

Wildwood Historical Society, Inc.



George F. Boyer Museum

(609) 523-0277

WildwoodHistoricalMuseum.com

3907 Pacific Avenue
Wildwood, NJ 08260

Gathering, preserving and presenting the Wildwoods' history

2025 Museum Hours

April 17-May 24: Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays 10 am to 3 pm

May 27-August 30: Mondays through Saturdays 10 am to 3 pm

Sept 4-Oct 12: Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays 10 am to 3 pm

Closed for the winter every year from November to March.

Issue 54. Winter/Spring 2025

In Memory of Al Brannen: Our Friend, Mentor, and Guiding Light

by Rob Ascough, Treasurer

Much has been said of the recent passing of Jack Morey, and rightfully so. Even if one never worked up the bravery to sample one of the many rides on one of his family's amusement piers, every resident and vacationer of The Wildwoods in recent decades had somehow been touched by his passion, vision, and — borrowing a word he liked to use to describe his father — *gumption*. All "Wildwoodians" hold something that can be traced back to him, whether it be a moonlit ride on the Giant Wheel, a family photo at the now-famous sign at the boardwalk terminus of Rio Grande Avenue, or simply interacting with him while he was spending time with his beloved Weimaraters or posing in an impromptu handstand.

Everyone has a place held near and dear to the heart, and if places outside of The Wildwoods had a champion like Jack Morey, most would be much better for it. We Wildwoodians were the lucky ones, because we had him.

However, the island lost another giant recently, and to assign titles to Al Brannen would mean making this article far too long for comfortable reading. If you knew Al, you know he was as multi-faceted as the glass inside a lighthouse; if you didn't, you're about to learn.

My first encounter with Al was documented in an article in this newsletter a while back, and it wasn't anything truly noteworthy. That's not to say it was good or bad, but simply not the moment when our paths were meant to cross. When my good friend Al Alven and I were researching and writing what would become *Images of America: Hunt's Pier at the George F. Boyer Museum*, there was a particular winter Saturday when unexpected snow started to fall. Bob Bright, Jr., who was assigned to let us into the building and keep us company (and presumably keep an eye on us with the assistance of his dog Zoey) became intimidated by the prospect of having to drive home with snow on the roads. To ensure our three hour commute wasn't for nothing, he summoned Al Brannen to the museum to allow us to continue our work. We did, though not for long, because it was obvious Al was

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Wildwood's Al Brannen Remembered for Humor, Love of Historical Society, Keeping Officials "On Our Toes"

By John Russo, Reprinted with Permission of The Press of Atlantic City

When Al Brannen would see children walk into the Wildwood Historical Society museum on Pacific Avenue, he'd guide them toward a giant bell that sat in the corner of one of the rooms.



Brannen would reach down and ring the bell, which had once hung in the belfry of the First United Methodist Church that later became the Quo Vadis Lounge. The kids would instantly light up.

On Sunday, the first thing society President Taylor Henry did was ring that same bell three times to signal it was time to remember their friend Al.

Brannen, a fixture in Wildwood for more than 60 years, from showing up to city commissioners' meetings to driving his classic cars all around the city, died July 25 after a sudden illness. He was 81.

The historical society held a celebration of life for Brannen. From open to close, it was filled with humor — one of Brannen's pastimes was a good dad joke, his children wrote in his obituary — as well as stories that showed how much he loved Wildwood. About 75 people crammed into the museum to laugh, cry and share stories of the things they loved about Brannen.

"This was fabulous. He would have loved it," said Al's wife of 58 years, Diane Brannen. "Last year, Al was 80, and I had a big birthday party for him because people would come like this to his funeral and say great things and he wouldn't hear them. So I said let's do it while he was here, and he loved it! And he would have loved this because he deserves it. He was a humanitarian."

In addition to his wife, he is survived by sons Thomas and Andrew, daughters-in-law Diane and Dian, and seven grandchildren: Lucas, Lila, Patrick, Samantha, Alexandra, Amanda and Mallory.

Nothing brought him more pleasure than spending time with his family, especially a good road trip. His favorite pastime was to pack everyone into the family car. One year, he

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Al Brannen Obituary

April 18, 1943-July 25, 2024

Alexander J. Brannen, born in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia, PA and a resident of Wildwood, NJ for the last 60 years, passed away on July 25, 2024 at the age of 81. He proudly served in the United States Coast Guard and had a distinguished career in various sales positions for over 50 years. Al was also a Commissioner for the City of Wildwood from 2009 to 2011 and he and his wife owned and operated several motels in Wildwood until the early 2000's. He is survived by his loving wife of 58 years, Diane; his sons, Thomas and Andrew; his daughters-in-law, Diane and Dian; his cherished grandchildren, Lucas, Lila, Patrick, Samantha, Alexandra, Amanda, and Mallory; and his dog Lucy.

Al was a dedicated volunteer in numerous community organizations and especially treasured the time he spent with the Wildwood Historical Society. He was also an avid collector and classic car enthusiast, often spending time at his beloved garage, where he proudly displayed the collectibles he had acquired over the years. Al's dedication, passion, and humor will be deeply missed by all who knew him. He loved to share a good dad joke, orchestrate a prank, tell a story about his childhood, and show home

videos of himself skydiving, driving at the Richard Petty experience, and flying in a B-24 bomber.

While he had many hobbies and interests, nothing brought him more pleasure than spending time with his family, especially a good road trip. His favorite pastime was to pack everyone into the family car (usually a station wagon), with no definite destination or schedule, and create an adventure with unforgettable memories. Suffice it to say that he preferred a Rand McNally Road Atlas to a GPS, a single lane road to an Interstate, and a duffel bag to a suitcase.

And finally, although Al was not born in Wildwood, make no mistake that he had Wildwood in his DNA. As much as he loved to travel, he was most happy relaxing on his porch on a breezy summer evening, spending time at the Wildwood museum, attending an event at the Convention Center, or giving his always anticipated comments at a Commissioner's meeting.

Donations in Al's memory can be made to the Wildwood Historical Society, 3907 Pacific Avenue, Wildwood, NJ 08260. A Celebration of Life gathering will be held at a later date.

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engulfed by a restlessness making it clear the last thing he wanted to do on a Saturday afternoon was babysit the two of us. It didn't take us long to stop, pack up for the day, and relieve him of his duty.

Having joined the Wildwood Historical Society's Board of Directors years later, I was granted many opportunities to interact with Al, and I quickly became captivated by his stories, energy, and love for The Wildwoods. His opinions weren't always popular with everyone, but he genuinely wanted what was best for the island, whether it be something simple like wanting funding for flowers in the median of Route 47, or a strong plan for the revitalization of Pacific Avenue. It was clear Al never approached anything with less than full force. This was evident in all of the loves of his life — his family, his friends, and the museum, which he treated as a combination of the two. To give selflessly to the museum was to find one's way into Al's enormous heart, and a tour of his private collection of passions in a nondescript Wildwood warehouse was to understand having made a positive impression on him. It was his way of showing a brand of friendship very specific to him.

Over the years, I constructed a collection of fond memories of the man. He told tales of his days in the Coast Guard, as a motel proprietor, a short stint in city government, and longtime caretaker of history through his involvement with the museum — he loved boasting of how, when the collection was moved from City Hall to its current location on Pacific Avenue, he organized hundreds of people to form a line across the city from one building to the other, so everything could be handed off to the next person, because Al was the kind of guy who knew hundreds of people who would agree to that sort of thing when he made his calls. He hosted fantastic holiday parties and recounted how he and his amazing wife Diane didn't have to pack away one single plate in the kitchen cabinets when their house was relocated down the street on rollers. He'd reach out to me when something regarding the museum was on his mind — always starting with his own firm convictions before settling down and providing the space in which I was able to say what I had to say — Al could never be accused of not listening and considering other's thoughts and feelings. When I helped him hang

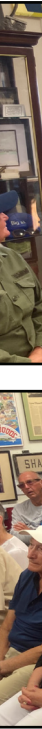
signs on the fence in the museum parking lot, he insisted that the screws all be turned to a perfectly horizontal position. Because, why not?

In a conversation with someone about Al a few years back, I was told that he had mellowed over time, but I struggled to validate that viewpoint because while there was a grandfatherly soft-spoken-ness in his words, there was also a fire that still burned deep within. It was not too long ago that, while spending time at the museum, Al called me outside for one of his many tasks — he wanted to relocate the boardwalk planks used to make museum souvenirs from one area behind the building to another. Because, why not? I masked my enthusiasm for the work — it was a warm, sunny day, so why wouldn't I want to forego pizza on the boardwalk so I could instead get dirty and sweaty? However, it gave me an hour with Al to talk about whatever was on our minds, and that was always a good thing. In fact, it was an even better thing that day, because it ended up being the last memory we created together. Soon after, I was heartbroken by news of his illness, just like everyone else. It took everyone by surprise.

A few years back, Al stepped down from the historical society's Board of Directors for the final time, affirming comfort in knowing it was in good hands and that he didn't need to be involved as he once was. Of course, this hands-off mindset lasted all of a few hours and the next day he was back to doing everything he used to do, albeit in a much less official capacity. Even Al couldn't buy into the fact that he had mellowed — it wasn't in his nature. His idea of "taking it easy with small jobs" was to recondition a portion of the bar rescued from The Shamrock, which involved cleaning it of years of spilled beer, fabricating a new wooden base, and affixing wheels so it could be easily rolled around. Because, why not?

As we all take this opportunity to reflect on our interactions, encounters, and experiences with Al Brannen, let us remember never to mellow, because the things we believe in the most are the things that most make us who we are. Al showed us that we are best when we treat our loved ones well, remain unwavering in our convictions, and make sure the screws are always turned perfectly horizontal.

Because, why not?





Last Chance: Wildwood History Calendar Sale

Don't miss out on this incredible opportunity to own a piece of Wildwood's history! Our 2025 Wildwood History Calendar is now on sale for just \$9.99!

This stunning calendar features beautiful images and fascinating facts about Wildwood's rich history. It's the perfect way to stay organized and inspired throughout the year, and it makes a great gift for friends and family who love Wildwood as much as you do!

We're down to our last few calendars, so don't wait to order! This is your last chance to get your hands on this amazing keepsake. Order now and get ready to make some unforgettable memories in 2025! Get your calendar today!

The calendar is available online at: <https://www.wildwoodhistoricalmuseum.com/product-page/the-official-2025-wildwood-historical-society-calendar>

Happy New Year from all of us at the Wildwood Historical Society!



Wildwood's Al Brannen Remembered for Humor, Love of Historical Society, Keeping Officials "On Our Toes"

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took all seven grandkids by himself to Walt Disney World in Florida.

For someone who was punctual, he loved spontaneity, said his youngest son, Andrew.

Alexander Brannen was born April 18, 1943, in Philadelphia but lived in Wildwood for 60 years.

Brannen served in the U.S. Coast Guard, served as a Wildwood city commissioner from 2009 to 2011, and along with Diane, owned and operated several motels in the city. He was a member of the Wildwood Historical Society and served as its president on and off dating to the late 1970s. His last term ended in 2019, when Henry took over.

"Even when he wasn't commissioner or president of the historical society, he was still present at both things, at City (Commission) meetings, here as a board member," Henry said. "He was very driven in what he wanted to accomplish."

Brannen was known for his classic car collection, an interest he shared with Henry. The two would often wind up at the same classic auto shows — she owned an El Camino, and he loved to show off his 1934 Ford Cabriolet.

Brannen also had a military Jeep collection, society Treasurer Rob Ascough said. And it was an incident that happened this past Memorial Day that had the whole town talking.

"He was driving around the town with one of his Jeeps, and someone called the police about someone driving around town with an Army Jeep with artillery on the top of it," Ascough said. "Police pulled him over somewhere on Pacific Avenue. He explained what he was doing, that the machine gun was fake. And they said, 'Just please stop driving your Jeep around town.'"

But what Brannen loved the most after his family was Wildwood, and it showed in the countless hours he spent at the historical society. It was in his DNA, his family said.

Brannen pretty much saved the society, Henry said. The society used to be in a small room at City Hall.

"Around 1990, the collection had grown so much that he found this building that had been boarded up for a couple years," Henry said.

In one half of the building was a stereo store, and the other was a funeral home. It was foreclosed, and no one wanted anything to do with the building, said society member Catina Blineberry. The city wound up buying the building, and Brannen suggested moving the museum here.

"When Al took over the building, the embalming stuff was still in the back, and nobody wanted to touch it. And Al had to get rid of it all by himself," Blineberry said.

Those hands-on projects were Brannen's specialty, even when he retired from the society in 2019, Ascough said. Brannen would refurbish a bar from a closed-down pub and call it "a light project." About a week before he died, Brannen asked Ascough if he'd help him with a task that required moving old Boardwalk planks from one area behind the building to another.

"It wasn't difficult to mask my enthusiasm for the work because it was a warm sunny day, so why wouldn't I want to forgo pizza on the Boardwalk so I could instead get dirty and sweaty moving old pieces of Boardwalk around," Ascough said. "However, it gave me and Al an hour to talk about whatever was on our minds, and that was always a good thing. And on that day, it ended up being an even better thing because it was the last memory we created together."

That love for Wildwood also found its way to City Hall, where Brannen made his presence known.

Every spring, Brannen let it be known that the iconic beach balls around Wildwood, especially in front of its marquee along the Boardwalk, needed a fresh coat of paint. That was just one of many issues he'd bring to the commissioners simply because he loved this city so much.

On Sunday, Mayor Ernie Troiano Jr. and Commissioner Krista McConnell sat behind the table at the front of the room, as if it were a commissioners' meeting, and a few members of Sunday's celebration voiced their concerns about free parking and other city issues as a way to honor Brannen.

"It's certainly not going to be the same," Troiano said. "Damn, I'm going to miss that complaining. But it was a good complaining because it kept us on our toes, and it made the city better. We're all better people for having known Al."



The Wildwood Historical Society community thanks Al Brannen for his service!



Our Team

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 Cathy Nesbitt Smith, Buck
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In Memoriam: Bob Scully, Bob
 Bright, Al Brannen

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Membership

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Visit wildwoodhistoricalmuseum.com to renew your membership, view past newsletters, buy items from our gift shop, donate a vehicle, or get a taste of Wildwoods history!

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