

CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND LOVE OF
Harry M. Sparks Jr.

September 28, 1940 - November 18, 2025





So much has been written about the colorful, creative, and remarkable life of Harry M. Sparks Jr. that you could fill a book with his accomplishments. Nearly everyone who knew him has a favorite Harry story — the kind that sounds unbelievable until you remember who you're talking about. And the thing about Harry's stories is: they're all true.

Harry radiated warmth. He was friendly, thoughtful, and disarmingly funny — the kind of man who made people feel instantly at ease. His humor, his storytelling, and his deep comfort in his own skin turned simple conversations into memorable exchanges. He didn't judge. He simply welcomed.

Born on September 28, 1940, to Dr. Harry M. Sparks and Lois Stiles Sparks, Harry grew up with his younger siblings, Phillip and Susan, in a family where education, curiosity, and responsibility were core values. Expectations were high — and Harry met or exceeded them all his life.

His childhood was, in his words, "idyllic." He hunted and fished with his father, forged lifelong friendships in the 4th grade over a game of marbles, delivered newspapers, and worked at the local Dairy Queen, where "all you can eat" wasn't just a suggestion — it was a challenge.

Harry's early passions — art, math, engineering — converged into a calling. After high school, he attended Murray State University, where art teacher Clara Eagle delivered life-changing advice: "You are an architect. Leave Murray. Step out from under the shadow of your parents." He listened.

He transferred to the University of Cincinnati's DAAP co-op program, joined Pi Kappa Alpha, worked at engineering and architectural firms, and played bluegrass with fellow students, including an 11-year run with the Rabbit Hash Ramblers.

Harry was also a gifted luthier. Drawing on his understanding of engineering, he had an instinct for intonation and form that great musicians came to rely on. He opened The Old Time Music Company, more than just a store or a repair shop, it was a gathering place for musicians. Over the years, he repaired instruments for countless players, including John Denver, Vince Gill, and Sam Bush.

At a fraternity party, Harry met nursing student Cris Siler. They married in 1963. Harry's senior thesis — an architectural design for the Louisville School for the Blind — helped shape national thinking about accessible architecture.



He later testified before Congress in support of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which incorporated several of his ideas.

Harry and Cris welcomed their daughter, Jill, in 1966 and their son, Hal, in 1969. The family lived in West Virginia, Georgetown, and Peaks Mill, Kentucky. Harry restored historical structures, instilled in his kids the drive and work ethic he had always practiced, and continued rising in his profession.



While working for the University of Louisville, Harry set up a repair shop in the basement of Harry Bickel's house that everyone had dubbed "The Bluegrass Hotel", where he met 18-year-old Vince Gill. As with many people that Harry would casually meet, they became lifelong friends. Years later, Vince surprised him by inviting him onstage at the Ryman Auditorium — thrilling and terrifying Harry in equal measure. He rose to the occasion and it became one of his fondest memories.

After he and Cris divorced in 1981, Harry moved to West Palm Beach, Florida, diving back into fishing and sailboat racing. He worked on projects for EPCOT and the U.S. Air Force in the Azores. Jill and Hal spent summers with him, sailing, swimming in the ocean and deep-sea fishing — memories that became some of their most cherished.



Harry also had a long-standing passion for antique weapons and muzzleloader competitions. At Friendship, Indiana, home of the National Muzzle Loading Rifle Association, he competed tirelessly — often dressed in buckskins, camping in a tepee, throwing tomahawks, and collecting medals. He and Hal shared many of these adventures together.

When 14 year-old Hal wanted to live with his dad, Harry moved to Chicago so Hal could attend New Trier High School, one of the country's top public schools. This move changed Hal's life — and speaks volumes about Harry's priorities.

In Cincinnati, Harry crossed paths again with Carol Burke, whom he'd first met years earlier in Florida. Carol saw in Harry someone open-hearted, curious, and endlessly creative. Love took root, and they married in 1992.



Harry thrived at Federated Department Stores, contributing to major projects including the Bloomingdale's build at the Mall of America. In 1997, ready for a new chapter, he launched his own firm: Architectural Group International (AGI). Under his leadership, AGI took on a wide variety of projects for Home Depot, Macy's, Bloomingdale's, and even the Tropicana in Las Vegas. One personal favorite was his restoration of the Rabbit Hash General Store.

Harry and Carol later moved to Ryland Lakes Country Club, where friendships flourished, trap shooting events were revived, and their beautifully trained hunting dogs became familiar companions.

When Harry envisioned a house on a particular hillside, it soon became real: an earth-sheltered, passive solar, geothermal home overlooking Mirror Lake — filled with art, stories, and warmth.

Harry faced kidney disease — an inherited condition — with dignity. He and Carol managed home dialysis for 5½ years. When his illness took away his ability to live his life fully, Harry chose his own path with grace.

Harry passed away on November 18, 2025, lovingly surrounded by Carol and Hal.

Harry M. Sparks Jr. led a rich, full, extraordinary life — one worth remembering in long stories, shared laughter, and, fittingly, with a glass of good bourbon raised in his honor.

