

# Message in a Bottle

## A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

by Michael G. Maness — [Maness3@att.net](mailto:Maness3@att.net)

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### Louie “Lou” Campbell – Lil’ Ol’ Pea Patch

Peace and quiet – that was what his wife Carol wanted. Years before, they ran to and fro from Houston to their place in Colmesneil that had several acres of peas.

At the Ethyl Corporation’s chemical plant in Houston, Lou’s friend Vance would always say, “You’ll going back to that lil’ ol’ pea patch?”

The name stuck. In part to honor his friend Vance, Lou named their place The Pea Patch. Their sign is being renovated and will be back up soon, with the Bible reference John 3:16 right below it.

“I want everyone to see that Bible verse when they come and go,” Lou said.

They love their God, their church, their children, and their three precious granddaughters.

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Woodville proved to be the loving the church they had hoped for, just like the one they left in Houston. Carol helps out at Church Mouse, the church’s resale and clothing ministry that will help anyone in need.

Lou has been leading the Wednesday chapel services for children at the St. Paul’s elementary school, currently in the process of adding grades to the fifth grade. He inherited this Wednesday chapel service from Eugenia Rust who led it for ten years.

Lou said with great affection, “Eugenia Rust is the sweetest, spirit-filled lady. She has touched my life more than anyone. She is a darling lady. She asked me to take the chapel. I have taken it over. I still have the outline she gave me. The kids are marvelous.”

Lou was born in Corrigan, the seventh child of eight. Because of a shortage of material during WWII, their family moved to Houston. After graduating from M.B. Smiley High School in Houston, Lou spent three years in the U.S. Army as a financial analyst.

On a weekend leave, he met, as he says, “A fine lady,” and began making more excuses to go home and



Lou and Carol Campbell



be with Carol. “Oh yeah, every time I got off, I was headed for Houston.”

Lou remembers like yesterday the hour he asked for Carol’s hand in marriage.

“Just before I got out of the Army,” Lou said, “I wanted to ask her parents for approval.” She did not want to ask in front of her sister. “So we had to wait for Joy to go to sleep. I never thought she would go to bed.”

When her sister finally went to bed, Lou stood up.

“I got a question to ask you,” Lou said to Carol’s father, who slowly brought the newspaper down. “I want to ask your permission to marry Carol.”

Her father made him repeat it. Her mother was for it. Lou was elated.

Before they married, and just out of the Army, Lou got a job with Gordon Jewelers as a credit manager in Roswell, New Mexico. At a frantic pace, they made plans to marry on December 31, 1963.

He forgot two things: the 31st was both New Year’s Eve and his mother’s birthday.

They married in Houston and headed back to New Mexico in their car, excessively decorated by her sister-in-law.

Lou still has the motel receipt – \$15.00! Lou keeps a lot of things that marked special times in his life or that brings to mind a nostalgic memory.

Lou was shy pulling into the motel, content to keep their nuptials under wraps. However, it was New Year’s Eve and a large party was taking place.

Just as Lou was about to get his room key, a slightly inebriated fellow had spied the new couple’s car and blurted out, “Happy Honeymoon Newlyweds!”

The motel manager congratulated them, too, and gave them their key and a box of Stouffer’s chocolates, and likewise said, “Happy Honeymoon!”

Their love for each other has grown for 48 years now. Instead of buying each other Christmas gifts, they work so well together that they mutually decide on gifts they both will enjoy for their country home, The Pea Patch.

Shortly after becoming a store manager for Gordon’s Jewelers in Monroe, Louisiana, Lou left that and began work at Ethyl Corp.’s chemical plant in Houston as a maintenance supervisor. He spent twenty-two years there. He loved fixing things. The plant atmosphere placed a priority on family, and in many ways his work was more about helping people than merely fixing broken pumps and such.

From another era, how many remember pulling into a filling station and asking “Fill it up with ethyl”? That was gasoline with lead in it, before the environmental protection laws forced all gasoline to the no-lead variety. The company refitted their plant accordingly to provide chemicals for detergents and other chemicals for synthetic tires.

On a Sunday morning in 1987, a huge explosion across the ship channel rattled their home some twelve miles away. Lou just knew it was the Ethyl plant that had exploded.

“It looked like Hiroshima,” Lou said. About one-quarter mile square of the plant was devastated. “No one was killed, but several were injured.”

Lou and an older fellow were charged with inspecting a huge forty-four-foot vessel about twelve-feet in diameter with four huge hydraulic valves inside, each about the size of a Lazy Boy recliner.

“We had to make sure they were okay,” Lou said. “About twenty-two feet up, we walked around the outside. The last thing I remember saying was, ‘oh no!’” as he fell down.

The fall broke his back in two places and busted his head.

“I woke up two times, once at the bottom and again in the ambulance. Bill was my angel,” Lou said, “he was the first guy I say when I woke up.” Lou spent four days in ICU and six weeks in the hospital.

“While I was in the hospital I knew the Lord could have taken me, but He did not. Our Lord has got a job for us to do. I did not know what he had planned for me. Some say the Lord talks to you at times.” Lou knew God had saved him for a special purpose.

Lou has many stories of the several churches he and Carol have been affiliated with, loving them all, from Baptist to Methodist to Episcopal. Clearly, they respect all of God’s work.

In Houston, he was a member of Lions International for seventeen years, receiving the Lion of the Year award twice. In Woodville he has been a member of the Rotary Club, currently serving as secretary.

Lou has been helping people in every job and church. After hurricane Rita, Lou made a couple of special runs to Houston to get gasoline and diesel. Several of us in need were very surprised when Lou showed up at our door.

Hearing about this author’s case from prison chaplain David Rust, Lou dropped by and asked with his characteristically friendly country drawl, “Heard you needed some gas?”

“Sure do,” was the reply, a God-send to so many who were caught off guard and without much left in their tanks for any trip or emergency from that pesky hurricane.

It was a scary time, and Lou was an angel to many.

Their daughter Michelle Hoffman works for Texas Institute for Measurement Evaluation and Statistics (TIMES) and reflected on her father’s heart. One time he bought a hardware store to salvage it for the wood and roofing material. He tore it down and stored the material to a shed. But as friends needed material from time to time, he ended up giving most of it away.

In their beautiful home, one cannot hear any highway traffic noise, just the way Carol wanted.

Lou has two collections he will show anyone. His small collection of oil cans throws one back to an era when everyone worked on their own equipment. One oil can was original equipment that came with the new Ford, given to the buyer to help the buyer maintain their vehicle or tractor.

His large collection of about 135 oil lamps consume the shelves of one wall of their large living room from floor to ceiling, ten-foot high– flat wicks, aladdins, and other varieties. Some are a foot and half tall, others only inches.

Lou reflects on his first experience with oil lamps as a child in the eighth grade. “Mom always had an oil lamp or two. When we lost our power, we lit an oil lamp. One time I reached for the class cover.” He got burned. “Never did that again,” Lou said and laughed.

Some are over 150 years old. The flat wicks only generate about 10-25 watts of lighting while the alladins can generate up to 75-100 watts of light.

Like nearly everything in his home, there is a story or the wonder of a story.

On his lamps, he pondered, “What would it be like to hear some of the stories they could tell?” How true, from the days before electricity was available and affordable, to times of power outages or a simple family gathering made cozier by the flickering lights of oil lamps.

Among his favorite are the Vapo-Cresolene Lamps that have a small bowl fixed above the flame to heat Cresoline. The ill person would sniff or breathe the vapor, by doctor’s orders. Lou has several of these and the original bottles, some still filled with Cresoline. The main ingredient was “cresylic acid fraction of coal tar.”

Vapo-Cresolene Company was established in 1879 in New York and the vaporizer lasted into the mid-1950s. In 1879, James H. Valentine made a crude vaporizer to aid his young daughter’s whooping cough. Patents were issued in 1885. They were advertised to help nearly every known breathing ailment, similar to the cocaine products of the day.

As early as 1908, the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA) noted that Cresolene was essentially creosote. In 1940, the Federal Trade Commission forced the company to stop advertising Vapo-Cresolene as a “remedy ... for croup, whooping cough ... deep chest colds” (JAMA, 1940). The International Agency for Research on Cancer has established creosote as a cause of cancer and OSHA has limited exposure.

The vapor lamps sure were popular for a time and did relieve many flu systems, yet, as Lou said, “The cure was worse for one than the ailment.” The bottle does say poison!

The oil cans and oil lamps, remnants of the chemical industry that consumed Lou’s life for so many years, call up memories of days gone by and of days yet to come. Few things are more nostalgic than an old oil lamp. What stories do they tell?

Lou and Carol always have something nice to say, always serving somewhere. Though they live in the country way off the beaten path, you need directions to find them, yet once there, you find a warm hospitality, a new sign on the way – The Pea Patch, John 3:16.