

A Tribute to Jane Levring Stam

By Paul "Skip" Stam on his mother's 74th Birthday, March 11, 1999



which was my father,

This tribute is a free-form exposition of the character of one woman described in the 31st chapter of Proverbs. You may decide whether I have faithfully applied the text. This is a birthday present even though the only present she has ever asked has been "sweet children."



First, my grandmothers. My father's mother was Deana Bowman Stam, originally of Rochester, New York. She was Dutch and married my grandfather, Jacob, who was of Dutch and French Huguenot descent. They had seven children, the oldest of Paul.

For a few months in 1962 I lived with these grandparents in Patterson, New Jersey, before the rest of my family moved there. My grandmother Deana was a wonderful cook and was amazingly tolerant of a 12-year-old grandchild. The sport of choice at my junior high school was "wallball" a cheap form of handball. I had never heard of it before but I was determined to learn. My grandmother allowed me to turn a basement room of the house into a practice room. The noise must have driven her crazy.



My mother's mother was Christine Whitten Levring. She was a housemother at



Wheaton College for 17 years. When I was four years old I lived with her for a semester while attending Wheaton Kindergarten. She would send me in to play in the parlor if she thought her girls were getting too interested in their boyfriends. Her uncle was Col. James Duncan who served in the Civil War. Another distant cousin was Jamie Whitten,

recently retired after 50 years in the U.S. House of Representatives. Later in life, "Gram" lived with our family. She was another wonderful cook but, more than that, took a real interest in our reading and activities.

My mom's father was Carl Levring, of Copenhagen, Denmark. When she was seven months old he died of the aftermath of malaria contracted during World War I while serving with the Army Medical

Air Corps in Louisiana. She grew up in Jackson, Mississippi, where she had cousins who were like brothers and sisters to her -Jane Lauber and Billy Moore.

On Pearl Harbor Day she learned the cost of loyalty.

Mom was a member of a high school sorority whose membership was only by invitation. Any member could blackball a proposed member. My mother proposed her best friend several times for membership, but each time her friend was rejected. My mother discovered that the rejection was due to a polio-caused deformity to her friend's hand. Because of this "deformity" her friend was not good enough for the sorority girls.



On December 7, 1941 my mother resigned from her sorority and told them why, as a Christian, she could not participate any longer. She was not sure if she would have any social standing at her high school in the next semester but, thankfully, circumstances intervened. A few weeks later her mother was invited to become a housemother at Wheaton College in Illinois. Mom was able to finish her high school studies at the Wheaton Academy without the encumbrance of sororities or more Latin.

At Wheaton College she met my father, Paul. For eleven years she had attended Camp Ton-a-wondah in the North Carolina mountains near Hendersonville, the last seven years as a camp counselor. Their wedding on August 25, 1946, was held at the end of summer camp at Camp Ton-a-wondah with her campers as attendants. The camp director "gave her away." Her trainbearer was "Pookey" Haynes - a later director of the camp. The service might be described as early nature lovers' style, being scheduled outside, next to the waterfall. A summer thunder storm moved things inside to the dining hall which was built over a waterfall. Between the waterfall and the rain on the tin roof it was hard to hear the "glee club" of 100 voices. One bridesmaid fainted. She was revived by a medical student, another cousin.

While at Wheaton College, Mom was in the Christian Service organization. She would travel to Cook County Hospital in Chicago to visit with patients without families.

My mother majored in zoology. She received the Bachelor of Arts in Science degree from Wheaton College in 1946. This had consequences. For many years she participated in the annual Audubon

Society's bird count on New Years Day. This meant that her children suffered through more bird lectures and travelogues than should be allowed under ordinances governing child protection.

She was a collector of zoological curiosities. She would find cat and bird skulls and even snake skeletons on the road and would preserve them in our freezer. The glove compartment always had a few plastic bags in it, in case we came across the remains of an interesting animal along the roadside. She would boil the skulls down in a big pot and instruct us in basic anatomy. A guest who nosed about in the freezer could find the skull of an owl. This very day there is a plastic bag in her freezer with a copperhead in it.

Her lessons in zoology were not purely academic, but useful. She was a Red Cross swim instructor and taught "life saving." In those days mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was the preferred method. One day Karen's two pet ducks were swimming in a plastic pool in the back yard. Somehow they drowned while Mom was on the phone. What to do with the drowned ducks? My mother successfully performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.



After college days my parents moved to Princeton, New Jersey, where my father was in graduate school. My mother worked in a lab for a professor trying to replicate the origins of life in a test tube. One day my mother and father attended a lecture by the nuclear physicist, Robert Oppenheimer. The lecture was also attended by Albert Einstein. After the lecture Dr. Einstein spoke to my parents and the subject of that comment has been a matter of family controversy ever since. One version is that, in a crowded stairway after the lecture, he stepped on my mother's foot and said "Excuse me."

After the days at Princeton in 1950 my parents moved to Danville, Virginia, to a house on Marshall Terrace. At the end of the street there was an artillery piece, a war relic. My mother organized patriotic parades for July 4th dressing up the children of the neighborhood in costumes. My parents also dug a swimming pool in the backyard. This was not the modern version with pumps, filters and recirculated water. Instead they filled the pool up with hoses, kept covers over it to keep out the leaves and used a siphon to drain it every Saturday night onto the neighbor's garden. My mother taught dozens of neighborhood children how to swim.

In 1956 we moved to Greensboro, North Carolina, where we lived for six years. It seemed to me that my mother was the chief ring-leader of everything important happening in town. She was a Girl

Scout leader and the leader of the girl's high school mission group of our church. These groups met weekly at our home. The Girl Scout Group practiced on my brothers for the childcare scout merit badge. Mom's three young sons (Skip, Chip and Billy as well as our sister, Karen) got a full dose of "girl talk."



Because my father was often away from home on business for several days at a time my mother had to be a disciplinarian at home. I have a theory that discipline mostly easily remembered is that which is unjust or undeserved. While I remembered being well restricted I do not actually remember any injustice from her ever. I do remember the taste of soap in my mouth as

her cure for my improper talk.

When my father was away Mom would pile all the children, including the neighbors, into the station wagon and would take us camping in the state parks. That was pure joy.

Jane was a great athlete. At Camp Ton-a-wondah she had learned all sports. There she taught swimming and fencing. She was on the basketball team in high school and on the tennis team at Wheaton College. She taught all of her kids to play sports but, more importantly, she played with us whether swimming, tennis, kickball, camping, or archery. She was a competitor. She was such a good tennis teacher that in the 1970s she began teaching professionally. She taught over three thousand (mostly in Greensboro) how to play tennis. She still has students and can soundly beat all of her grandchildren (except perhaps Michael or Martin).



One of her dreams was to build a home around a tennis court. She lived in squalor in a townhome from 1968 to 1982 on a month to month basis always planning to build her dream house at Carlson Farms. It never

happened. So after Dad died in 1990 she finally built her tennis court, and then her basketball court. As a founder of Raspberry Ridge String Camp she has blessed the lives of hundreds of children from Chapel Hill and Durham. She is known for two unique athletic techniques. Before taking a basketball set shot she always licks her fingers. In tennis doubles her killer drop shot is the specialty of the court.

She is a constant reader. She liked to read aloud to my father and to her children and liked to be read to. She taught us hundreds of Bible verses and poems which we competed to say as fast as we could. One by Isaac Watts was especially helpful to us.

AGAINST QUARRELING

Whatever brawls disturb the street,
There should be peace at home;
Where sisters dwell and brothers meet,
Quarrels should never come.
Birds in their little nests agree;
And 'tis a shameful sight
When children of one family
Fall out, and chide and fight.

My mother never wanted recognition as a cook. She often talked about the burned beans, or the scorched toast but the truth is what she served was always delicious. She has had a garden, which she tends herself. Her feasts from the garden are elegant. Sewing, mending and washing were her specialty. Go to her house with soiled or ragged clothes and she will fix them on the spot. She always knows the best place to buy clothes to save a fortune. The only reservation I would make would be her penchant for dressing her boys up in identical suits. The "itchy brothers" (Brooks Brothers wool suits) combination was an exemplar. She would use experimental textiles as well. Since my father was the head of research for large textile companies he would bring home samples of prototype textiles for the family to try out.

From 1962 - 1969 my parents lived in New Jersey again- this time not in Princeton but in northern (Kinnelon) New Jersey. This was in the days when the South was not held in the highest esteem by Yankees. My mother's accent was distinct. She found a home in New Jersey of true southern architecture - Smoke Rise - built like a plantation house. It was reputedly a stop on the "Underground Railroad." She turned it into a gem in the muddy north as well as a center of hospitality.

My mother is protective of her daughters-in-law (Dottie, Doris and Lynn) but without ceremony. One night she was treating them to a candlelight dessert of raspberries/blackberries with ice cream. Doris felt something a little crunchy but did not say anything. Getting a little more light on the subject Dottie saw that one of the crunchy things was still moving - a Japanese beetle.

Mom is an internationalist. Her foreign travels have only included Europe a few times and a recent trip to New Testament sites in Greece and Turkey, but her friends from around the world are counted in the hundreds - students, missionaries and cousins.



Her Chinese friends are her special interest. She and my father befriended dozens (maybe hundreds) of Chinese students in Chapel Hill. For years she has taught southern conversational English to students and their families but shared friendship and the gospel of Jesus Christ as well. On one Wednesday each month, she hosts the World Serious, an informal but informative time for friends to learn about Christian mission activities around the world.

Mom is evangelistic. She has been a counselor with the Billy Graham Crusade in New York City and at the Wheaton Center at Wheaton College. With the Good News Clubs in Greensboro and on hundreds of other occasions she has always been ready to share her faith. For many years she studied and enjoyed Christian Womens Club and Bible Study Fellowship.

One of her aunts, Margaret Quattlebaum of Columbia, South Carolina, was very smart but truly crazy. Although she owned her own home she was paranoid against electricity and funeral homes and would get her food from others' discards. For decades she would not let anyone in the family help her. In her very old age she finally let my mother into her life because they had been friends when my mom was a young girl in Marg's wedding. She always called my mother "Baby Jane." First she let my mother provide food for her. Later she allowed Billy, Mom and Hank Fordham to make some basic repairs (including a roof) to her house. Finally when she fell and thought she had broken her leg she allowed my mother to carry her to our home in Greensboro to care for her. Hundreds of others have been recipients of my mother's mercy.



Her children rise up and call her blessed.

