



Rodger Alvan Bray

July 29, 1954 - December 20, 2025

Rodger Alvan Bray was born in the Ozarks of Missouri in 1954 to Florence and William. His older brother's name was Rodney. They moved to Illinois when both Rodger and Rodney were still young for William to become superintendent of a school where Florence also taught art. At that school, Rodger quickly took on the job of being the older brother, defending Rodney, who suffered from mental illness, from other kids. He would be a caretaker to others for much of his life.

Rodger originally wanted to study art but ended up at a religious university in the region, presumably encouraged by his mother (William had quit being a minister long ago). That did not last long, to say the least, and he switched to another school, earning a degree in business management while thoroughly enjoying the liberties and free love of the 1970s. In between visits to the urban landscape of Chicago and the small towns of northern Illinois working as a representative for Do-All Tools, he met Shirley Flood.

They enjoyed one another's company, trading letters over the course of months and years, and eventually decided to travel through the United States together. On this year-long trip, they traced parts of Route 66 with an orange VW van, visited many of the country's national parks, got arrested (Rodger, at least), encountered gun smugglers on the border of Texas, hiked the Grand Canyon's depths where they narrowly avoided a flash flood, and decided to

marry in Tallahassee, Florida.

Not long after returning home from this trip and settling down, Rachel and Rebecca Bray, identical twin girls, appeared in the world. It was the start of a long journey as caretaker for Rodger that would define a huge part of his life. Six years later, Shirley and Rodger got more, perhaps stunning news: Dylan and Bryce, a second set of identical twins, were on the way. Despite an economic recession impacting his employment, like many others in the 1980s', things were looking good for Shirley and Rodger and their double dose of twins. Shirley had finished her nursing studies around the midpoint in the span between Rachel and Rebecca's birth and the arrival of their younger brothers.

But, as is so often in life, the bad can accompany the good, and Shirley was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer (quite probably from agricultural pollution like pesticides poisoning well water in northern Illinois), that, even thirty plus years later, is extremely difficult to treat. She and Rodger tried for two years though, visiting all manner of licensed doctors, indigenous healers, and alternative medicine providers in their desperation, but nothing could stop the exponential tide. She passed away in 1993, leaving Rodger as the single father of two identical sets of twins.

Raising children was one challenge, but Rodger also had to take on a greedy health insurance company to get them to pay for their late mother's treatment, which that company refused, referencing the oft-cited "pre-existing condition." Rodger threatened to tell local newspapers and channels about their denial, and, within two days, the pre-existing condition was no longer a condition of denial, and the bills vanished to the fantasy realm from whence they came. He won, and that moment of triumph over an intentionally confusing, opaque and all-powerful bureaucracy would define Rodger for the rest of his life. Is it too much to presume that Rodger would have cheered on Mangione, like so many

Americans across the political spectrum?

As Rodger walked out of the funeral service at the Baptist Church of Pecatonica, Illinois, he asked himself, "My God, what will I do now," having promised Shirley that he would keep all the children together. With the help of grandmothers, grandfathers, and other family and friends, Rodger persevered, making due on his promise to Shirley of holding the family together by taking on and learning the role of both parents, offering discipline and affection to all of his children. He was far from a perfect father; no parent is, but he tried to do what he thought was right for his family, often with little "sounding board," or outside advice to guide him but his own internal voice and vital pulse.

In 1995, he moved his family out of rural Illinois to better growing conditions in Madison, Wisconsin, for both himself and his twins. There, his true learning came from reading and watching documentaries. Often before taking the boys on trips they would stop by the local library and check out books together, ranging from science fiction and astronomy to art history and tales of other lands. Rodger prized erudition and would offer leniency in chores if there was ongoing reading.

Visiting (art) museums, perhaps a harkoning to the lost path of formally studying art at university at a much younger age, was a part of this self-learning, which also became an exercise in patience at times for the kids as Rodger examined each work of art and read each accompanying descriptions, integrating techniques and ideas into his own artwork fueled by a mosaic of ceramics, painting, and drawing classes in the rich environment of Madison's university landscape.

Part of Rodger's parenting approach included not imparting any specific doctrine to his children, allowing them to choose their paths themselves, often

jokingly referring to the “Church of the Open Mind” with his characteristic chuckle. Rodger helped his children try to search for meaning in life beyond the United States’ obsession with consumerism. He encouraged travel, exploration of other cultures, the act of creation through artwork (of course), fishing gear and tackle over plastic toys or “junk” as he called it, taking photos of animals instead of hunting them (he had been hunter and trapper himself), sailing and enjoying the pace that nature, that life, gives us, and taking part in the most human of acts: writing. Rodger pushed his children to journal, to write, to perform a reflection on consciousness and become part of the universe knowing itself.

Paired with his desire for knowledge and to be self-taught was his commitment to staying free, to avoid the rat race as much as possible. To do this, Rodger managed various rental properties for which he acted as both landlord and handyman. Rodger wished all of his children to be free and would be happy to know how well they are now doing on their life paths. Over the course of the years, he made mistakes (some might say many), as all parents do, but he kept the twins together, as promised to Shirley.

And our promise to him as he would often repeat in a loving refrain before bed:

“Do you promise to love me?”

“Yes,” we said.

“Forever and ever?”

“Yes!” We shouted.

“Even when you’re all grown up?”

“Yes, daaadd!”

And we will love him, forever and ever.

The Bray family thanks Sienna Crest for all their help with Rodger.

Tribute Wall

MM

“ Matt M. planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Rodger Alvan Bray.

Matt M. - December 27, 2025 at 09:05 PM

BS

“ Roger gave me a never to be forgotten memory of Lightning Bugs.

Billy Stoner - December 27, 2025 at 03:05 PM

HF

This describes your dad exactly how I remember him. He definitely had boundaries, but with such a kind heart. His advice that he gave me about life was eye-opening. Very wise and kept life simple. I'm thinking of all of you during this time.

Heidi Fueger - December 27, 2025 at 05:34 PM