

Ernie Hamilton - Founder, Shelby Systems, Inc.

By Ron Chandler

As a pioneer in the field of church management software, Ernie Hamilton developed a strong background in fund accounting while establishing the data processing center at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas in the 1970's. In 1976 Ernie Hamilton left the Seminary to begin Shelby Systems. The company has become one of the lasting and most respected companies providing software to churches, parishes, denominational headquarters, independent ministries, as well as religious and secular development organizations.



Shelby Systems actually fulfilled a dream of Ernie's, as he envisioned giving the same kind of management capability to churches that businesses enjoyed. Seeing the computer as a new tool for enhanced ministry, he designed computer software for more efficient and more accurate financial and data operations. Member and prospect tracking became more than simply

contributions and Sunday School records. With the knowledge of the abilities and needs of their participants, organizations could now more readily define and refine their ministering activities through the use of Shelby programs. Further, knowing that these non-profit organizations needed specific kinds of financial record keeping, Ernie developed software modules based on fund accounting principles, and saw the product become one of

the most respected in this very specialized market.

Although Ernie Hamilton died in a private plane accident in November of 1998, Shelby Systems continues to carry out his dream. Shelby software helps to support churches and ministries as they touch the lives of millions of people worldwide.

To say Ernie Hamilton was a hard worker is definitely an understatement. Whatever he did, he did with great passion. Yet, like Solomon, the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes, Ernie knew that life was meaningless without God. Ernie Hamilton not only was a pioneer in the church information management industry, he also touched the lives of everyone in his family, those who called him a friend, those who worked with and for him, and others whose lives he touched in unique ways. He left a huge legacy in the field of church information management, but his other legacy of loving and caring for people is just as large. Ernie spread his passion for life to all those around him all in the name of ministry and Jesus.

Young and old alike who knew Ernie have made statements such as:

"He was one of my heroes. I told him that when

I grow up I want to be just like him”, to which Ernie would respond, “God wants you to be more than that”.

“When I think of multiplying ministry - approaching all things with a large perspective to impact the largest possible audience - Ernie was a model.”

“Ernie was an affirmer and mentor. He supported people in ways known to few.”

One local Memphis church tells the story of Ernie working side by side into the night with their staff to get their old system 34 up and running. Local seminary students were always a target of Ernie’s generosity. He loved offering them the opportunity to work at Shelby during their seminary years, enabling them to go on to perform full-time ministry after graduation. Several pastors and church staff members through the years have come to Shelby suffering from ministry burnout and congregational abuse. They have been rehabilitated while contributing to Shelby’s support to ministry and then gone back to full time ministry.

During Ernie Hamilton’s life, Shelby Systems became a hospice for families and individuals with terminal diseases. When more than one employee experienced life-threatening diseases, and in some cases, life-ending battles with disease, Shelby Systems’ support made a huge impact on their lives. Many current employees and families can tell you of deeds of kindness Ernie Hamilton did for them and their families, known only to them.

Ernie had the gift of grace. It was a special gift that he possessed and tried to invest in all that his life touched. He loved aviation and was himself a pilot, once donating a van to a small airport. His wishes were that the proceeds from the rental of that van go to maintain a small plane and to help young people with an interest in aviation.

After Ernie’s untimely death, other young people contacted the family to say that Ernie helped them through a difficult time, helped them get their self-esteem back, and even paid their college tuition for a few semesters to get them back on track. Others said that they are successful in their lives and vocations today because of the investment Ernie made in their lives. Ernie and his wife, Mary Ann, have helped many others with places to live, personal loans, vehicles to drive, places to vacation, untold meals and recreation, all the while doing it quietly and privately “as unto the Lord.” He was known to say, “Don’t worry about material things. They fade away or can be replaced. People are the most important thing in

What Others Said About Ernie Hamilton

by Steve Hewitt.

Nick Nicholaou, President of Ministry Business Services shared, “Ernie was one of God’s guiding lights to many of us who serve Christian churches and ministries. He always had his eye on the big picture and helped to elevate my perspective a number of times.”

Pat Faudree worked at Shelby for many years and served as the companies historian. When I asked her about Ernie, she stated, “Let’s say you’re interested in how computers and churches became connected. And you said ‘just draw me a picture of how this came about.’ Your best bet would be to somehow get graphic representation of the workings in the brain of Ernie Hamilton. An acknowledged pioneer in making the computer a realistic tool for churches as early as 1975, he oozed confidence in what could be accomplished AND in how he could help that typical church secretary decide she really could write a letter and track attendance with nary a typewriter.

Following what he believed to be God’s calling him to be a pastor, Ernie helped to set up the computer and accounting system at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. The long nights laboring over the kinks and quirks of primitive programming helped him visualize what was on the horizon. He could see the obvious benefits to administering the myriad aspects of this major campus. Think of how the Lord’s work could be furthered if the local pastor had such a tool that would ease the administrating and free him to minister.”

Dan Bishop who served Shelby and Ernie for many years shared, “What struck me about Ernie was his faithfulness to his family, his employees (who he treated like family) and the Lord.

He never grew weary of helping people, especially those in ministry who struggled with tough times. Very few ever knew of Ernie’s hard times. He was never focused on himself – always on helping others. Ernie Hamilton’s legacy is people, who became successful because he helped them grab their own bootstraps and he lifted right along with them. Many are in ministry today, because Ernie encouraged and helped in tangible and spiritual ways.”

life.”

Ernie invested his spirit in Shelby Systems. He made statements such as: “All employees are family. Do your best. Approach your work in a Christ-like manner. Your work is a ministry to the Lord.” These were common statements heard around Shelby Systems every day. It’s no wonder that Shelby Systems has grown from his bedroom to a multi-million dollar ministry business supporting the stewardship investments of thousands of ministry customers. Prayer was his conduit for guidance in doing business and helping others. Even today, Ernie’s legacy continues to impact thousands of lives. His strong belief in Christ, family, people, the church, and helping churches and organizations do ministry through technology has and continues to be a dream of Ernie Hamilton, a pioneer in the field of church information management and technology.

Frank Canady, the present President and CEO of Shelby shared, “Ernie and I working together far more than 40 hours a week. He loved coding on the IBM mid-range hardware that he knew best. He also loved selling and training. He even survived a typhoon while training a customer in Guam. We did a lot of software in the early days for manufacturing, rental, farms, etc. to pay the bills while developing our first package for churches. We survived a lot of very lean days early on to make it to where we are today. He always tried to develop a solution when asked by a customer or prospect but was also known to ask why you would want to do that if it didn’t relate to a broader audience. He was the best man in my first marriage, pall-bearer when she died and best man when I re-married. He was my closest friend.”

11:10 AM

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11:12 AM

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