

A Tribute to Sam Hart

One of ETEC's 'People in the Room'

by Jim Campbell



Sam Hart

1945-2025

Sam Hart hasn't been in the ETEC Friday meeting room for years now. And that makes me sad. Sam passed away last week at the age of 80. His last days were hard, I'm told, but he made a lifetime of friends and memories. That was evident as the line went out the door during the receiving of friends at his funeral service Saturday.

How Sam and ETEC found each other is a strange story. He was from the Prospect community in London County, Tenn., and started his working career with Yale and Towne Place Manufacturing.

He later joined Y-12 as a journeyman machinist and spent 25 years making stuff at the bomb plant. He loved making things. He also raised tobacco on his little farm near the Tennessee River. And a great family. He retired early from Y-12 to take care of his wife, his high school sweetheart who fell ill with ALS. Sam tried his best to make her last year's more comfortable and was with her when she died in 2003.

I'd known Sam at Y-12, not well, but we knew each other. In the early days of the newly remade East Tennessee Economic Council, 1992 to 1995, we received several grants from the Department of Energy that were designed to help the workers at the federal plants and community around those plants adapt to the downsizing of the workforce at the of the Cold War. Thousands lost their jobs, and others retired early.

One of the programs we supported during that time was called Manufacturing Means Jobs. It was a part of the Oak Ridge Centers for Manufacturing Excellence, jointly operated by ORNL and Y-12. Both of which, at that time, were both run by Lockheed Martin Energy Systems. The program was set up to let Y-12/ORNL tradesmen and engineers support any Tennessee manufacturing enterprise that asked for help. They might find opportunities to transfer into new careers. But that was harder than it sounds. Tennesseans don't like to ask for help.

Enter Sam. Sam never met a stranger. He listened well, and more importantly heard what customers were asking. People liked working with him. He worked to make the program sustainable. It morphed many times over the years, but some people today call it the Manufacturing Demonstration Program located at ORNL's Hardin Valley's campus.

Some months after Sam's wife died, I got a call from a friend at Y-12. "Sam's down at the farm without anything to do," she said. "Is there anything he could do for ETEC?"

Sam loves to make stuff... ETEC really doesn't make things, at least not in the machinist's sense of the word. So, I ended up hiring him. It made sense. His job was like the work he had done late in his career at Y-12...go find people and companies that need help and then find them the resources that can actually help them. He pretty much was given permission to knock on people's doors. Which he loved.

He was so good at this he was 'stolen away' from ETEC (sort of, sort of not), by the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce to be a vital component of their existing industry support group. He worked there for the last 10 or more years of his working life. Still, he came to ETEC every Friday. He called at least weekly to tell me who he'd met with and what was happening. I loved those calls.

He was a treasure.

There is much more to Sam's story. Someone needs to ask Ray Smith to tell the story of the 1912 banjo ring and Sam's efforts to recreate its signature tone using modern material science. The picture of Sam and that banjo ring was prominent at the funeral.

A good man. An important part of the ETEC community for years.

He will be missed.