

## **JAMES ELMER AKINS**

**October 15, 1926 - July 15, 2010**

Jim was born in Akron, Ohio. The son of a tenant farmer from Georgia who migrated to become a rubber plant worker, he was raised a Quaker. Although he did not always define himself as a pacifist in the way that most Friends do, his life was spent constructing policy and advising on solutions to some of the world's most serious and complex conflicts. This included sometimes living near harm's way, and putting his reputation on the line in some very public ways. Jim's life illustrates how seeking peace means diligent study, daily courage and constant commitment to nurturing relationships.

He attended the University of Akron, leaving to serve in the Navy for two years in World War II, and graduated with a major in physics in 1947. Of his World War II service, Jim much later said to a Friend who had also served in the military then, "I don't regret that for a minute. Hitler's forces had to be stopped." But Jim was also deeply respectful of Friends' efforts to seek solutions to conflict and to prevent war and suffering, including a presence in the Middle East going back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Combining his scientific abilities with his gifts for language and communication, he took on a deeply committed, active role throughout his life in this concern.

After the war, Jim worked on international relief projects in Europe, including with the American Friends Service Committee. His diplomatic skills began serving him well then, including, by his telling, on the transatlantic ocean voyage where, largely surrounded by male aid workers, he successfully courted "the beautiful woman," Marjorie "Marney" Abbott, who became his wife. They were married in May of 1954.

Jim, wife Marney, and children Mary Beth and Tom joined Friends Meeting of Washington in March of 1966 by transferring from the Meeting at Brummana Friends School in Lebanon. At that point they had been serving in the Middle East for nine years. While in Washington, he served on the Ministry and Worship Committee.

Early in his career, Jim taught physics and chemistry at the American Community School in Lebanon from 1951-52. He joined the Foreign Service in 1954 and served for more than 30 years, working in Italy, France, Syria, Lebanon, Kuwait and then Iraq from 1963 through 1965. 1963 saw a revolution in Iraq, and the Akins talked about living through the bombing.

Jim was appointed to the State Department's top energy post in 1968. A New York Times article, in addition to pointing out how prescient his predictions on the shocking rise of oil costs had been, pointed him out as a radical: in concert with his belief that Americans must use less oil, this highly-placed State Department official was actually walking to work.

He was then appointed as the U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia in September, 1973, just in time to arrive during the October 1973 war and to serve during the first Oil Crisis of October, 1973 - March, 1974. He held this post until February, 1976. Jim found that his career with the state department had come to end one day, while, back visiting in the United States, he got a call from a friend who had spotted the fact in the newspaper. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had recently authored an article under a pseudonym

in Harper's Magazine, entitled "Seizing Arab Oil," advocating a U.S. takeover of Middle Eastern oil fields. Unaware that the author was his boss, Jim told a TV audience that whoever had written that article had to be a "madman." This had not been taken kindly.

Jim moved on to a successful career in consulting on energy issues, and was now more able to speak freely at conferences and in the media about Middle East concerns. He was not shy about describing how the United States had mishandled affairs in the area, acting out of its fears of communism or its craving for oil, destroying its own chances to gain respect. He was able to use his knowledge to offer a different vision: that cultures that had learned to survive in the area over thousands of years before "modern" western involvement should be allowed to put these skills to work, and that, by giving time and by culturing positive experiences, there could be mutual sharing and growth between Middle East and western culture.

Friends visiting the Akins home at the end of Garfield Terrace, NW were greeted by an abundance of roses across the front yard. The area behind the house was its own world, framed by great trees, in which acanthus, fig trees and flowers bloomed. All of this was referred to as "Jim's gardens." Inside were artistic and cultural artifacts from the Middle East, many of which had been dug out of the desert by Jim and Marney. These were sources of conversations that highlighted Jim and Marney's shared love of the area's less well-known cultural and personal values, and offered a view into what was at the heart of Jim's public messages. Much of this collection is now held by Jim's alma mater, the University of Akron.

Jim had said, "When the day comes that I can no longer carry my own bags, I'll retire." He followed through on that only with some urging by Marney, though, and their move to the Collington retirement community outside Washington may have been harder for Jim than any of the others.

At Jim's memorial, former embassy staffers recalled that he clearly wanted them to "walk around" and get to know people well in the community rather than just sit at their desks. They spoke about how much they had gained from the opportunity of working for him.

Jim's life challenges us still to ask, "What makes a pacifist?" He always didn't follow the prescriptions that many Friends expect, but he worked ceaselessly for greater understanding amidst controversy all of his life. The question, "What makes a true public servant?" is still one very much worth asking, and Jim provides the example of someone who understood this. In consulting with his conscience, he chose between merely maintaining a public image and staying true to his convictions. He was gracious about challenging all Friends to stay true to theirs.