

# Message in a Bottle

## A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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### Elsie McGovney Stewart – “Turnip Greens, Thank You!”

“God has smiled on me all of my life,” Elsie began.

All who know her quickly catch her up-beat spirit and sprightly manner. Her easy smile is sprinkled with humor and an infectious short demure laugh, well, not quite a *laugh*, something more than a giggle and less than laugh. Genuine and sincere – Elsie enjoys life and helps people. A friend to all.

As the seventh and last child, among six brothers, Elsie was highly favored and had a special upbringing. She was born in Coffeyville, Kansas, and mostly grew up in East Texas. In the 1940s, Leverett’s Chapel (near Kilgore), Texas, was oil rich, and all of her school teachers had masters degrees.

Yet, Elsie quit school three times to go work and still graduated at 18 years old. She has always had an independent and private mind, mixed with a dab of mischievousness.

When she lost her mother Dolly at five years old, Harry and Ella McGovney raised Elsie and her two brothers, Leroy and Jack. Several ended up in Woodville.

Elsie was 14 years old when Pearl Harbor was hit, and four of her brothers were in the Navy at the time. She vividly remembers WWII. Like everyone from her era, she heard about it on the radio – no CNN then.

Her brother Leroy McGovney was stationed on the USS *Honolulu* at Pearl Harbor and was on shoreleave as the Japanese attacked. He recalled seeing the Jap Zeros flying in, bombing and machine gunning destruction.

It took six weeks before Elsie got a letter from Leroy, informing her that he was okay. Leroy and the *Honolulu* were very lucky. A bomb had crashed through the deck and landed in the ammunition magazine, but it was a dud. Because the engines were down and power out, the men formed an assembly line to get ammo to the deck so they could fight back. As the men lined up, the sentence “praise the Lord and pass the ammunition” entered our vocabulary via a Navy chaplain in the line helping pass the ammunition topside.



When her family moved to Beaumont, Texas, she was 14 and did not fit in. From the small town of Leverett’s Chapel to the big city, that was shock enough. Her stepmother would not buy her the proper clothes, so Elsie quit school to go to work at Southwestern Bell (SW Bell). She settled into a pace, going to school in the morning and then working from 3 PM to midnight as a telephone operator for SW Bell.

It was tedious saying, “Number please, thank you,” for eight hours. That is how the telephone worked then, a caller buzzed in and requested a number from the operator. After hours and for fun, Elsie and her crew changed their phone greeting to, “Turnip Greens, thank you.” And a caller would give the number they wanted regardless.

Elsie laughed, and said, “Don’t print that.”

Throughout our discussion, she said “don’t print that” a dozen times – “Oh, don’t print either.” At first, she declined the interview, too, being a rather private person, that is, until one got to know her. For she is a kind and humorous lady, as genuine as anyone can find. With a mischevious grin, she would concede, “Well, okay,” to the things in this article. We did go off the record for several adventures, for even to this day, she does not want to cast anyone in a bad light.

They do not call her era “the best generation” for nothing.

When she came to Beaumont, the quality of the education she had received back in Leverett’s Chapel placed her about three years ahead of her classmates academically.

Many times and against SW Bell rules, she would connect between five and six of her Beaumont school mates onto a single line, so they could study their homework. Elsie would go about her work operating the phones, as she had always finished her homework before she left school. However, at the end of her shift, she would have to tell the girls to get off the line, as “No one coming on the shift would understand what I had done with the wires.” Several times, when her friends would continue to stay on the line, she would just have to pull the plugs out.

Seems teenage girls are the same in every era.

That’s Elsie too, kind and connecting, and when she tells you she is going to do something, she means business. That has played out all of Elsie’s life. You can find Elsie picking friends up and taking them to the hospital or out to eat or wherever her friends need to go.

Before Elsie got out of high school, she was working full time and buying her own clothes.

Having a blast – “Turnip Greens, thank you” – and other adventures.

She married Cecil Stewart the first time when she was 19, and at 20 was divorced. She did not comment further. She kept up with Cecil’s mother until she married again. After six years of marriage, her second husband died of a heart attack. One Christmas day, Elsie called Cecil’s mother again. Funny – it was Christmas day, and when his mother told Elsie he was “hunting on Christmas,” Elsie was quick to tell his mother that she needed to tell Cecil, “He should be with his family on Christmas, NOT hunting.” Of course, she was right.

Elsie and Cecil found their way back to each other again, but that is getting ahead of the story.

Elsie finished high school in a round-about fashion, after transferring with SW Bell to an ATT subsidiary in Charleston, West Virginia (not Charleston, South Carolina). Seems WWII was going on and the telephone company did not want to pay telephone

operators fair wages for their war-essential services. Elsie became a union steward and participated in strikes. Their group got some coaching from some local coal miners, who, she reflected, felt a bit out of place themselves, being big and burly in their efforts to instruct these little women on picketing. The miners felt a little frustrated and left them.

But they *picketed*. Elsie’s picture made the front page of the Charleston Gazette in January of 1946!

Stonewall Jackson High School officials did not think it proper for one of their students to be picketing, making the newspaper and all, and so at first they would not let Elsie attend the graduation. As she “conferenced” with the school officials, Elsie *told* her teachers’ administrators that she was a member of the union, making a living just as they were, buying her own clothes and supporting herself. What could they say? Elsie continued, “Just give me my diploma. I earned it. I do not need to attend the graduation!” Elsie won and attended the graduation. And the SW Bell operators got their raise.

Elsie laughed in her typically demure way.

Elsie and Cecil Stewart did remarry and stayed together for 42 years, until his death in Woodville, Texas, in January of 2009.

Humorously reflecting on the rarity of the McGovney name, the Rev. Dr. Raymond Parker commented at the funeral of Elsie’s brother Leroy, “We woke up to find ourselves overrun with McGovney’s.” Elsie laughed again.

Elsie’s house was originally the bottom floor of the old two-story Magnolia Mason’s Lodge that had been moved from its first location next to Woodville’s First Baptist Church. The old lodge was used by the church, and it was used as a school house, a laundry mat, and a skating rink until the Masons bought another place. The Fagans bought the old lodge building and moved it. The lumber from top half was used to construct her brother’s house.

Elsie has been in Woodville since 1969.

For the longest time, she has been involved with the Homemaker Extension Club, being on the state board for six years and the national board three years. In the picture, she is holding a certificate awarded to her in 1988 for services rendered to the national board by Virginia Knauer, special advisor to President Ronald Regan.

Elsie sings in the choir at Dogwood Hills Baptist Church, Woodville, and thinks her pastor the Rev. Chad Barnes is a “very dedicated man.” She was proud of Dogwood Hills’ relief effort during Hurricane Ike and recently after the terrible tornados in Alabama.

This year, she became Worthy Matron, essentially the president, for the local Order of the Eastern (OES) for the second time, the first time was in 1974. The OES is the largest fraternity in the world that has both men and women, led by women who have Masons in their family; the OES is all about honor and morals under God ([www.OES.org](http://www.OES.org)).

At 80-plus, with kindness and humor, Elsie is *still* connecting people with a smile. “Turnip Greens, thank you.”