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LIVES REMEMBERED

LIVES REMEMBERED: State's July covid-19 deaths surpass 175

Windmill-maker, poultry plant worker, anglers among month's casualties

by [Eric Besson](#), [Lisa Hammersly](#), [Jeannie Roberts](#) | August 9, 2020 at 8:29 a.m.

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Among the more than 175 Arkansans who died of covid-19 in July 2020, according to the Arkansas Department of Health, were (top row, from left) Roy Junior (RJ) Blackburn, Mack Giles Sr., Charles Sibley, Albert DeMarco, (bottom row) Irene Hawkins, John Dillon and Joyah Flemister.

More than 175 Arkansans died of covid-19 in July, the Arkansas Department of Health said last week, dozens more than the 137 who died a month earlier.

Most were among groups the pandemic is most likely to kill: the aged, the less healthy and those who live or work in close quarters -- nursing homes, prisons, poultry plants and other factories.

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Numbers and risk factors don't, however, reveal much about the individual Arkansas lives lost.

Dead in recent weeks was an Alexander father of 10, a 42-year-old Helena-West Helena elementary schoolteacher, a Sherwood man who trained dogs to detect bombs, and a Van Buren native of Laos who worked in a factory six days before the virus claimed her.

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In some cases, obituaries and survivors' interviews tell still more.

Irene Hawkins of Danville: "loved wind-chimes and flowers. She had hair like cotton candy."

Roy Blackburn of Charleston: "a gentle soul; the calm in any storm, unshakable."

This Arkansas Democrat-Gazette occasional series, "Lives Remembered," focuses on individuals who lost their lives to the disease caused by the coronavirus. The 23 below are among those who died in July.

Because some survivors don't want their loved ones' deaths linked publicly to covid-19, the newspaper generally publishes names and photographs for this series with family members' permission.

Roy Junior (RJ) Blackburn, 66, Charleston, July 1. "Everyone liked RJ. If you met him, you knew why. He was kind, gentle, patient, and a great listener," according to the obituary written by his daughter, Ashley Deen.

"He could find a silver lining in the darkest cloud and show you how to see it, too. He gave the best hugs, like each might be his last. He fried the tastiest catfish you'd ever eat. He loved with his whole heart, just like his mama."

Blackburn, who had worked as a logger and a farmer, was a resident at Greenhurst Nursing Center in Charleston when he was hospitalized in Clarksville with an unrelated medical problem, his daughter said.

The widower and father of two tested positive for covid-19 in that hospital, but showed no symptoms.

"He tested positive on a Thursday," Deen said. "They called Sunday and said he was still asymptomatic. Then they called Monday and said, 'something is very wrong. We'll have to intubate him. And he'll have to be life-flighted to St. Vincent's in Little Rock.'" Blackburn was transferred June 23, diagnosed with covid-19 and pneumonia, according to a coroner's report.

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Doctors at CHI St. Vincent Infirmary called daily with treatment plans, Deen said. But July 1, they said his vital signs were deteriorating, and they didn't expect him to live through the day.

Even if the hospital could have let her look through a window to say goodbye, Deen couldn't have been there.

During his illness, she and two of her daughters, who live in Hackett near Fort Smith, also tested positive and were ill and quarantined with covid-19. They contracted the virus separately from her father. They have recovered.

A 40-year-old Lowell man, July 1. Identified as a Tyson employee, he tested positive for covid-19 and was admitted June 7 to Mercy Hospital Northwest, a coroner's report says.

He was intubated June 9 and, about three weeks later, was being transferred for rehab when he died, according to the report. His medical history included congestive heart failure.

An 80-year-old Fayetteville man, July 2. The husband and father of two earned two master's degrees, according to his obituary, in social work and in counseling. He worked for Arkansas' Department of Human Services for 20 years and then five years for Indian Health agencies in Oklahoma.

"After retirement, he enjoyed spending time with his grand-kids and working with his cattle and horses. He enjoyed travelling and seeing the country," his obituary said.

The Vietnam veteran, formerly of Stilwell, Okla., was a resident at the Arkansas State Veterans Home at Fayetteville.

He tested positive for covid-19 in the Veterans Home, and his only symptom was fever, according to a coroner's report.

John Dillon, 79, of Sherwood, July 2. He was a bomb dog handler with the U.S. Air Force, retiring after 21 years, and helped created the drug and bomb dog unit while working the next 20 years at the Pulaski County sheriff's office. Dillon's last career was as a U.S. Marshal at the federal courthouse in Little Rock.

"He was full of life, and he lived a great life," said his daughter, Melissa Bounds. "He loved telling stories of where he'd been with the military, his experience with his dogs and with criminals.

"He was a strong man that everybody loved, and he never met a stranger -- a good old southern boy from McNary, Tennessee."

Dillon was hospitalized May 1 with health issues unrelated to covid-19 and was sent for rehab to Woodland Hills Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center in Jacksonville. He was quarantined at first, since he had transferred from a hospital, then twice tested negative for covid-19, his daughter said.

Bounds, of Nashville, Tenn., asked her father by phone to stay in his room, but he often ventured into the halls of the nursing home, she said.

In early June, his daughter got a call saying Dillon was showing symptoms of the virus and had tested positive. He was taken by ambulance to Baptist Health-North Little Rock on June 5, according to a coroner's report.

The widower and father of two fought the coronavirus for four weeks at the hospital. Bounds and other family members weren't allowed to visit, but were grateful that one son was allowed to suit up in personal protective gear to be with his dad as he died.

A 69-year-old Siloam Springs woman, July 2. She worked as a certified nurse's aide until retirement, according to her obituary.

The wife and mother of one died at Washington Regional Medical Center, according to a coroner's report.

An 88-year-old Danville woman, July 5. She was "one of the sweetest people you would ever meet," her obituary said. "She suffered with Alzheimer's for many years. But she is finally free."

The widow and mother of two was a resident of Mitchell's Nursing Home in Danville.

A 58-year-old Springdale man, July 5. His obituary describes him as "a loving and devoted man" who worked for Tyson Foods for more than 41 years.

"When he wasn't helping others, he was fishing on the lake," the obituary said.

The husband and father of two tested positive for covid-19 on June 5 and died a month later of respiratory failure related to the virus, according to a coroner's report.

A 69-year-old Bentonville man, July 5. A maintenance worker for Tyson Foods, he tested positive for covid-19 on June 19 and June 28.

He was a husband and father of four.

A 55-year-old Mountain View man, July 5. He "loved tinkering with just about anything but had a real talent for making windmills," according to his obituary.

The husband and father of two was admitted to Baptist Health-Little Rock on June 27 with seizures and an altered mental state, and tested positive for covid-19, according to a Pulaski County coroner's report.

Mack Giles Sr., 76, Alexander, July 6. Giles was born in Prescott and moved to Hot Springs where he graduated from high school. At 18, he struck out to find his fortune in California and made it as far as Gary, Ind., before finding a job.

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He retired about three years ago and moved back to Arkansas after 42 years at U.S. Steel, where he was head electrician. He also owned an electrician business for 30 years.

"He cracked jokes and loved to play with his grandkids," said his son, Mack Giles Jr. "He was a really giving guy. He took care of all the kids in the neighborhood. He was a great father. He came to every football game and track meet I had, even if he had to work double shifts just to make it there."

"He did a whole lot of fishing. Crappie. He would freeze them up and eat them," Giles Jr. said. "He was still trying to find a good fishing hole here before he got sick."

Giles Sr., normally energetic, became lethargic toward the end of May and didn't feel well. His son took him to Baptist Health-Little Rock on a Sunday where the elder man was treated, tested for covid-19 and released. His son called the hospital the next night and learned his father had tested positive.

"Who knows where you get coronavirus?" his son said. His father had talked only about going "to some gas station and got coffee and a couple days later didn't feel good."

After the positive test, his son said, he took his father back to the hospital in early June "and he never came home."

Giles Sr. was treated for more than a week before being placed on a ventilator. The father of 10 was on the machine for about three weeks before he died, Giles Jr. said.

Not being able to visit or communicate was difficult.

"They wouldn't allow anybody up there. They need to change that," his son said. "I got to talk to him a couple of times [by phone] before they put him on a ventilator, but that was it. I don't know if he knew we were thinking about him or not when he passed."

A 56-year-old Danville woman, July 7. Another resident who died of covid-19 at Mitchell's Nursing Home, she loved going "to the casino, planting flowers, cooking, playing pranks and joking around. She has a great sense of humor and loved animals," according to her obituary.

The mother of two is also survived by "a host of family and friends who all love her and will miss her dearly," her obituary said.

A 67-year-old Van Buren woman, July 8. The native of Laos was a wife and mother of five. She worked at Tyson Foods until July 2, six days before she died, according to her obituary.

She "had a passion for gardening, cooking Lao traditional authentic cuisine and traveling to many destinations with her children," the obituary said. She was "a hard worker, loving, caring, giving, warming, inspirational and [a] respectable person."

Albert DeMarco, 91, Ozark, July 8. A mechanic who could fix anything, DeMarco's hobbies included flying airplanes and rebuilding damaged aircraft, according to a son, Tony DeMarco.

"He's flown all his life. We would go to the Midwest, and get wrecked airplanes and trailer them back to California," his son said. "He would literally put them back together, fly them, sell them, get another."

An Army veteran, Al DeMarco served in Korea and received a Purple Heart for shrapnel wounds. The husband and father of three moved to Arkansas from California about 30 years ago. He survived a single-engine plane crash on April 12, 2014, when he was 85. The crash happened soon after takeoff as he flew with a friend out of a Tulsa airport, according to news accounts.

In early June, DeMarco was hospitalized with an unrelated medical problem, his son said. Tony DeMarco and his wife, Marilyn, traveled from their Idaho home to Ozark to help. They weren't allowed to visit at the hospital. But a hospital staffer called on June 19 to release his father in an effort to protect him from covid-19 at the facility, the son said. At that time, his father had tested negative for the virus.

Albert, Tony and Marilyn DeMarco stayed at the father's Ozark house, quarantined. A week later, he tested positive for covid-19, and later his son and daughter-in-law did too.

"My wife and I definitely had the symptoms," Tony DeMarco said. "The fatigue was the worst. You'd walk across a room and be exhausted. But my dad started to go more and more downhill. We tried to get him to move, tried to get him to eat. ... He was cold all the time, had a fever, was achy.

"One morning, he had a super-high fever, and we called an ambulance."

DeMarco was taken to a local hospital, then transferred to the VA Medical Center in Fayetteville where he died. Tony DeMarco said he and his wife, both 66, are back in Idaho and mostly recovered.

A 54-year-old Springdale man, July 9. Released hours earlier from the Washington County jail, he was found unresponsive at home and rushed by ambulance to Northwest Medical Center, according to coroner's and police reports. He tested positive for covid-19.

He had been arrested July 8 on drug possession and distribution charges, according to a newspaper article. A coroner's report said his medical history included diabetes, obesity and "moderate use of heroin and meth."

A 55-year-old Springdale woman, July 10. Born in Guanajuato, Mexico, the wife and mother of two loved crocheting, sewing and was an avid church-goer, according to her obituary.

A Washington County coroner's report provided little more information. Besides testing positive for covid-19, she had health issues that included cardiac failure and pneumonia, according to the report.

Charles Sibley, 92, Helena-West Helena, July 11. An Army veteran who was drafted to protect the Panama Canal Zone in the Korean War, he married his childhood sweetheart in 1949. Sibley graduated from Memphis State University and worked for J.E. Dilworth Co. calling on industries in Arkansas and Mississippi, according to his obituary. In 1955, he moved to Helena and went on to establish Sibley Supply Co.

A longtime school board member, he was a Phillips County Chamber of Commerce "Citizen of the Year."

"All who knew Charles, knew that he was an avid outdoorsman and hunter," his obituary said. "He was a founding member of the Jackson Point Hunting Club. His legacy lives on with his trophies shared among his children and grandchildren."

Alzheimer's disease forced him to move to Crestpark of Helena nursing home, where he tested positive for covid-19 in mid-June and developed pneumonia, according to daughter Cathy Campbell.

Sibley's wife, Doris, and their three children visited him daily at the nursing home and at a local hospital, looking in from outdoors through windows.

"He was 92 when he died. He had lived a long life, a good life. He was a good man," Campbell said. "The problem was we couldn't be with him."

The Sibleys opted for a family-only funeral, with almost everyone speaking about him, then gathered at the Jackson Point Hunting Club, she said.

"We had food and fellowship. Everywhere we looked, we knew he was in the middle of it. We did as good a job honoring him as we could under these circumstances."

Irene Hawkins, 92, Danville, July 12. "I always remember her as a little, tiny old lady. But when she talked, you listened," said her granddaughter, Jennifer Hartman.

The widow and mother of four was a nurturer, according to her obituary. "She could always be found tending her flowers, sewing beautiful embroidery and making meals for her large family. ... Everything about her exuded comfort and love. She made every day brighter and better."

"She never drove. She stayed at home," Hartman said. "She loved her Grand Ole Opry and Big Macs. She was fabulous. At the end, she had dementia, but she always knew me. She was an amazing person. She deserved to be fought for."

Hawkins' health began to decline soon after Arkansas in March locked down nursing homes to visitors, including Mitchell's Nursing Home in Danville where Hawkins was a resident. She was hospitalized three times between March and June for treatment after a fall, dehydration and other issues, Hartman said.

In mid-June before her release from Chambers Memorial Hospital in Danville, Hawkins tested negative for covid-19 and returned to Mitchell's for two weeks in isolation, her granddaughter said. While there, she tested positive. A little more than two weeks later, she died.

Since her grandmother's death, Hartman has called state officials and nursing home watchdogs trying to learn what more can be done to protect remaining residents at Mitchell's and in other nursing homes around the state.

Michael Wells, 58, Ouachita River Correctional Unit, Malvern, July 16. Wells had been in and out of prison for several years because of drug issues, his daughter Alena Konkol said.

Despite his problems, she described Wells was a "loving father" who enjoyed working on cars, painting houses and playing basketball with his 14-year-old grandson. "When he was out, he was spending time with me and his grandchildren," she said. "When he was home he was the caringest, lovingest man."

Konkol said her father was partially paralyzed by a stroke in June, and had been sent to the prison hospital at Ouachita River for care. He was there about a week, she said, before he returned to a hospital on July 6 and was diagnosed with covid-19. He was admitted with shortness of breath, a coroner's report said.

Konkol said she was not able to speak to her father while he was hospitalized. "I guess that's what's eating me the most," she said in an interview. "I didn't get to say goodbye."

Joyah Flemister, 38, Pine Bluff, July 16. She worked at a Tyson Foods plant in Pine Bluff, but her grandmother said in an interview that she did not know if that was where Flemister contracted the virus.

Bessie Bennett said her granddaughter did not know she had covid-19 until she was admitted to a hospital July 11 for treatment of high blood sugar.

Bennett said Flemister's preexisting conditions, which included diabetes and hypertension, likely resulted in covid-19 taking a much harder toll on her body. The Jefferson County coroner's report listed the cause of death as cardiorespiratory arrest and covid-19, and said she died in the intensive care unit at Jefferson Regional Medical Center.

Bennett said her granddaughter's name -- Joyah -- fit her, because she was a joy to be around and was always giving away baked goods and helping take care of her friends' children as if they were her own.

She said her granddaughter was her "traveling buddy" for road trips to visit relatives in destinations such as Texas, Mississippi and Memphis. Together with Flemister's mother, who died in July 2019, they were known to friends and family as "the three amigos" because they were always together. They enjoyed shopping, going to the casino, and having dinners and get-togethers at Bennett's house.

"She really cared about people, and she always met people with a smile and would do anything she could to help them," Bennett said. "She was a big-hearted person."

An 86-year-old man, North Little Rock, July 22. A cost estimator in the construction industry, the widower and father of two counted among his hobbies coin collecting and building furniture for family and friends, according to his obituary.

He was a resident of Robinson Nursing & Rehabilitation Center in Little Rock. He went into hospice care July 20 with acute respiratory failure and covid-19, according to a coroner's report. His medical history included Alzheimer's and dementia.

Dr. Herman Ginger, 78, Pine Bluff, July 24. Though he started his working life as an engineer for the Boeing Co. in New Orleans, Ginger in 1968 began training to become an eye doctor at Southern College of Optometry in Memphis, according to his obituary. He opened his Pine Bluff office in 1972.

"In his spare time, Dr. Ginger loved to work on various projects in his shop, play musical instruments, sing and spend time with family," his obituary said.

The husband and father of one served as Jefferson County's District 6 Justice of the Peace until his death. County Judge Gerald Robinson told Quorum Court members that Ginger was hospitalized with covid-19 on July 9.

A coroner's report shows that he died of "cardiopulmonary arrest due to covid-19" at Jefferson Regional Medical Center.

Joshua Handley Jr., 41, Pine Bluff, July 27. When his funeral procession reached Fire Station No. 5 in Pine Bluff on Thursday, no fewer than 10 firefighters stood outside to salute. When the caravan turned onto Blake Street, a commercial area, it was greeted by a street-wide balloon release and cheers of: "We love you, Josh."

Handley died after a battle with covid-19, his sister Wendy Handley-Cail said. The funeral procession's route mirrored the Pine Bluff native's daily routine: he'd walk, nearly 10 miles some days, stopping at various businesses and the fire station to volunteer.

"Every -- and I mean every -- business on Blake Street had people out releasing balloons when the hearse was passing through," said Handley-Cail. "It was very powerful ... seeing the magnitude of people whose lives he touched."

Handley, who had a learning disability, lived with his father and loved his family but was dedicated to his service. He'd show up two hours before football games in the Watson Chapel School District, where he worked the first-down chains, his sister said.

"Anything that he did, he was devoted and loyal to it," Handley-Cail said. "He gave it 110% every time."

Handley's family doesn't know how he contracted covid-19. He was hospitalized for more than two weeks at Jefferson Regional Medical Center and was on a ventilator the entire time, his sister said.

A 42-year-old Helena-West Helena woman, July 31. An elementary schoolteacher, she was admitted to CHI St. Vincent Infirmiry in Little Rock on July 22 with "covid-19 positive pneumonia," according to a Pulaski County coroner's report.

Information for this article was contributed by Rachel Herzog, John Moritz, Ginny Monk and Kat Stromquist of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

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