

Louis W. Thornton

ATSSB Hall of Fame Posthumous Inductee, 2023

Louis W. Thornton was born March 23, 1946, in San Angelo, Texas, to Ward and Emogene Thornton. He spent his childhood participating in Boy Scouts and 4-H. Within scouts, he advanced to the rank of Eagle Scout, and he was a member of the Order of the Arrow. In 4-H, he raised and showed lambs. At age 10 he was the youngest exhibitor ever to show the grand champion in both the youth and the open class categories in Denver, Colorado. He was also active in his church youth group serving as president of the teen council for three years.

He attended elementary and junior high school in Rankin, Texas, where he began his love of music. He joined the band in seventh grade and learned to play both alto and tenor saxophones. In 1964, he graduated from McCamey High School in McCamey, Texas.

Upon graduation, Louis attended Sul Ross State College in Alpine, Texas, where he earned his Bachelor of Music Education degree in 1968.

Louis was known to be a jack-of-all-trades. Many of his talents were a result of the skills he acquired during his varied work experiences in high school and college. He worked for the Texas Department of Transportation, for the Railway Express Agency and for Mobil Oil. He apprenticed as an electrician and as a TV repairman. He was a dispatcher for the Brewster County Civil Defense. He even worked as a ranch hand.

Beyond these work experiences, Louis was a man of faith. He was active in the bus ministry at Bronte Church of Christ. He was a deacon at Jacksboro where he worked in the bus ministry and served as a Sunday School teacher. In Abilene, he worked with the teens at Southern Hills where he also served as a deacon over the sound ministry. In his retirement, he worked with the Loaves and Fishes Ministry at Hillcrest Church of Christ in Abilene.

In every community in which Louis lived, he fulfilled his civic responsibilities. In Bronte, he was on the city council, he was chief of the volunteer fire department, and he was Bicentennial Chairman. In 1977, because of his service to the community of Bronte, he received a Good Citizen Award from KRUN Radio in Ballinger. In Jacksboro, he was on the Sesquicentennial Committee, he was VP of the chamber of commerce, and he was selected as Jacksboro's Citizen of the Year in 1986. At Abilene Christian Schools, he was selected outstanding teacher of the year in 2001, and was given the John and June Estes award for outstanding support and dedication to the school. He was inducted into the Wylie Hall of Honor in 2009.

Louis began his teaching career in Bronte in 1968. It was here he met his wife, Lynda. To this union were born two children: Melody Lyn and Michael Louis. In 1978, he accepted the head director position in Jacksboro, where he taught for nine years. In 1987, he accepted the head director position at Wylie ISD in Abilene. After eleven years at Wylie, Louis retired from full-time public-school teaching. In 1998, he accepted the band director position at a private institution, Abilene Christian Schools, in Abilene. Health issues forced him to permanently retire



from teaching in 2001.

Louis was a member of the Texas Music Educators Association for 41 years; TMEA/UIIL Region 2 Music Division President for six years; TMEA/UIIL Region 2 Band Chairman for twelve years; TMEA State Board Member for twelve years, and he was a founding member of ATSSB. He was also a member of the Texas Association of Private and Parochial Schools for four years, and he was State Band Chairman for one year. He was a member of Phi Beta Mu for 15 years, and a member of Texas Music Adjudicator's Association for 21 years. He was a certified judge for marching and concert/sight-reading competitions.

Over the course of his career, Louis built strong, competitive bands. In 1972, for the first time in school history, the Bronte band won sweepstakes. In 1985, for the first time, Jacksboro qualified for the State Marching Contest. In 1994, Wylie qualified for the State Marching Contest for the first time. Additionally, the Wylie band won sweepstakes ten of the eleven years Louis was the head director. During his time at Wylie, the program grew from 45 students to over 160 where approximately one-fourth of the student body was in band.

Louis spent his entire life either attending or working for small schools. He was convinced that the quality of a band program did not depend on the size of the band or the school district, but on the desire to win and the dedicated effort it took to make it happen. He believed quality came in all sizes. In addition, he believed small school programs needed an organization that believed in and supported the unique interests of small schools across the state of Texas. Therefore, he worked tirelessly to help develop and organize what is now the Association of Texas Small School Bands (ATSSB). The first meeting was held in his band hall at Wylie High School. There were sixteen founding band directors present for the first meeting. From that small group, the organization has grown to approximately 1,300 members.

After a long battle with cancer, Louis passed away in October of 2009. Although he was a man of many talents, his true legacy as a teacher was his love of students and his unique ability to instill in them not only the love of music, but more importantly, a sense of belonging and self-worth. His goal was to help each student develop integrity and to achieve their highest potential. He welcomed all students into his programs: the musicians, the cheerleaders, the athletes, and those who simply needed a place to belong. His door was always open, and he believed in every student even if they did not believe in themselves.

Even though Louis is no longer with us, his legacy lives on. Under his supervision and leadership, band students at Jacksboro branded themselves "The Purple Pride," and band students at Wylie branded themselves "The Pure Gold." Both bands still proudly wear these names. After football games at Wylie, Louis directed the band in "It Is Well." The tradition continues today. So even though he is gone from this life, his legacy lives on through the lives of his students, through traditions he began, and through the organization of ATSSB.