time, his success would not be measured by his overcoming adversity; success would manifest itself in the way he fought it day by day.

Oliver had been active in his church when he was a child, but as an adult he had never been a very spiritual person. Now, as he faced the imminent end of his life, Oliver more seriously considered his spirituality. In his last months he enjoyed the frequent visits of his pastor, and he took great comfort in the assurance that, through Christ, his spirit was destined for eternal life in Heaven.

As the weeks advanced, the cancer further impaired Oliver’s strength and wracked his body with pain. The doctors prescribed medicines that could make him more comfortable, but he knew that those medicines had potential side effects of dulling his mind. He refused such help, feeling that it was far more important for him to keep his mind sharp than to have his body free of pain.

As his remaining days dwindled, Oliver never allowed himself to become bedridden. As difficult as it was for him, he still put his clothes on every morning and came to the den to rest in his chair. He continued feeding his mind through his reading, and as much as possible, he continued eating a “healthy” diet. Even in Oliver’s last hours, he was able to summon the strength to smile and reach out to his family members when they came into his view.

One evening Oliver’s condition had deteriorated to the extent that he had to be taken to the hospital. There it was determined that his kidneys had shut down: he only had hours to live. His close family members were called in to be with him.

The next day, July 18, 1998, as Frances and other family members stood around his bed, they watched his breathing become weaker and weaker. Finally, silently and calmly, Oliver Kermit Hobbs slipped away into the presence of his Lord.

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Throughout his life, Oliver hungered for knowledge, for learning new things and improving his mind. He possessed a rare ability to create new ideas, to analyze problems and synthesize solutions from a storehouse of wisdom that ranged from physical concepts to philosophical theories.

Many people seemed impressed by the fact that Oliver had achieved the level of success he did, without the benefit of a college education. If the hardships of his past ever bothered him though, he never showed it. Rather, Oliver remained a humble man, always eager to share his wisdom, his insights, his time, or anything he had to offer, with anyone who needed it.

In first-century Greece the mathematician Hero of Alexandria wrote works on geometry, physics, and mechanics. He also invented a number of hydraulic and pneumatic devices that we commonly use today. Oliver Hobbs would have admired such a man.

In today’s world, the word hero is typically applied to a person who has performed a single dangerous or important task. But in Oliver’s case, there were few single events in his life that would rise to that level. Rather, his accomplishments might better be viewed through their consistency and the numbers of people whose lives were improved through his work. Oliver’s inventions improved the sciences of agriculture and horticulture, and they found their applications around the world. The jobs he provided through his business provided a good living for those who worked for him and with him. Through his generosity, many people were given the opportunity to increase their knowledge - some being fortunate enough to work with him and learn firsthand from his experiences; others enjoy the wealth of knowledge that is available to them through the Oliver Kermit Hobbs campus of Paul D. Camp Community College. The most fortunate people, however, were those who were able to assimilate into themselves the values of humility, hard work, and generosity that characterized his life.

Oliver Kermit Hobbs was, indeed, the Gentleman Hero.
E. J. (Jackson) Hobbs, “Awarded 1st Prize, Grand Cycle Contest, Edenton, N. C., July 4, 1912”

Sallie Frances Hobbs, 1902

Oliver Hobbs, “hitched up” to his older sister, Mattie Mae, around 1921

Oliver’s 11th grade school picture, Hobbsville High School, 1935

Oliver and Frances, around 1944

Oliver and Frances, 1940
Skyrocket and Nellybelle “racing” on Elm Street, 1956.

Microvators were manufactured at Benthall Machine Company after Oliver became director of product development in 1958. Notice the sketches in the margins.

Oliver and Frances at Hobbs Engineering Company, 1963

Model 663 Digger Brochure Photo, 1963

Oliver and assistant, Bobby Umphlette, work on 663 Peanut Digger design, 1963.
Oliver in China, 1980


Senator Paul Trible presents Oliver and Jim Adams the E-Star Award, 1985.

Oliver hosting a Chinese delegation, around 1985.

Dedication of Plaque to Oliver Hobbs at Paul D. Camp Community College, Suffolk campus, January 1995

Oliver and Frances, around 1988