



Thomas Alvin Waits

January 31, 1931 - November 21, 2022

Thomas (Tommy) Alvin Waits, a sixth generation Floridian and longtime Tallahasseean, died Monday November 21, 2022, at the age of 91 surrounded by his family. He is survived by his devoted wife Susan, his brother Frank McCaffery, his children Kimberly Anderson and her husband Todd, his daughter Karen Leigh, his son Thomas and his wife Christine, grandchildren Brendan, Thomas, and Tory Doolan, Juliet and Nicolas Waits and great grandchildren Ayla, Spencer, Hadley, and Cal Thomas Doolan. He was predeceased by his brother Bobby Waits and his sister Gail Ogden.

Tommy was born January 31, 1931, in Palatka, Florida where the Waits family had originally settled in the mid 1800's. He spent a happy childhood in this small, commercially vibrant town helping his grandfather run the family turpentine and cattle farms and enjoying small-town life of Palatka where a movie and a soda could be had for a nickel.

In 1939, the Waits family resettled in Jacksonville where Tommy later attended Riverside (aka Robert E. Lee) High School and became a very active member and leader of Boy Scout Troop #7. Tommy enthusiastically led the Troop during this critical Second World War period, leading them in drives to collect scrap metal and rubber, helping his mother plant a "Victory Garden", and marching in frequent parades to boost war time morale. In his senior year at Riverside, this patriotic commitment motivated him and several close friends

to join the U.S. Marine Air Reserve Squadron at Jacksonville Naval Air Station. After graduating from Riverside, Tommy briefly joined his father for a year in Washington DC, where he attended a Professional Accounting School and toured the sites of the DC area. Soon the Korean War broke out and Tommy and his fellow Jacksonville Reservists were called to active duty and stationed in Long Beach, California for Marine Boot Camp training where he reached the rank of Staff Sergeant servicing aircraft gunnery. In 1952, Tommy was discharged from the Marines and returned to Jacksonville where, being eligible for the GI Bill, he elected to enroll in a school located in nearby Tallahassee that had only recently (in 1947) returned to coeducational status and been renamed Florida State University (FSU). It is difficult to overstate the significance of his decision to attend this relatively small university and marks a major turning point in his personal and professional life.

Tommy's 1952 enrollment in the College of Business and 4 years of attendance at FSU were nearly legendary for the uniqueness and breadth of collegiate organizations and extracurricular activities he enthusiastically pursued, including Kappa Alpha Fraternity, Garnet and Gold Key Leadership Honorary, Student Government Association, Flying High Circus, and FSU Cheerleaders. Although a very fine athlete, Tommy elected to forego conventional athletics in favor of joining the highly dynamic Flying High Circus and FSU Cheerleaders, two organization which would mesh perfectly with his fun loving and naturally comedic personality. In the Circus, he played the Emmett Kelly "Hobo" clown with such an impressive level of theatrical skill that he was often photographed by Tallahassee Democrat reporters. Tommy also led several acrobatic acts for the Circus including the famous bicycle act pedaling the Big Top with numerous female performers supported on his shoulders. The FSU Cheerleaders also were a natural fit for Tommy and as head cheerleader he often interacted with the head football coach/athletic director, Tom Nugent, who once called Tommy to his Campbell Stadium office offering sample whiskey bottles for the Cheerleaders to hand out to the

student body to increase the “stadium roar” (Tommy diplomatically declined). A busy college schedule didn’t prevent Tommy from remembering his commitment to the Boy Scouts, and in 1955 he was offered a memorable summer job as Aquatic Director at the Scout Camp in the Catskill Mountains of New York State teaching a Jewish youth group from the Bronx the joys of camping, canoeing, and outdoor life.

Tommy graduated from FSU in 1956, but the University was never far from his mind and after a brief job as an enforcement agent for the State Beverage Department (a.k.a. ATF) in Miami, Tommy decided to permanently settle in Tallahassee when FSU President Bob Strozier offered him the Directorship of the FSU Office of Alumni Affairs and the Seminole Boosters where he had memorable and colorful interactions with FSU dignitaries of the period like Ruby Diamond, Bob Strozier, Stan Marshall, and Bill Peterson. In 1964, Tommy would also become a devoted member of the local Rotary Club, remaining active for 58 years. Tommy went from this experience at FSU to build a successful career as a professional executive culminating in him being President/CEO of the Florida Hotel and Motel Association for 26 years. For this service and his championing of Florida tourism, he was appointed in 2002 to the Florida Tourism Hall of Fame and memorialized with a bronze plaque that hangs in the State Capital Building.

Tommy married his lifelong partner Susan Helms at the St. John’s Episcopal Church in 1958 and went on to build a loving family life in their home on Gardenia Drive with his 3 children, always imbuing their daily family life with his unique and irrepressible sense of humor, his never-ending optimism, his incredible generosity, and his kindness. He was a man of faith and a devoted member of the North Florida Baptist Church for 20 years. A service honoring his memory will be held Sunday, December 4th at 2:00 pm at the North Florida Baptist Church, 3000 N. Meridian Rd, Tallahassee Fla, 32312.

Rocky Bevis and Breanna Green are assisting the family with their arrangements. (850-385-2193 or www.bevisfh.com)

Cemetery Details

Roselawn Cemetery

815 West Piedmont Drive
Tallahassee, FL 32308

Previous Events

Funeral Service

DEC 4. 2:00 PM (ET)

North Florida Baptist Church
3000 N Meridian RD
Tallahassee, FL 32312
<http://www.nflchurch.com/>

Tribute Wall



“ *Bevis Funeral Home created a Tribute Video in memory of Thomas Alvin Waits*



Bevis Funeral Home - December 06, 2022 at 06:02 PM



“ *We've lost one of the greats. I got to know Tommy during my two tours at VISIT FLORIDA. I always loved to see him coming, whether during a drop-by at our office or one of the many Florida tourism events over the years, because I knew that I was in for a good story and a laugh. He had an absolutely huge heart. They sure don't make them like Tommy anymore. Sending so much love to the family.*

Amanda Clements - December 01, 2022 at 03:57 PM



“ *Beautiful in Blue was purchased for the family of Thomas Alvin Waits.*



November 30, 2022 at 12:00 PM

RM

“ A kind and knowledgeable man who taught me and us about the intersection of government, associations and the tourism industry. Tommy will be missed.

Roger Miles & Miles Partnership

Roger Miles - November 30, 2022 at 11:55 AM

TP

“ I knew Tommy in two capacities — both via the tourism industry and through my service on the national board for the Florida State Alumni Association. Tommy’s passion for both made him someone to whom I held in the highest regard. He always had a twinkle in his eye, too. No doubt he was smiling down from heaven when FSU beat that school to the south on Friday.

Tamara Pigott - November 29, 2022 at 09:07 PM

NG

“ It was my great and distinct honor to work with this fine gentleman. It was my honor to have learned from him. It was my supreme honor to know him. May his memory be a blessing to his wonderful wife and family—and to us all.

Nicki E Grossman

nicki e grossman - November 29, 2022 at 03:42 PM

 Lisa Hartlage

“ Such an excellent leader and visionary! He will truly be missed. Sending our condolences. Lisa Hartlage and team from Change of Scene Travel in Elmhurst, IL.

Lisa Hartlage - November 29, 2022 at 03:24 PM