

Message in a Bottle

Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Jess and Georgia Collins – Local Spinner and Weaver

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Jess and Georgia do everything together, loving each other in a delicate balance of mutual concern and community service. These days they bridge the gap between the past and the present with their spinning and weaving exhibitions at the Heritage Village. From them and others at the Heritage Village and Museum, it is easy to see what “village” really means. Village Director Ofiera Gazzaway said, “They are so loyal and dedicated” (Heritage-Village.org).

They have been connected to Woodville since 1955. They married on June 1, 1957, in the Woodville United Methodist Church, the same day Georgia was supposed to graduate from North Texas State College (now Univ. of North Texas). Missing her graduation ceremony, they left at 2:00 PM to go to Alexandria, Va., so Jess could enter Combat Engineering and Construction school at Fort Belvoir.



They have always been Methodists and have tried to keep their kids in church, in Spurger and lately in Woodville. They have four kids, oldest Tommy Collins, Kamala or “Kami” Greif, Alexandria Benton, and Samantha Collins Yosko.

Kami was born while Jess was at Fort Belvoir in special weapons school, where he learned how to employ atomic demolitions.

Atomic demolitions?

“Yes, to take down whatever needed to be taken down. We were specially tasked and ready, if needed, to take down the Fulda Gap near the Carpathian Mountains. One could carry the atomic explosive on your back. Drill a hole in the right place and lower the mountain into the valley.”

The Fulda Gap was protected during the Cold War by NATO as a certain pathway for the then Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact tanks. Coming through occupied Poland and East Germany, the tanks could break through the Fulda Gap and then into West Germany’s crucial

town of Frankfurt and more. Off the northwestern edge of the Carpathian Range, and between the low mountain ranges of Vogelberg (bird's mountain) and Spessart (brown-reddish garnet), the route followed the Fulda river with a relatively level plain through the mountains.

The NATO vs. Warsaw Pact hostilities are still played out today, and a cottage industry in Fulda Gap war games exists in video games and for paintball enthusiasts (FuldaGap.com).

Jess' job required him to be less than 30 minutes from a phone. As part of the 36th Infantry in the 1960s, his job was to be ready with his five kiloton Atomic Demolition Munitions (ADM). In a moment's notice, his Combat Engineer team would pursue their strategic plans to be inserted into the Fulda Gap, light the fuse, and RUN! Not so funny then. The atomic munitions would drop one of the mountains into the Fulda Gap.

One could say, indeed, Jess was an expert at closing gaps!

Jess won a National Science Foundation grant, so they moved to Laramie, Wy., where he got his Masters Degree in Natural Science. He loved it. His masters thesis was on waste oil disposal, in particular what methods the Shell Oil Company used to dispose of bad oil. Interestingly enough, bad oil reacts to biological agents and scum eating bacteria.

Jess' dad had a stroke, so they built a house in Spurger and moved back, and both taught in Kirbyville for a few more years. Jess' last stint of 4 years was spent in the Woodville ISD, retiring in 1990. Danielle Dungan (Jackson) said, "He was the best science teacher."

In 1991, Jess and Georgia started the J.C. Penney Store in Woodville. They went to Grove, Ok., to learn the franchise, and while there they visited a spinning and weaving shop.

They brought back to Woodville a spinning wheel. The Heritage Village itself, still in its infancy, already had a loom. With their characteristic vigor, Jess and Georgia set themselves to mastery of both, filling a gap in the textile manufacturing at the Village's living exhibitions. They would work all day at their Penney's store, then go to the Village and to spin and weave.

Danny Adkins, owner of the Dogwood Café, said, "You will not find two more dedicated people than Jess and Georgia. They are charter members of the Spinners and Weavers Guild. They are true friends that will do anything for you and never ask for anything in return."

In the photo, Georgia is at the spinning wheel, and Jess is at the loom. Standing to the right is docent Yvonne Goss with a group from Giddings, Tx., viewing the exhibitions at the Village, that include a black smith, shingle making, and much more.

Jess and Georgia have been ambassadors, too, as they took their skills on the road for the Village to over 22 venues from Anahuac, Tx., to Lafayette's Arcadian Village. They have set up shop at the Texas State Fair in Dallas, one time at the Natural Science Museum, just down the hall from the Star Wars exhibit – holding up one side of the gap between the past and distant future. They have promoted the Village at fairs in Tyler, Marshall, Dayton, and the Texas State Forest Festival in Lufkin.

How does one spin?

"One has to do three things at once," said Georgia. "After all this time, you don't think about it. Your foot is treadling, like a bicycle, driving the band to the wheel. My left hand keeps the twist where I want it while my right hand is separating the fibers to the thickness I want. The wheel does the rest of the work."

Just as it must have been years ago, one can "spin" a spool in about 5-6 hours, depending upon the spool and thickness of the thread. About 75 yards to a spool. Of what? Dog, cat, goat, rabbit, Alpaca, Lama, many breeds of sheep, Yak. Buffalo is not much fun. One of the easiest is wool. Silk is fun too, because it has long fibers, though a little harder to pull.

“Oh yes, cotton too,” she said in afterthought. Truly the expert. She talks and spins at the same time.

“We have never done a bad show,” said Jess, Georgia nodding. Yet, one time in Lafayette, they felt they were too young in the trade. “We thought we knew it all,” said Georgia. “We got over there and their loom was built in the Civil War and was strung with modern sewing thread. One cannot work with the wrong thread, and it was tangled. Worse, the tourist group was from France! So here we are, teaching the loom while untangling the thread and using a translator. All of us spent a great deal of time laughing. If all that was bad enough, try doing that with a translator who knew nothing about spinning and weaving.”

Bridging the language gap was challenge enough.

They love watching the children’s expressions. Listening to their questions. Can I do it? Is it hard?

What is one of the most precious times?

Reflecting a moment upon their years, and all of the people, Georgia began to shed some tears. She covered her face.

Jess and Georgia love the “village” so much. They love living the heritage. Yet, it is the people they work with, the tourists who visit, and of course the children.

“They put up with me,” Georgia said. Jess smiled, “It has been a long time since you cried.” Overflowing with memories. The “village” is a cherished part of their life.

No longer calculating how to bridge a gap by felling a mountain with atomic munitions, these days, a little slower, but with more personal attention, Jess and Georgia are bridging the gap between the young and old, and between all of us, with something much more powerful and uniting than atomic fission – good old “village” love.