

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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John Stagg – Entrepreneur, “Nuke” Handler, Beekeeper

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John Stagg has sold more than ten thousand “nukes.” A wheeler and dealer all of his life, taking initiative and starting businesses from scratch, he is the American entrepreneur.

No, not the *nuclear* nukes, but it seemed a good way to start this story of soon to be 74-year-old Red Cross Damage Assessment Coordinator for Tyler and Jasper Counties.

John was born in Durald, Evangeline Parish, Louisiana, in the only English family for several miles.

“We had to know Cajun French. And to speak to old folks, I had to know some German,” he said, and joked about having to re-learn normal English in school.

He got his first shotgun at thirteen, a Model 12 Winchester.

“I still have it,” he said with pride. His 1951-52 Louisiana hunting license indicated, surprisingly, the times and places one could shoot bear.

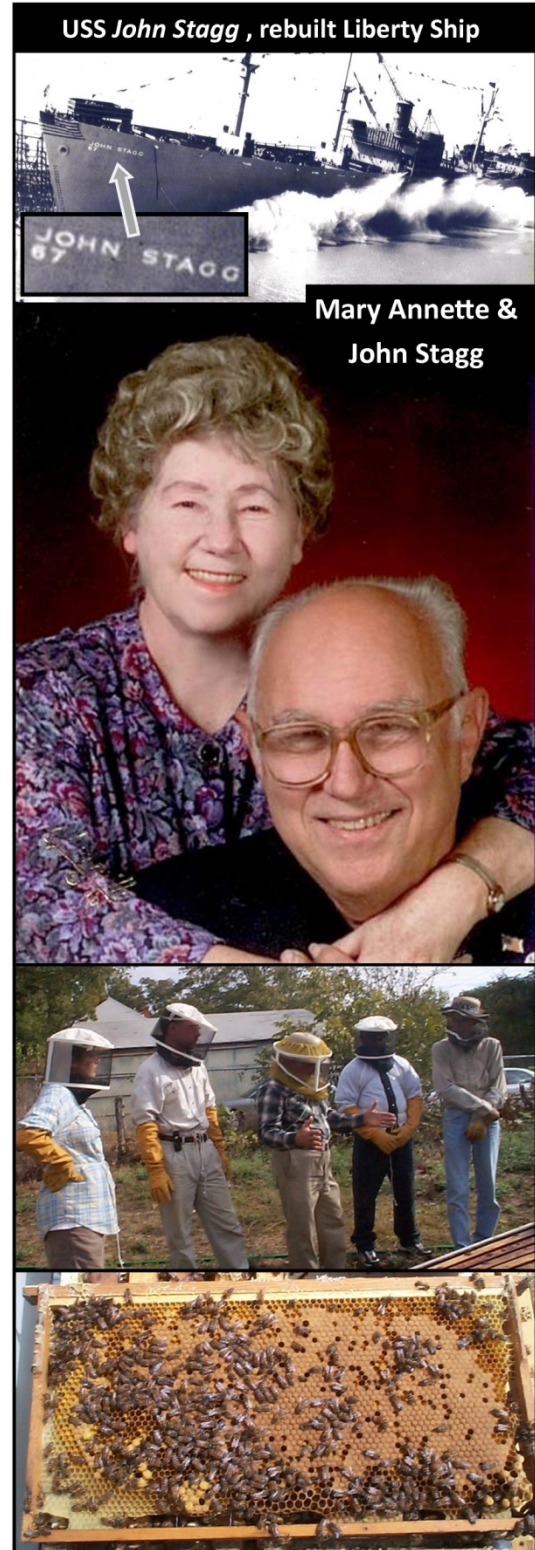
John has searched out his family history. What a pleasure to find out the U.S. christened two USS *John Stagg* ships. The one in the photo was an old Liberty Ship rebuilt for the Vietnam War (in a previous article on Captain Millard Scott, several Liberty Ships passed through the Panama Canal on Scott’s watch – maybe a few *John Staggs* too). This one was named after Commissary General John Stagg under George Washington.

The photo was given to John by his cousin, Julia Stagg, who was a welder on that very ship.

“You’ve heard of Rosie the Riveter,” John smiled, “well, they had Julia the Welder. She could lay a beautiful bead.”

What an honor it is to be the descendent of a man with one’s own name who was a general for George Washington, the most prominent Founder Father of the U.S.A. Moreover, another in John’s lineage was Henry Stagg, commandant of the Louisiana Purchase.

“That is how we came south,” John said, as “Henry was married at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans.”



John grew up working for his father’s Stagg Implement Co. in Opelousas. He made \$20 a month. While still in school, John began his own trucking business.

“I would haul hay for 15 cents a bale from the field, including loading in the barn; 10 cents per fifty lb. box of sweet potatoes, including picking them up from the field. Plow an acre, \$3; disk, \$1.50; mow, \$1.50; and more.” He still has the price list, typed on an old manual typewriter. A memento of the hard work from his youth, but of something else too, called “hustle,” a word not well known today among the young.

By the time he joined the Navy in 1961, he was running his trucking business, a dairy, and a farm. Lastly stationed at VT-31 Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi, his squadron trained pilots and according to GlobalSecurity.org was “truly on the leading edge of the Department of Defense Joint Training Initiative.”

“Every three months we flew to the USS *Lexington* for them to qualify to land on a carrier,” he said. The “Lady Lex” has its own colorful history, now permanently moored in Corpus Christi and excellent museum packed with WWII history (see USSLexington.com).

“We were the Navy’s FAA,” said John, himself certified on eight aircraft.

John remembers well the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated, November 22, 1963.

“Me and some other clowns,” John said, “all went to the bank and cashed some checks in silver dollars. We came back and began playing with those silver dollars.”

“What are you doing?” one questioned.

“The government is going broke. Better stock up,” they said, trying to lead their friends on a ruse, pretending that the U.S. economy was on the brink. As the news spread of Kennedy’s assassination, their fun soon came to an end, as the CIA linked their comic allegations to the president’s assassination. The CIA arrested them all!

Their commanding officer said, “If I didn’t need you all so bad, you would all rot.”

It was not so funny anymore.

John met the love of his life in 1972, Mary Annette Sindle, after a good friend finagled a meeting between them.

Working as a part-time youth director at Trinity Baptist Church, Corpus Christi, and helping the Baptist Student Union of Del Mar College, faculty advisor and good friend Joe Holcomb said John needed to meet a “sweet little thing.”

John, the workaholic, put off the introduction.

Yet, at a birthday party a year later, John was introduced to Mary Annette. Two and a half months later, they were married on New Year’s day 1973.

On their wedding day in Doucette, Texas – where she grew up – Mary Annette’s brother-in-law was the preacher, and he drove a car that looked like the newlywed’s car. The wrong car was decorated, and the newlyweds escaped in their own unmarked car.

They have two children, Philip and Naomi, both Woodville High School graduates.

Naomi said, “My father always encouraged me to try new things, even if they were not traditional ... even at the early age of three. I followed my father through the honeybee yards, pastures, and his workshop with puppy-like devotion and admiration that only Daddy’s Little Girls can truly convey. So it came as a surprise to him when I asked for a hammer to help him build the honeybee hives. Another surprise was the reaction of other adults when he presented me with a sturdy but lightweight hammer of my very own. I was ecstatic. The adults at my party? Not so much.”

“*Why on earth did you get a little girl a HAMMER?! seemed to be the question of the day by those around me,*” Naomi continued. “My father’s answer was simple and straightforward: ‘It was what she wanted.’”

“‘But she’s a girl!’ they pointed out with disdain. To which my father countered, ‘So? If I had bought her a two-dollar doll, to you, I would have been a hero. To her, it would not have made much of a difference. Instead, I bought her a twenty-dollar hammer and now I’m a heel? I’d much rather be *her* hero than yours.’”

“So here’s to Dad ... always my hero,” said Naomi brimming.

John taught on a temporary certification at Southwest Texas State, San Marcus, until he completed his certification in 1975, and then became head of the vocational department at South Park Junior High, Corpus Christi. At the same time, he led a bus ministry for his church.

They moved to Woodville in 1982. Among all of the businesses he started, John has had a long-lived love for honeybees, from the early 1950s to his selling out in 1983 after a back injury.

He had one of the largest bee operations in the U.S. and remains a consultant with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He taught Apiculture – beekeeping – for Del Mar College and has helped innumerable others. Tyler County local Shelby Smith, owner of the Cherapa Retreat in Spurger (CherapaRetreat.com), said John was her “bee mentor, a natural born teacher. I know I can count on him as a friend.”

“I helped the government with the Killer Bees through 60s and 70s ... everyone at Texas A & M knew me then,” he said.

All American honeybees are called European bees, because that is where they originated. The Africanized bees are more aggressive, easier to provoke, and they attack in greater numbers; moreover, they take over European beehives, and on occasion, a swarm is deadly to people – hence, the term *Killer Bees*. They spread from Brazil to Argentina, Central America, Mexico, then to Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, and southern California.

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John developed the “blue box” which trapped the bees with pheromones and helped trace migration. The boxes were built by Paul Jackson of Texas A & M.

The height of John’s beekeeping had three operations: in Weslaco by the Rio Grande River; his largest in George West which was ninety miles from Corpus Christi, San Antonio, and Laredo (“ninety miles from everywhere,” they liked to say); and in Fort Riley, Kansas.

John ran large ads in *American Bee Journal*, the largest and most prestigious of the three main journals at the time, the other two being *Gleanings in Bee Culture* and *Speedy Bee*.

“I mainly raised bees for bee keepers,” he said.

He sold miniature hives with a queen called “nukes” by the tens of thousands.

A standard hive with a queen was about 16x20x9” with ten frames in each hive.

“Started off with a 1,000 hives. One frame with a brood – that’s bees still in the cells with the caretaker bees. Another frame of honey with bees on it. The queen cell would develop into a hive of bees in about three months. Sold them by the 18-wheeler load. Usually put 2,500 nukes per trailer ... several trailers per year.”

John Robinson, an information specialist for Baylor University, met John Stagg by accident, as the latter’s daughter worked for the Baylor library, and World Hunger Relief was interested in starting a bee keeping operation (WorldHungerRelief.org). Another bee keeper donated a couple of hives, and John Stagg taught them all they needed to know.

“John was in his element teaching us about bees,” said Robison. “He taught us not only practical things like how to build and maintain hive equipment, how best to enter a hive to check

on how the bees were doing, when to add hive boxes to expand bee space as the colony rapidly increased in size in the Spring, but he also taught us bee biology, the life cycle, so that we would be able to think about what we were doing.

“During that time I learned some things from other beekeepers too, but John had a deeper understanding than anyone I knew based on his long years of experience. Unlike those beekeepers that had to buy every tool for every need, John demonstrated the ability to make do with what was at hand in the moment. I always said that if you were stuck in the wilderness with little means for survival, John was the guy you wanted to have along because he could make whatever was needed.”

See the photo – notice, John is the only one *without* gloves, instructing on bee care for the World Hunger Relief farm. John seldom uses gloves or a veil!

In 1979 the Iranian revolution drove the price of oil from \$15 to \$39 per barrel in twelve months. John forced a showdown with some truckers on strike.

“I was hauling a load from George West to Fort Riley, Kansas. Several of the truckers were having wildcat strikes.” John rubbed his chin with his good hand. “Got fuel at a stop in Ardmore, Oklahoma. The truckers were blocking the driveways and not letting any trucks out. They were trying to paralyze the shipping industry. I did not argue with them. I just pulled over and started pulling the net off of the honey bees.”

“What are you doing,” one of them asked.

“You are not going to kill my bees. Bees can get their own water and keep the hives cool. I was going to let them out.”

“Okay,” they said, wanting him to re-tarp the bees.

“I had to let the bees out, and told them, ‘Okay, I’ll re-tarp them, but *not* until I got on down the highway.’ I could not take the chance they might not let me get out of their blockade. Once on down the highway, I put the net on, and for good measure left behind a few thousand unhappy bees at the truck stop.”

John’s a life member of the American Legion and regularly leads Prisoner of War (POW) dedications at ceremonies around Tyler County.

Of late, John and Mary Annette have volunteered with the Red Cross, certified in several emergency capacities. They helped with disaster relief during the tornados in Alabama, and during the wild fires in Waller, Montgomery, Jasper, Hardin, and Tyler Counties. They helped set up canteens and shelters for all those affected, including fire fighters and the evacuated.

Longtime friend David Bordelon said, “Dependable. An independent spirit. Always finishes what he starts.”

Alan and Joyce Temple reflected the same thing, Joyce percolating, “Golly, he has a green thumb.... There is nothing he has not done.... What a giver of his time. Both are totally unselfish.”

Because of some ailments, they have slowed down a bit. John uses his left hand most of the time because his partially amputated fingers are sensitive to pressure.

Yet, ever the entrepreneur, John is today working on a solar energy initiative. It seems he has *always* had two or more jobs at a time, and has never ceased to help others.

Their son Philip reflected on a saying his father frequently used. “Several times when dad was self-employed, some friends needed help or something was going on at the church. We had so much to do. *Why stop the work to help?* I’ll never forget. I asked my dad about helping the friends. He responded, ‘If you’re ever too busy to help a friend, you’re too busy.’”

Having worked his right arm to death, sort of speak, John readily extends his left hand for a handshake. There is plenty of mileage remaining in his left hand, and energy in both of their hearts, their American spirits unfazed.