

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

by Michael G. Maness — Maness3@att.net

See previous articles at www.PreciousHeart.net/message



Jimmie R. Cooley – ex-Mayor and “Aunt Jim”

Woodville history buff Mary Neal (whom you will hear about in another article – hint, hint) and Jimmie have been good friends since their first grade in school. When asked what came to her mind about Jimmie, Mary gushed: “Hahaa ... Jimmie is a leader and a shaker. She can get things done. Even when we were in school she was in charge of getting info about people and bringing them together.... In High School she was the negotiator. She got other girls to decorate the football field pole. She did not ask the boys to climb up; we did that. Just an all-around people person ... a joy to be around.”

The friendship between them has been dear.

“She’s fearless,” Mary Neal said.

Jimmie’s somewhat private nature is not what comes first to one’s mind to those who know her. She is careful, guarded, direct, and usually on the run.

At 79 she has just begun to scale back her civil service, to give more time to her family.

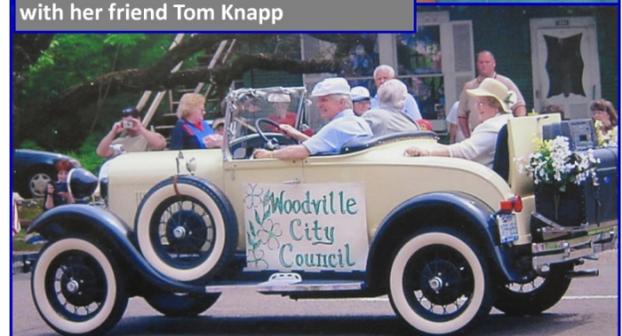
“My children are my greatest blessing,” said Jimmie.

As one of eight children, to this day she is protective of her four children, Glenn, Gayle, Jason, and Clyde. They look out after her too.

Furthermore, her twenty nieces, ten nephews, and others in her immediate family call her Aunt Jim.

“To them *all*,” she emphasized, “I am simply known as Aunt Jim.” She loves them all.

“Why did my sisters go to glory and leave me with their messes,” Jimmie said, reflecting what she has said to her nieces and nephews,



To Jimmie
With Best Wishes, *Laura Bush*

not entirely in jest. “That just tickles them to death.”

She smiled broadly, proudly and seriously accepting her role as matriarch, having survived all of her siblings.

Born in Corrigan, Texas, she moved to Woodville when she was seven years old.

While a sweet sixteen, just a month before turning seventeen, she went to work for Thames Drug Store in Beaumont and began supporting herself. It was a rough road.

In 1951 she married Billy Riley of Woodville, and they divorced in 1974. Her father-in-law, O.A. Riley, owned the Dodge and Plymouth dealership and was also the “county” school superintendent; there were no independent city school districts then.

In 1976, she married Bob Leamon, the love of her life, and they lived in Palestine on a small ranch raising Black Brangus (cross bred between Brahmas and Angus). A heart attack took Bob in 1994. Not long after that, she sold her cattle to Todd Staples, the current Texas Agriculture Commissioner.

In the late 1990s, she married retired veterinarian Dr. Matt Cooley, and they lived on her ranch for a short time.

When her mother needed her, Jimmie moved back to Woodville: “I had to take care of my mother.” Soon after that, she and Dr. Cooley parted ways.

In 1998 she got involved with the Tyler County Chamber of Commerce. She loved helping her home town. As she visited local businesses, many of the owners said, “Jimmie, you need to be our mayor,” affirming her energetic assertiveness.

“I don’t know about that,” she would tell them. She was reluctant. Yet, like the good aunt she has been, she did not shirk from the challenges laid before her. Just as many looked to her in her family, many in Woodville began to look to her too.

“George Jarrot,” Jimmie said, “really put the hurt on me.” The incumbent mayor was not going to run again, so she filled for the

position of Mayor of Woodville, Texas, and left for a long-overdue vacation to London.

“Local attorney Ernie Gassiott faxed me in London that I was Mayor,” she said, rather surprised, and ready to help out, like the good aunt she has always been. She was mayor from 2000-2006.

When she became Woodville’s Mayor, the city and county were at odds with each other over parking meters. “The courthouse said the meters were on their property, and the city said they were on the city street,” said Jimmie. Who collects the money? “As we speak, the meters are in a barn. I asked Judge Owens to give me my oath of office. That kind of broke that ice.”

Jimmie helped guide the city into the purchase of the new city hall, a former bank building owned by Robert Woods. It took some dealing and shrewdness on her part, some of Woods’ family encouragement too, and some mediation by realtor Malcolm Collier.

In a twist of irony, even as Jimmie signed the check that purchased the new Woodville City Hall, and helped guide its initial restoration, she reflected on her dear mother, known to most as Emma Raspberry.

“My mother was so sweet. The day we bought the city hall, and I signed the check – a large check – and the agreement, my mother would not let me balance her checkbook, because she did not think I was capable. To her, I was still sixteen years old.” Jimmie smiled and shook her head. Her mother went to heaven at 97, leaving behind in her daughter a determined independent mind.

Today, Woodville has one of the finest city halls of any locality our size in the country.

Tyler County Treasurer Sharon Fuller said, “Jimmie is a very clever lady and she’s one you will always want on your side.”

Word got around, and in 2002 Governor Rick Perry appointed Jimmie to the Office of Community Affairs Task Force, in 2005 to the

Lower Neches Valley River Authority (LNVRA) and in 2011 reappointed her to the LNVRA.

When some city mayors were invited to the governor's home in Austin, Jimmie recalled like it was yesterday what Governor Perry said before they ate: "I know this is your house. But you have honored our family to let us live in this house. And we ask the blessing at each meal."

"That *really* impressed me," Jimmie emphasized, "that you could be in the public arena and still hold onto your faith."

In 2005 at a reception in Tyler, Texas, she met First Lady Laura Bush.

As Woodville Mayor, Jimmie has had to weather hurricanes and other tragedies, and she has made a few people upset. Regardless, she held her reins tight, smiled, and let her heart guide her.

"When Hurricane Rita came (Sept. 23, 2005), our countywide population of 22,000 grew to 40,000 people, some living on the Wal-Mart parking lot ... with kids needing milk ... no food." Jimmie shook her head.

"I called Governor Perry and he sent the National Guard who set up at the old football field."

Former Beaumont Mayor Evelyn Lord came and stayed in Woodville, and she and Jimmie worked through several of the crises together.

"I've been so blessed in life," Jimmie reflected, "I don't know everything, but I know people that do. Evelyn *really* helped me out. The best advice she gave me was, 'Where your skirt, but never hide behind it.'" They became fast friends.

At a pivotal point, a National Guard Lieutenant came to City Hall and said, "We have orders to pull out tomorrow."

"No, you don't," Jimmie said. "People will die on us."

"Orders from my boss," he said.

"My boss is bigger than your boss," she said, referring to Governor Perry, whom she

immediately called. "Three hours later, the young man came back and said, 'You know, we're staying. But we need a place to sleep and some help with laundry.' So I got them a place to sleep in the Woodville High School and got the prison to do their laundry."

Shortly after some recovery from Hurricane Rita, Jimmie hosted Governor Perry at City Hall to present certificates of "A Job Well Done" to the area utility crews and local first responders.

Keith Bellamy said, "She has always been a person who can compliment without being a fake."

On Jimmie's last day as Mayor, long-time City Secretary Terri Bible said, "Jimmie has been a true Hero. She has gone the extra mile to ensure that all the employees are treated fairly, giving nothing more to one than she could give to all." Terri noted Jimmie's work ethic, saying that as mayor she would go home at night, lie down, and, thinking Jimmie's thoughts for her, Jimmie would say softly to herself, "Darn, there were a million more things I should have remembered to say."

Mary Neal said, what so many know, "Jimmie is just a dear friend. If you called her, and said, 'Jimmie, I need a friend,' she would be there."

That is true of many an "Aunt Jim" who always has other people on her mind – family, friend, fellow citizen – every ready to help, encourage, and challenge.