Laura Bush’s father, Harold Welch, enjoyed telling how he met his future mother-in-law, Jenna Welch, in Canutillo, Texas. Jesse Hawkins was laying bricks with mortar she had mixed herself and Harold thought, “I am marrying into a family whose women can do anything!”

Jessie Hawkins helped her husband build houses on Nuway Drive and run their businesses. Jessie was one in a line of women who learned to survive tragedy, and other states packed up their belongings to run, but other parents came. On weekends she would stay in town with her friend Mary Liz and go to picture shows at the Plaza and the Ellanay theaters.

Jenna attended the Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy (now UTEP) for two years and studied journalism. She was so nervous to ask her father for the $25 semester tuition that she waited until the last possible day in 1939. As Laura Bush wrote, “It was a bleak seven years into the Great Depression, and twenty dollars was a significant sum. There were women who took jobs making sandwiches in soup kitchens just so they could be guaranteed one meal a day. Education was a luxury.” Welch didn’t ask her father for further help with her college fees.

Jenna couldn’t afford the bus to ride the 14 miles into town, so she lived with a family in El Paso and took care of their daughter in exchange for room and board. Once she chaperoned the child from New York all the way to Aruba on an oil tanker, an exciting adventure for a girl from a small farming community. Somehow, she managed to gather the money needed for her train fare to New York. She was brave and self-reliant and knew how to make her own way.

With the U.S. involved in World War II, Jenna decided to leave school to earn a living. The number of women working outside the home increased during the war as women were needed in the work force to do the jobs men had been doing previously. She was hired by the Popular department store downtown to work in its advertising department. Welch said, “It was a wonderful job. It was the biggest department store in the area. In fact, the wife of the president of Mexico would send up there for clothes.”

It was there that a co-worker pointed out a friend on the street, “Oh look, there’s Hal.” Jenna looked out the window to see Harold Welch for the first time, the man who would become her husband. He too had left college, working as a loan officer and then district manager for Universal CITI Credit in El Paso, supporting his widowed mother.

At that time, ladies and gentlemen would dress in their finery and pay the six cents to walk across the bridge to dine and dance in elegant Juárez. The first club at the base of the bridge was the Tívoli nightclub, with exotic shows and dance floor with orchestra. Jenna and Hal had Boquilla black bass for dinner there, and the next morning, the gossip column of the newspaper published the news that Jenna Hawkins had been seen dancing with a handsome stranger at the Tívoli.

Hal volunteered to go to war. While he was on leave, the two continued dating. They were married at a chapel on Fort Bliss in January 1944, and shortly after, Hal was shipped off to Europe with the 555th Battalion as a master gunner.

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While they were separated, the two wrote letters, Hal confessing that he would like to have a baby boy when he returned.

Jenna continued her job at the Popular and lived with her lifelong friend Mary Liz, whose husband was also at war. Jenna’s rent payment enabled Mary Liz to keep her house with their two children instead of moving back home with her parents. Every night after dinner, they would write letters to their husbands. For fun one day they snapped pictures of each other in a bubble bath in a claw foot tub. Hal held on to this the entire two years he was away.

When he returned, Hal found a coworker had become district manager at his firm, so he chose to move to Midland. Laura wrote her mother learned how to fight the Midland wind and dust. The area was completely different from the farm valley she grew up in with its cantaloupe and smells of freshly cut alfalfa. Laura was born a little more than nine months later.

Jenna Welch was an only child because her mother had lost two other babies who were “born too soon,” although it just wasn’t talked about. She deeply missed having siblings. Laura Bush wrote, “When I was growing up, [my mother] would say with a wink in her quick, witty west Texas way that she would have been ‘insulted’ if her parents had had more children.” Perhaps Jenna framed her feelings in the situation for her daughter because she herself lost three babies, born too soon, and both mother and daughter keenly felt the loss of these children.

Laura Bush’s memoir begins with a chapter on the birth and death at three days old of her brother, John Edward, and how difficult it was for her parents. The remote, tiny medical clinic in Midland, Texas, of the 1940s did not have any of today’s inventions and processes such as incubators or drip lines that enable premature infants to live. He was buried in an unmarked grave with other premature babies who didn’t live. Jenna had a very difficult pregnancy carrying Laura and would go on to lose a daughter named Sarah Elizabeth when Laura was eight and another brother when Laura was 13.

These deaths and the subsequent lack of other children in the house had a central importance in the Welch family, even though Laura never saw her mother mourn. Laura wrote, “Now at ninety, when she cannot recall someone she met the day before, she remembers those babies. She sits in her green chair in her plain Midland living room and says, ‘We would have had two boys and two girls if they had all lived. It would have been quite a family, wouldn’t it? I sure wish one of those little boys could have lived at least, because my husband wanted a boy so bad.’”

As an only child, Laura spent a great deal of time with her parents, especially her mother, who introduced her to literature at an early age and read Little Women to her at age seven. Jenna loved books and Laura was a natural reader. She read constantly to Laura, borrowing their books from the Midland Library. Laura wrote, “And she read to me, her voice weaving its spells of character, plot and place, until I too yearned to decipher the fine black letters printed on the page.”

Like her mother, Jenna was handy around the house, more so than her husband who could design house plans and supervise workers as a developer in later life, but didn’t do the manual work. She painted, reupholstered chairs and replaced countertops. She cooked three full meals every day and filled the house with laughter, dispelling the potential sadness and loneliness caused by living far from family in what Georgia O’Keeffe described as the “terrible winds and a wonderful emptiness” of the Texas plains. Laura wrote of her parents even in their later years, “They were happy. No sadness unreviewed their happiness.”

As a self-taught naturalist, studying wildflowers and birds, Jenna taught her daughter to appreciate and enjoy nature. Because Midland is in a migratory path, the opportunities for bird watching were abundant. She became a member of the Audubon Society and was active in the protest against DDT in the 1960s because it was weakening egg shells and endangering bird species. Jenna passed on her skills and passions to her only child, engaging her in the natural world and the intellectual and creative world of literature.

Jenna encouraged Laura to be self-reliant and make do. Her mother would pack a “solo picnic” for Laura to take to the empty lot on their street that functioned as a park. Their wide circle of friends who were also transplanted to that harsh region of the state eventually came to feel like family for Laura. Still, she keenly felt the loss of siblings on trips especially, for her parents had each other and she was in the back seat alone. She taught her dolls to read and write because she had no siblings to teach. As early as six years old, Laura would travel on the train by herself from Midland to Canutillo to stay with her “Grammee” and “Papa” (Jessie and Hal Hawkins). Some of her best memories occurred in El Paso and cause her to love this region to this day.

Grammee was unlike any other grandmother or mother that Laura knew. They all wore dresses and aprons. Jessie wore pants, big hats and long sleeves to protect her arms from the sun. Laura wrote in her memoir, “Grammee was a collector too, her house and garden an artful arrangement of what man and nature left behind.” She grew pomegranates, desert plants and a wide swath of daffodils.

The bulb that started the garden came from her mother’s farm in Arkansas. When Jenna and Hal moved to Midland, Jessie dug up bulbs for her daughter to transplant at her new house. The young family moved a lot in the early years, and Jenna would dig them up each move and replant them. When Laura married, Jenna continued the tradition, “appearing on [her] doorstep with our developed bulbs, the offspring of that long-fallow Arkansas yard, four generations removed.”

These long summer weeks that Laura spent with her grandmother in the magical valley surrounding El Paso had a tremendous impact on her. There was a bond between the two women, at opposite ends of their lives, possibly made all the more special by the losses Jessie suffered in having an only daughter and granddaughter. Jessie sewed beautiful matching dresses for Laura and her dolls, sending the clothes on the mail trains to Midland throughout the year. When Laura visited, she made doll furniture with her grandmother and fell asleep holding her hand in the warm summer night.

Like her mother before her, Laura would play with the kids traveling through the auto court and those who lived in the neighborhood, enjoying the wildness of the desert they didn’t have in their suburban neighborhood in Midland.

While neither Jenna nor Hal Welch finished college, they valued education, and sending their daughter to college was a priority. Choosing a professional career as a Southern woman was relatively new, but because of her upbringing, Laura became a teacher and librarian, working with disadvantaged minority children.

Children came late to Laura and George Bush. In fact, they were starting the adoption process when Laura became pregnant at age 34. The pregnancy was difficult and carefully monitored because of the family history of miscarriages, and twin daughters Barbara and Jenna were born prematurely at Baylor Hospital in Dallas where they could receive neonatal care. As they grew and the family moved away from Midland, the twins would visit their grandparents one at a time so that each would know the pleasures of being an only grandchild, and at home, an only child. Jenna taught Laura to love reading and libraries, and her work with children has given her a great sense of accomplishment. She has been able to work with education and children both as the First Lady of Texas and of the nation. That is why the city/college partnership library at EPCC’s Northwest Campus, located in Canutillo, Texas, has honored this mother-daughter team by renaming it the Jenna Welch and Laura Bush Community Library. The pair has visited several times, sharing their love of reading and education in various events. Jessie Hawkins and Jenna Welch overcame loss and tragedy to create lives filled with laughter and learning and passed that on to Laura Bush. It is a matriarchal legacy of self-reliance and determination that has no doubt been passed on to Laura’s daughters.