

Robby Collins: Saving Jacksonville and the World
By Dennis Powers

Born in 1921 in Riverside, California, Robertson “Robby” Collins grew up in California and later graduated from Stanford University. After serving in the Army Air Corps in World War II, he moved to the Rogue Valley in 1948, where he was very successful in the lumber business. Moving to Jacksonville in 1962, he mounted a successful opposition to a proposed four-lane highway that would have connected Interstate 5 with the Applegate, destroyed or removed eleven historic homes and buildings, and cut Jacksonville in half.

Robby went on to bring about the restoration of various historic structures in Jacksonville and protected them with historic preservation easements. This use creates the right of the designated organization to approve--or disapprove--any changes to the property and ensure that a proposal protects the structure’s historic nature. In learning the ins-and-outs of restoring the town and its buildings, he became a heritage preservation specialist.

This culminated in a large swatch of Jacksonville in 1966 being designated a National Historic Landmark. The Landmark District is approximately 326 acres in size and includes 688 structures; this boundary is not the same as the city limits, nor is it the “historic core” area. More than 100 individual buildings are specifically listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Collins served on numerous boards, including the Southern Oregon Historical Society and the Historic Preservation League of Oregon, as well as being the past president of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. No matter how busy he was as a businessman, however, he traveled all over America and Alaska, sharing his experiences with other small towns that were struggling to save their heritage. He worked at the local and state preservation levels, eventually becoming a trustee and later vice-chairman of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

He received the University of Oregon’s Distinguished Service Award in 1980 for his role in Jacksonville’s preservation; three years later he was awarded the Distinguished Preservationist Award by the governor. When he saw his retirement coming, Collins began accepting overseas projects where he could use his Jacksonville and small-town experiences to assist third-world countries in their attempts to save their historic sites.

In 1984, he retired at age 63 from his lumber business and devoted full time to the international front. With these responsibilities, he later moved to Singapore for the rest of his life, from where he was a teacher and consultant on historic preservation from Singapore, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal to Thailand, Fiji, the Philippines, China, and other countries. Robby became the Chairman of the Cultural Tourism Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (“ICOMOS”), an august group dedicated to these purposes.

To share his expertise, Collins joined numerous travel-industry task forces (teams of hotel experts, bus, and airport operators) as the “heritage specialist” to help others assess and protect their heritage. He assisted the people in Macao (the land seaport accessed from Hong Kong) in developing a “heritage tourist package” that included their old Portuguese buildings and churches, not just the gambling casinos. In Cairns, Australia, he pointed the residents to preserving an old railroad, coffee plantation, and old Queensland houses built by settlers a century before. Collins created plans to preserve sites such as Cambodia’s famous Angkor Wat.

His commitment, energy, and enthusiasm for historical preservation around the world were legendary. Robby Collins died on May 23, 2003, in Singapore at age 81 from dengue fever.

Sources: *The Christian Science Monitor*, “Delhi, Macao...Retiree travels globe to help restore heritage sites,” at [International Commitment](#); “Robertson E. Collins,” May 28, 2003, *Mail Tribune Online Edition*, [Background](#). See also: “Jacksonville Historic District” at [National Park Service Data](#).