I Give You…

COLONEL WILLIAM S. HART

(Kentucky Colonel, that is…)

**Kentucky Colonel** is the highest title of honor bestowed by the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Commissions for Kentucky Colonels are given by the Governor and the Secretary of State to individuals in recognition of noteworthy accomplishments and outstanding service to a community, state or the nation. The Governor of Kentucky bestows the honor of a Colonel's Commission, by issuance of letters patent.

Prior to 1932, about 1,000 people had received Commissions as Kentucky Colonels. In the late 1920s into early 1930s, Kentucky Colonels began to organize fraternally (socio-politically) to form an organization and the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels was founded in 1932 by Gov. Ruby Laffoon.

Between 1932 and 1935, Governor Laffoon dramatically increased the number of Colonels by issuing more than 5,000 Commissions.  One of the earliest was bestowed upon the famous Western Movie Hero, Wm. S. Hart, in 1933.

Another easily recognized Colonel was white-suited restaurateur Harland Sanders, whom Laffoon so commissioned in 1935. Other Colonels commissioned by Laffoon included Mae West, Shirley Temple, Clark Gable, Bing Crosby, Will Rogers, Fred Astaire, Jean Harlow, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Jack Dempsey and W. C. Fields.

Although Gov. Laffoon appears to have been ‘Star Struck,’ the honor has also been bestowed upon various people who are not generally considered especially notable – they have been people from "all walks of life," although the selection process is intended to identify only those with a reputation for high moral standards and a record of "good works" accomplishments. An individual can only become a Kentucky Colonel if nominated by an active Colonel. An active Colonel is a Colonel who contributes to the Honorable Order of Kentucky Colonels annually. At least 85,000 people have received the title.

In 1936, New York advertising agency owner Colonel Arthur Kudner wrote a toast to the Kentucky Colonel. The toast was quickly adopted by the Honorable Order, and it was widely published for use by Colonels. The toast has since been ceremoniously presented at each of the Kentucky Colonels' Derby Eve Banquets:

*I give you a man dedicated to the good things of life, to the gentle, the heartfelt things, to good living, and to the kindly rites with which it is surrounded. In all the clash of a plangent world he holds firm to his ideal – a gracious existence in that country of content "where slower clocks strike happier hours." He stands in spirit on a tall-columned veranda, a hospitable glass in his hand, and he looks over the good and fertile earth, over ripening fields, over meadows of rippling bluegrass. The rounded note of a horn floats through the fragrant stillness. Afar, the sleek and shining flanks of a thoroughbred catch the bright sun. The broad door, open wide with welcome... the slow, soft-spoken word... the familiar step of friendship... all of this is his life, and it is good. He brings fair judgment to sterner things. He is proud in the traditions of his country, in ways that are settled and true. In a trying world darkened by hate and misunderstanding, he is a symbol of those virtues in which men find gallant faith and of the good men might distill from life. Here he stands, then. In the finest sense, an epicure... a patriot... a man. Gentlemen, I give you, the Kentucky Colonel.*