

# Message in a Bottle

## A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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

See previous articles at [www.PreciousHeart.net/message](http://www.PreciousHeart.net/message)



### Mary Jane Neal – Tyler County Historian

Like so many, Mary Jane Neal loves Woodville and Tyler County and all of the history therein. A quiet and soft-spoken lady, her gentle voice is without guile and seemingly rounded on the corners. She has no sharp tones.

When talking about Woodville or the county, she lights up. Related to many in the area, she seemingly has a story about every corner from every decade.

Her great-grandfather William Martin Van Buren Stewart was a country doctor (pictured on the horse), yes, named after President Van Buren. He lived in Colmesneil and rode around the community on a horse to visit sick people. The foundation to his drug store can still be seen in Colmesneil.

Mary Jane's great-grandmother was a Crow from Georgia.

Her grandfather William A. Ferguson was born in Jasper on July 4, 1875, and became deputy sheriff in 1927 and sheriff of Tyler County in 1930 (1930-32). On November 1, 1918, he received a commission to become a Special Texas Ranger.

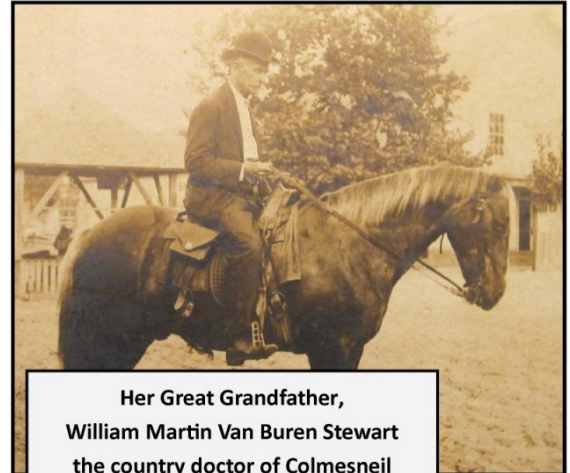
Her great-grandmother Delilah Riley was originally a Shivers, whose father was brother to Governor Allen Shivers grandfather. While governor, he sent inaugural invitations to Mary Jane's mother.

Always the history buff, she has notebooks of clippings of various events surrounding her extended family and the history of Woodville.

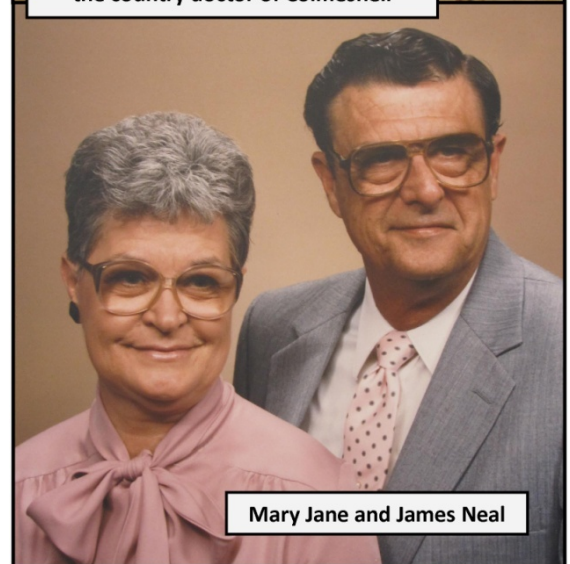
Passed down from her mother, Mary Jane held in trust the original Annual Minutes to the New Bethel Baptist Association dated September 19, 1863, printed on the back of wallpaper—*wallpaper*—because paper was in short supply during the Civil War! She recently had two copies and the original framed by Ken Weaver. One of the framed copies was given to the New Bethel Association at its November 2011 meeting.

John Riley was the association clerk in 1863. He was Mary Jane, Maxie, and Pat Riley's great-grandfather, and Terry Riley's great-great-grandfather – what roots!

John and his wife Delilah lived with her parents in Doucette and passed those minutes to her daughter who then passed them to Mary Jane's mother, and then to Mary Jane herself.



Her Great Grandfather,  
William Martin Van Buren Stewart  
the country doctor of Colmesneil



Mary Jane and James Neal



Rev. Troy Richardson, Terry Riley, Rev. Jerry Redkey,  
Rev. David Miller, Mary Jane, and Joe Richardson

The original minutes will be on display at the New Bethel office in Kirbyville and then transferred to the Texas Baptist Historical Collection in Dallas (see a copy at [www.PreciousHeart.net/1863.pdf](http://www.PreciousHeart.net/1863.pdf)). One copy will remain at the New Bethel office, and the other will be displayed locally, at the Shivers Library, the Heritage Village, or some suitable location.

Mary Jane's great-grandmother on her father's side was Sarah *Jane*. Try to follow this: from there, Mary Jane's grandmother was Bunnie *Jane*, followed by Mary *Jane*, with her daughter Stacey *Jane*, and her granddaughter is Megan *Jane*, the latter to graduate in May 2012 from A&M in Galveston. What a nice touch.

Mary Jane dearly loves her three of grandchildren, Megan Jane, Aaron and Andrew. Aaron is 16 and attends Liberty Christian School in Argyle, Texas. She has a special affection for and a protective spirit toward Andrew, now 19, who has severe Down Syndrome and autism. Andrew may not live past 35 and will never function above that of a two-year old.

Stacey Jane, Mary Jane's daughter, said, "My mother makes calls and organizes during the state legislative sessions to ensure Andrew and others who are severely to profoundly affected can continue to receive their life-sustaining service as only the Denton State Supported Living Center can provide.... I am very blessed to have her as my mother."

Mary Jane and James Neal married in 1952, having known each other since the eighth grade in school. (Don't you just love stories like that?) After attending Sam Houston State and a stint in the Air Force during the cold war, he worked for Southwestern Bell and then ATT. They moved back to Woodville in 1995.

In the corner of a room in her home, Mary Jane has the rocking chair that was used to rock her great-grandmother Sarah Jane, called a "nursing chair" because it had no arms. Her home is decorated with Southwestern art, mainly with cowboy paintings by Fredrick Remington, a favorite of her husband.

James went to heaven in February of 2007, and she still misses him dearly, having been married 55 years on the Friday before the Monday of his passing.

Mary Jane said, "He was rough on the edges, but he had a big soft heart. He would talk to a stranger." He also encouraged Mary Jane's dear friend Jimmie Ruth Cooley to run for mayor of Woodville. On Cooley, Mary Jane said, "She liked to get things done."

In her younger days, Maxie Young, Jimmie Ruth and she were all classmates. She remembers strapping roller skates to her shoes and skating around the courthouse. There used to be a pole on the northeast side, and they would race down the sidewalk, following the boys, from west to east toward Hwy. 69, and grab the pole and swing south on the sidewalk.

"Dumb, dumb," she softly said, reflecting the danger of failing to grab the pole and being flung into the highway traffic. "Follow the leader" was not always the wisest thing to do. But they had fun.

They did not have a lot to do, except, "Go and watch the red light change." She laughed.

"We had the Fain Theater owned by Wood Fain. On Saturdays, they had the Westerns. Serials like Tarzan. Westerns like Roy Rogers. That was how they got the children back on Saturday, to find out what happened to Tarzan, Jane and the monkey."

"During the Korean War, they would have war pictures. You remember the Glen Miller Story?" she asked. "My husband, James, was in that movie. They filmed it at Lowery AFB and used GI's as extras. He was an extra in that movie."

Mary Jane supported her husband, desiring herself to stay "in the shadows." She wanted to get along with everybody. She did not care for conflict, but some has happened in her family

In the late 1890s, her great uncle got into a political argument with two brothers, who killed him as he walked home.

“At the trial, a lawyer motioned for the judge to declare a mistrial, which really upset the people,” she said. Back then one could go to court armed with a pistol. Her great-grandfather and his two brothers came to the trial with their guns!

“As everyone left the courthouse,” Mary Jane continued, “one of the murderer’s friends was up stairs with a gun aimed at my great-grandfather. A friend of my great-grandfather came behind the sniper, and told him to hold on.”

The two brothers spent five years in the Huntsville Prison, the only prison Texas had then.

The courthouse square looked different then, the back part added in the late 1920s.

One of Mary Jane’s favorite subjects is the history of the Woodville High School – Go Eagles! It is good to reflect from time to time on what many have forgotten or, perhaps, today some take for granted.

When the Woodville Academy burned in 1904, the people of Woodville built another school that developed into the Kirby High School because of the generosity of John Henry Kirby. He was sheriff of Tyler County when he married Lila Stewart, and they moved into the house where the Kirby High School was built in the early 1920s.

When the Kirby High School burned, John Kirby donated the land to rebuild it in 1924.

The first graduating class in 1925 included Mary Jane’s father Billy Van Ferguson.

John Kirby donated more money and land in 1926. In 1943 another fire burned down the high school, with only the Home Economics Department surviving.

At that time, the Kirby High School was all white, and the black students went to the Scott High School, whose foundation can still be seen across from the old football field, now the Sinclair Children’s Home extension. Mayme R. Canada, widow of the superintendent, wrote a book, *A Historical Documentary of the Henry T. Scott School* (1998), and she still helps out with black history month every February in Tyler County.

The Kirby High School was rebuilt in 1947, just like the old one, except no gym in the middle. A gym was built in 1948.

“This time they had a patio with a Coke machine,” Mary Jane said.

“How much were Cokes?”

“Oh my Lord, it might have been a dime.” She gently smiled.

And who would have thought, but she and former Mayor Jimmie Ruth played football together in 1948? They called it the “Sugar Bowl,” and Jimmie Ruth made the only touchdown for their team. They were in the class of Kirby High class of 1949, and Mary Jane wrote her book on *Kirby High School* (1996).

In the 1960s the Kirby and Scott schools were integrated into the Woodville ISD.

When the gym burned in 1996, Mary Jane’s husband took some bricks from the old building, cleaned them up, put a gold ribbon around the bricks tying around the brick a little piece paper telling of the brick’s origin. He tried to find and give a brick to every basketball player that played in the gym from 1948 to 1996.

The rebuilt gym was named the Kirby Gym. Now ... you know the rest of the story.

“I am glad that they named it such,” Mary Jane said, “because Mr. Kirby donated the land and the other buildings.”

And we are glad for Mary Jane, too, who treasures these memories in her heart, as we all should, who love our small piece of paradise.