

Room At WPCCC Will Help Retain 'Ervin Heritage'

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MORGANTON — When former U.S. Sen. Sam Ervin died in 1985 at the age of 88, a chapter in American politics came to an end.

Ervin, or "Senator Sam" as he was known, served in the Senate for more than 20 years, from 1954 to 1975, and was known as a feisty, dedicated defender of the American Constitution.

This was never more apparent than during the 1973 Watergate hearings when Ervin chaired the Senate committee investigating the scandal. During these hearings, Ervin became a national hero of sorts for his bold but eloquent lectures on the sanctity of the Constitution and his outrage over those he felt had betrayed its principles.

Now, almost five years after his death, Western Piedmont Community College plans to open a memorial room this summer commemorating the late senator's life and career.

The effort to preserve the Ervin legacy began as early as 1987 when Morganton Judge Claude Sitton, along with attorneys Thomas Starnes and Graham DeVane, spearheaded an effort to preserve Ervin's Morganton home.

The original goal of the group, Sitton said, was to convert the home into a

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Sen. Sam Ervin Works At His Office Desk In This 1982 Photo

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museum about Ervin's life and career. However, two years later, after much difficulty in raising the financial support needed to preserve the home, the group, upon the request of officials at Western Piedmont Community College, decided instead to accept a plan to move the late senator's home library to facilities on the WPCCC campus.

The mutual goal of the college and the group, however, was not only to preserve the library collection, but to preserve the "Ervin heritage," Sitton said.

To this end, the college and the group agreed to set aside a room in the college's media center, located in the new Philfer Learning Resources Center, for a reproduction of Ervin's home office where the library was housed. Within this room, project workers and consultants would attempt to duplicate as closely as possible all the detail of the original office.

According to Grady Pitts, dean of development at WPCCC, the new learning center was in the initial construction stages when the proposal was made, allowing time to include the space in the overall structure of the building.

Afterward, Pitts said, an agreement was reached with Ervin's children — Sam Ervin III, Laura Smith, and Leslie Hansler — to give the entire collection, along with the furniture and memorabilia from the original office, to the college. The family also pledged to assist in the creation of an endowment for the perpetual maintenance of the library and for educational programs related to the library.

According to Winston Lear, dean of learning resources at WPCCC, the li-

brary will contain more than 7,500 volumes. Though much of the collection deals with political and legal literature such as judicial decisions, law journals, and public papers of recent presidents, both Pitts and Lear pointed out that the collection also contains many works in the areas of theology, history and literature.

Pitts was most impressed with the senator's Southern historical collection, which he described as one of the best in the state. The library also includes an extensive collection of writings and speeches from many diverse public figures ranging from Dick Gregory to Henry Kissinger.

Although the library will be a memorial to Ervin, it will not, in the words of Pitts, be a "dead space." The room, he said, will be treated as a rare book room where, under tight restrictions, visitors will be able to do research.

Besides an extensive library collection, the room will also feature all of the actual furniture and mementos from the original office at the time of the senator's death. Each item, Pitts said, will be displayed in its original position.

"When you see it set back up here," he said, "everything's going to be back in the same place as Ervin would have used it."

Among the interesting items that will be displayed in the room is the gavel Ervin used during the Watergate hearings, a statue of Justice, and a gift given to Ervin and his wife commemorating their 50th wedding anniversary.

Lear noted that the 150-year-old desk from Ervin's Senate office will also be displayed just outside the room.

Eventually, Pitts said, the college hopes to create a reception area adjacent to the room where documentary videos on the senator's life and Ameri-

can history in general could be shown. The college is also trying to work out an arrangement to acquire copies of Ervin's personal written record of the Watergate era, which the family had previously donated to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

He said a long-term goal of the project is to "make this a repository for (Ervin's) career in Congress," as well as a forum for discussing American history, the Constitution and Watergate.

For now, Pitts said, the "biggest task is to get a handle on what we have."

Besides the difficulty in sorting through and arranging all of the items in the collection, the room itself offers some interesting challenges.

According to George Curtis, carpenter for WPCCC, the 18-by-30 foot room will feature all of the architectural detail of the original room, including a walnut parquet floor, cherry wood paneling and fir shelving. Curtis said that locating the necessary materials for the room's interior, as well as matching the molding and stain of the original shelving, proved to be difficult.

With most of the room's interior construction completed, items are now being moved into the room for display.

College officials hope to open the room by early or mid-summer. At that time, the dream of Claude Sitton, Thomas Starnes and Graham Devane to honor the late Sam Ervin Jr. will be realized.

"This will be a great benefit to all and give an opportunity for all to see the original room and to do research as well," Sitton said. "We're just delighted."